**Reason to Feel Guilty**

Randolph Clarke and Piers Rawling

Let *F* be a fact in virtue of which an agent, *s*, is blameworthy for performing an act of *A*-ing. For example, as some theorists have it, the fact in question might be that *s* freely *A*-ed, knowing that it was wrong for her to *A*, and moved by ill will when she so acted.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consider:

(**Reason**)*F* is (at some time) a reason for *s* to feel guilty (to some extent) for *A*-ing.

Leaving implicit the qualification concerning extent, consider, further:

(**Desert**) *s*’s having this reason suffices for *s*’s deserving to feel guilty for *A*-ing.

Here we explicate and advance these two theses (with slight qualification of the first), as well as a third thesis connecting desert of feeling guilty with the fittingness of this response.[[2]](#footnote-2) We then raise a difficulty for the idea that one’s desert of a feeling of guilt—or, indeed, even its fittingness—hinges simply on the truth of that feeling’s constitutive thought.

In light of our three theses, we address several claims that have been made regarding responsibility and desert. We take issue with the divorce of desert from responsibility. We find acceptable a claim regarding blameworthiness and reason to induce guilt, and we defend the idea that it is noninstrumentally good that one who is blameworthy be subject to a fitting feeling of guilt. We argue against a view on which desert of blame has a teleological dimension. At the end of the paper, we provide clarification and suggest a qualification of the thesis we call **Reason**.

1. *Feeling Guilty*

The feeling of guilt, like resentment and indignation, is among the negative reactive attitudes (Strawson 2003), emotions to which we are commonly subject when we blame someone for something. In the case of feeling guilty, of course, the person blamed is oneself.

Though not uncontested, it is widely accepted that emotions are object-directed or intentional states: an emotion has an intentional object, it is about something. We endorse this view of the feeling of guilt. We suggest that in feeling guilty, one at least implicitly takes oneself to be blameworthy for something.[[3]](#footnote-3) On this view, **Reason** implies that a fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy for *A*-ing is (at some time) a reason for one to be subject to an emotion in being subject to which one takes oneself to be blameworthy for *A*-ing. The implication seems eminently reasonable.

Whether the intentionality of emotion should be understood cognitively—as the emotion’s having propositional content—is a question on which we shall avoid taking sides, though we return to it in section 5. But evidently simply believing that one is blameworthy for something is not sufficient for feeling guilty. There is a felt quality—an affective aspect—of a feeling of guilt that the mere belief lacks.[[4]](#footnote-4) It feels bad to feel guilty. How bad it feels varies. We shall say that as it feels worse, one’s feeling of guilt is more severe; as it feels less bad, the feeling is milder. The extent to which it feels bad is what we call the extent to which one feels guilty.

A feeling of guilt commonly has a motivational aspect as well. The feeling can motivate one to apologize, make amends, or resolve to turn over a new leaf (Baumeister et al. 1994: 260). It can motivate self-reproach or self-punishment, though it is important to see that the emotion is not itself behavior of this kind. Indeed, it is not any kind of behavior. Nor, then, is it behavior that one might engage in with the aim of making oneself feel guilty. If on some occasion one succeeds in making oneself feel guilty, the feeling of guilt is what one brings about, not one’s bringing about this feeling. The attitude is a state, not the performance of an action.

Although we have distinguished several aspects of a feeling of guilt, we do not mean to imply that these are discrete, separable components. On the contrary, the emotion seems to be a unitary thing, albeit one that we can consider in these several ways.

We take it that a reason to feel guilty is, then, a reason to be subject to an emotion that characteristically has the indicated intentional, affective, and motivational aspects. If one deserves to feel guilty, then one deserves to be in such a state.

1. *Reason, Emotion, and Fit*

We adopt a familiar notion of a reason for *x*—where *x* is an attitude or action—as a consideration that counts in favor of *x*. (Similarly, a reason against *x* is a consideration that disfavors *x*.) Thus, our concern is with a reason “in the standard normative sense” (Scanlon 1998: 19). One can act or have attitudes for such a reason, in which case that consideration is (in Scanlon’s terms) one’s operative reason for so acting or having that attitude.

Normative evaluation of emotions is common in everyday contexts—one shouldn’t stay angry forever over minor things—as well as in law—asylum is to be granted when applicants show a well-founded fear of persecution. People are asked why they are, for example, amused or disappointed, and their answers are commonly treated as purported reasons; what is cited, even if allowed to be a cause, can be dismissed as a bad reason. A recalcitrant emotion—one that persists despite one’s knowledge that its object lacks the feature that, in being subject to that emotion, one takes the object to have—is, unlike a perceptual illusion such as the Müller-Lyer, said to be irrational.[[5]](#footnote-5) We accept that such talk is often correct. Our emotions can be rational or irrational, based on good reasons or not.

Among considerations that favor or disfavor having a given emotion, two kinds can be distinguished. Some of the first kind concern the instrumental value or disvalue of having the emotion. For example, if fearing a dangerous animal will only make it more likely to attack, that fact disfavors fearing it.[[6]](#footnote-6) The fact that the animal is dangerous is a consideration, of a second kind, that favors fearing it. Our concern with reason to feel guilty is with a consideration of this second kind.

A favoring reason of this kind renders the emotion it favors a *correct* or *fitting* response to its object. We shall call such reasons *f*-reasons. We take it that a fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy for *A*-ing can encompass all the reason required to render fitting one’s feeling guilty for that deed. Thus, **Reason** can be glossed: a fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy for *A*-ing is (at some time) a sufficient *f*-reason to feel guilty for *A*-ing—sufficient, that is, to render that feeling fitting.

We allow that considerations encompassed in (but not fully encompassing) such reasons may also aptly be called reasons to feel guilty, and they can bear on the fittingness of the response. For example, the fact that it was wrong for *s* to *A* may be such a reason. Similarly, some fact partly in virtue of which it was wrong for *s* to *A*, such as that in *A*-ing *s* betrayed a friend, can be a reason for *s* to feel guilty. But these would not be considerations favoring feeling guilty *in addition to* the fact in virtue of which *s* is blameworthy for *A*-ing; they would be encompassed in, or part of the basis of, the latter.

Similarly, the fact that one is blameworthy for *A*-ing may be said to be a reason to feel guilty for *A*-ing, and one bearing on the fittingness of that response. But it would be double-counting to count this as an *f*-reason *in addition to* the fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy.

A complication: it might be that some considerations encompassed in a fact like *F* are not themselves reasons to feel guilty, but rather background conditions in which other considerations encompassed in that fact count as such reasons. Perhaps the fact that *s* acted freely in *A*-ing is not itself a reason for *s* to feel guilty, but rather a background condition required if the fact that *s* acted wrongly in *A*-ing is to count as such a reason.[[7]](#footnote-7) To accommodate this possibility, **Reason** might be reformulated: *F* encompasses what is (at some time) a sufficient *f*-reason for *s* to feel guilty (to some extent) for *A*-ing. However, for the sake of simplicity, in what follows we’ll often state things in terms of the original formulation.

A sufficient *f*-reason to feel guilty, like *f*-reasons generally, is a pro tanto reason favoring the fitting response. Even when feeling guilty is fitting, one might have reasons disfavoring that response, and it might be that all things considered one should not feel guilty. In that case, all things considered one should not have an emotion that would be fitting. Fittingness is but one of several normative dimensions of emotions.

1. *Fit and Desert*

The desert of a response is often linked to the fittingness of that response (Clarke 2016: 128; Feinberg 1970: 82; McKenna 2019: 257; Nelkin 2016: 178). With respect to desert of feeling guilty, a linking claim might be put as follows (with the qualification concerning extent left implicit):

(**Ground**) what grounds *s*’s deserving to feel guilty for *A*-ing is simply what grounds that feeling’s being a fitting response by *s* to her *A*-ing.

To clarify: evidently the relation, *\_ being deserved by \_ in response to \_*, is not (identical with) the relation, *\_ being a fitting response by \_ to \_*. When your belief that *p* is fitting, it is certainly not deserved by *you*, and we think it is simply not deserved. Further, although your fitting resentment of your wrongdoer is, we think, deserved, it is deserved by *the wrongdoer*, not by you; one of the distinctive features of guilt is that the one who fittingly feels it is the one who deserves it. Moreover, we allow that the fact that one deserves to feel guilty can be distinguished from the fact that this feeling is fitting.

Nevertheless, we suggest that, necessarily, a feeling of guilt is fitting just in case it is deserved; and what explains the fittingness (or lack thereof) of a feeling of guilt is just what explains the desert (or lack thereof) of that feeling. As it might be put, desert of feeling guilty is fully and exclusively grounded in what grounds the fittingness of that feeling.

What we have said about reason to feel guilty and what we say here about ground can be brought together as follows: if *s* has a sufficient *f*-reason to feel guilty for *A*-ing, this reason, together with any background conditions required for this consideration to count as such a reason, grounds both the fittingness and the desert of *s*’s feeling guilty for *A*-ing.

Derk Pereboom accepts that “a sense of pained remorse is a morally fitting…response” to one’s acknowledgement that one is blameworthy for something (2015: 288). But he denies that “the guilty deserve to suffer such pain” (288). The “moral fittingness” of such a feeling, he implies, does not suffice for its being deserved.[[8]](#footnote-8)

For many object-directed emotions—amusement or surprise, for example—their fittingness does not, of necessity, coincide with their having any moral property. Pereboom and we agree that the fittingness of certain attitudes in response to one’s blameworthy conduct *does* implicate some moral property. We, unlike he, think that the implicated property is that of being deserved.

One of our disagreements with Pereboom can be set aside here. He favors a view on which negative reactive attitudes such as resentment and indignation include anger toward the purported offender as well as “a belief that the agent deserves to be the target of that very anger just because of what he has done or failed to do” (2014: 128). Since this belief is, he holds, always false—no one ever deserves any such thing—resentment and indignation are never fitting. If a feeling of guilt likewise includes some such belief (we doubt that it need include anger), then, as Pereboom sees it, that feeling, too, is never fitting.

We do not see good reason to think that feeling guilty need include believing anything about desert. But setting this issue aside, a substantive dispute with Pereboom remains. Consider a feeling in having which one takes oneself to be blameworthy for something, which is a negative affective state, and which has the motivational profile that we characterized in section 1. Pereboom accepts that a feeling of this kind can be a morally fitting response to conduct for which one is blameworthy—its fittingness, as he sees it, is a moral matter—but he denies that one can ever deserve to have such feeling. Why might one—why do we—think otherwise?

If you resent someone who is innocent, then, we think, your attitude is unjust. It is unjust for the same reason that it is unfitting: the person lacks the evaluative feature, blameworthiness, that in resenting that person you take her to have. Likewise, if you feel guilty for something for which you are not to blame, your attitude is unjust, and unjust for the same reason that it is unfitting. The unfittingness of these negative reactive emotions implicates not just some moral matter but, more specifically, justice.

Further, the consideration of justice that is implicated is desert. The innocent deserve not to be blamed. That is what is unjust about blaming them. Blaming the innocent is not merely gratuitous, undeserved; it is contrary to what they deserve.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Blameworthiness yields a different desert-status: the blameworthy do *not* deserve not to be blamed. They do not deserve this for the same reason that blame of them is not unfitting. And as blame of the blameworthy is not only not unfitting, it is fitting, so, we hold, the blameworthy not only do not deserve not to be blamed, they deserve blame. Blame of them is not only not unjust, it is just. It is deserved, and so just, for the same reason that it is fitting. Its being deserved is grounded in what grounds its being fitting. Desert is the kind of moral matter that is at issue with the fittingness of blame.

A thoroughgoing desert-denier must deny—to her disadvantage, we think—that the innocent deserve not to be blamed. A less thoroughgoing denier might accept this claim about the innocent but deny that anyone deserves to be blamed. But unless it is said that even the blameworthy deserve not to be blamed—a curious position—a difference in desert-status between the innocent and the blameworthy will have been recognized: the former deserve, while the latter do not deserve, not to be blamed.

Might this be the only difference in desert status between these two, or is there the further difference that the blameworthy deserve to be blamed whereas the innocent do not? Here is a consideration that supports affirming the further difference. Consider gratitude toward someone who has not, in fact, done you any favor. The person does not deserve your gratitude, but she also does not deserve *not* to be the object of that attitude; your gratitude toward her is not contrary to justice, it is merely gratuitous. But now, if the difference in desert status between the innocent and the blameworthy is only that the latter, unlike the former, do not deserve not to be blamed, then the desert status that obtains with blame of the blameworthy is the same as that which obtains with gratitude toward the non-benefactor: the blameworthy agent does not deserve not to be blamed, but she also does not deserve to be blamed. There is no difference in desert status that might provide an explanation of why blame of her is not, like gratitude toward a non-benefactor, merely gratuitous. Recognizing a further difference between the desert status of the innocent and that of the blameworthy provides the understanding: the blameworthy not only do not deserve not to be blamed, they deserve blame.

Feeling guilty for something of which you are innocent is not merely gratuitous; the feeling is one that you deserve not to have. As well, feeling guilty (at the right time, and to the right extent) for something for which you are blameworthy is not merely gratuitous; the feeling is one that you deserve to have.

A theorist who accepts that feeling guilty can be morally fitting might reject **Ground** if she holds an inflated desert theory.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, the thesis would seem objectionable if one thought that deserving to be subject to an emotion entailed that all-things-considered one should be subject to it; for fittingness clearly does not carry this entailment. But deserving to feel guilty does not, either. (Desert in general does not entail such all-things-considered judgments.) One can have a reason to feel guilty, one’s having which suffices for one’s deserving to feel guilty, and yet that reason can be outweighed by considerations that favor one’s not feeling guilty. We reckon that it is not so rare that one who deserves to feel guilty has such overriding reasons. One has things to do, and feeling guilty can interfere with getting them done. When this is so, it makes feeling guilty no less fitting, and no less deserved, but it might have the result that all things considered one should not, at present, feel guilty. With these matters taken into account, we wonder what desert of feeling guilty is thought to be if the moral fittingness of that response is said not to suffice for it.

An association of the notion of desert with viciousness and savagery might lead one to reject the notion. We, too, reject viciousness and savagery. But, as we think Pereboom would agree, there need be nothing vicious or savage about a morally fitting pained feeling in response to one’s culpable conduct. What should be rejected, we think, is not the notion of desert but the mistaken association.

1. *Just Emotions*

The consideration of justice that we have invoked is a matter of certain object-directed emotions, such as guilt and resentment, being directed toward those who deserve to be objects of these attitudes, and of these attitudes not being directed toward those who deserve not to be objects of them. Such justice is not a matter of the administration of sanctions, the infliction of punishment, or payback for prior wrongs; it is not retributive in a familiar sense. It is a variety of distributive justice, though plainly not a matter of the distribution of economic benefits, and it does not concern economic, political, or social institutions or practices.

W. D. Ross recognizes a form of justice that is in an important respect similar to what we have in mind, one that consists in “the apportionment of pleasure and pain to the virtuous and the vicious respectively” (1988: 138). The just apportionment, he says, is distribution “in accordance with the merit of the persons concerned” (21).

Ross’s notion nevertheless differs from the one that we have invoked. Although a feeling of guilt is painful, resentment need not pain the one resented; it might remain uncommunicated, or felt only after the blamed person is deceased. The relevant distribution, then, is not one of pleasure and pain. Nor is it a distribution of benefit and harm. It is not obvious that blame of the dead harms them at all. Perhaps the best case for thinking that it might is that, when it is undeserved, it is an injustice to them. But then the injustice of the blame will be prior to its being a harm—what its being a harm consists in—rather than something consisting of the malapportionment of harm.

Further, unlike Ross’s notion, ours concerns only the responses of moral agents to the conduct of one another. The distribution that matters is not one of just anything that might be wanted or unwanted but, specifically, that of reasons-responsive attitudes. Justice, we contend, has a place in this sphere.

Joel Feinberg suggests that “responsive attitudes are the basic things persons deserve and…‘modes of treatment’ are deserved only in a derivative way, insofar as they are the natural or conventional means of expressing the morally fitting attitudes” (1970: 82). We note that whether this or that mode of treatment is deserved can depend not just on what would be natural or conventional expressions of a deserved attitude but on moral matters as well. Still, Feinberg’s suggestion agrees with our view that the desert of reactive attitudes is a basic consideration of justice.

Such desert is a moral matter in two senses. First, one deserves a certain negative reactive attitude, when one does, due to some fact in virtue of which one has a certain moral property, that of being blameworthy for something. And second, one’s desert of such an attitude is itself a matter of there being a certain moral reason favoring it.

This notion of desert, with its associated notion of justice, can be elucidated by articulating their interconnections with each other and with other normative phenomena. We have identified some of these connections, tying desert of negative reactive attitudes to the fittingness of these attitudes and to what we’ve called *f*-reasons, and thus to blameworthiness and facts in virtue of which one is blameworthy, and situating the feeling of guilt among these phenomena. We will later—in section 6—discuss a connection with reasons for action and—in section 7—with value. The view that emerges is, we hope, one that many readers find both familiar and plausible.

1. *Fit as Accuracy*

An influential construal of the fittingness of an emotion stems from Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000). Emotions, D’Arms and Jacobson hold, present their objects as possessing certain evaluative features. For an emotion to be fitting is for it to accurately present its object. The approach has been applied by several writers (e.g., Portmore 2019; Strabbing 2019) to the fittingness of reactive attitudes, including feeling guilty.[[11]](#footnote-11) If, as **Ground** implies, the fittingness of a feeling of guilt suffices for its being deserved, the approach yields the result that accuracy of presentation of this feeling suffices for its desert.

Care would be needed in spelling out such a view. Both feelings of guilt and blameworthiness are gradable: both come in degrees. One’s feeling of guilt can be more or less severe—one can feel guilty to a greater or lesser extent—where this is at least in part an affective matter, a matter of how bad one feels in feeling guilty. And, of course, one can be more or less blameworthy, where this is not a matter of being more or less worthy of something, but of being worthy of more or less (perhaps more or less severe) blame.

Whether one’s feeling of guilt is deserved is, we contend, partly a matter of whether its severity is in some sense proportional to how blameworthy one is (though, as we will soon note, the matter is complicated). Fit, understood in an ordinary way, encompasses such proportionality. And proportionality (or disproportionality) of this sort implicates a moral matter: an overly severe feeling of guilt, just as overly severe blame of another, is unjust.

How might this proportionality be captured in terms of accuracy of presentation of the emotion? Consider a cognitivist construal of the intentionality of a feeling of guilt: it represents *that something or other is the case*—its content is a proposition. The accuracy of its presentation can then be seen as a matter of *truth*.[[12]](#footnote-12) If the fittingness of a feeling of guilt is said to suffice for that feeling’s being deserved, the view will then be that the feeling’s truly representing things suffices for one’s deserving to have that feeling.

Suppose that one’s feeling of guilt represents that one is blameworthy for *A*-ing. One might indeed be blameworthy for *A*-ing—one’s feeling of guilt might truly represent that one has this feature—and yet it might be that one does not deserve to have this feeling, for the feeling might be far more severe than anything that one deserves. One might not deserve to feel so bad.

The problem is not solved simply by incorporating a degree of blameworthiness into the content of the representation. One can, in feeling guilty, have the thought that one is very blameworthy without feeling very bad, or think that one is worthy of only mild blame while feeling very bad.

Such possibilities might be denied. It might be suggested (we have encountered the suggestion) that in object-directed emotions there is a necessary connection between the cognitive and affective aspects, such that, necessarily, a feeling of guilt represents that one is very blameworthy if and only if one feels very bad. But reflection on how feeling guilty for a past offense often evolves over time casts doubt on this claim. Shortly after a youthful offense, in recognizing my blameworthiness for it, I might both take myself to be very blameworthy and feel very bad. Decades later, I don’t feel so bad about it, but in so responding I still take myself to be very blameworthy for the misdeed, just as blameworthy as I earlier thought. Resentment likewise can fade in intensity of feeling without alteration of one’s view of how blameworthy the offender is.

The observation raises a question about fittingness: might the milder later feeling be fitting, just as fitting as was the more severe earlier feeling? Or is this a case of justifiably having a feeling of guilt less severe than what would be fitting? We incline toward the first view of the matter.[[13]](#footnote-13) If over some period of time one has blamed oneself quite a lot for a certain offence, the emotional response from oneself that is now fitting might be less severe than what was fitting earlier, though we do not think that one has become less blameworthy.[[14]](#footnote-14) If this is correct, then the proportionality between intensity of affect and degree of blameworthiness that figures in fit will depend in part on what has occurred since the offense.

Returning to the problem we raised at the start of this section, here is a way to ensure that a feeling of guilt—whatever its severity—is deserved just in case its intentional content—construed as a proposition—is true: take the feeling to represent oneself as deserving *that very token feeling*. If no overly severe feeling of guilt is ever deserved, then none will truly represent things.

Consider, in this light, Douglas Portmore’s view that the thought that is constitutive of a feeling of guilt for *A*-ing is that one deserves to experience the unpleasantness of this feeling in virtue of having violated a legitimate demand in *A*-ing (2019: 12.). Although we are not sure that this is Portmore’s intent, the idea might be that the feeling refers to itself, rather than simply to the kind of feeling that it is. Assuming that desert requires proportionality (however complicated a matter that is) between intensity of affect and degree of blameworthiness, a feeling of guilt will truly represent things only if it is proportional to one’s degree of blameworthiness.

Portmore does not aim to explicate desert in terms of fittingness. On the contrary, since on his view the fittingness of a feeling of guilt is explained in terms of the truth of a constitutive thought, and since the truth of that thought would be explained, in part, by desert of the feeling, his view explains fittingness in terms of desert. Whereas we take the desert and the fittingness of the feeling to have a common ground, on Portmore’s view desert of the feeling is part of what grounds its being fitting.

In any case, we are skeptical that a feeling of guilt has the sophisticated intentional content that Portmore attributes to this emotion. He rejects a construal of the feeling’s intentionality in terms of blameworthiness, arguing, for one thing, that young children can feel guilty even if they lack this concept. We find the content that Portmore attributes to the feeling considerably more demanding, requiring possession of concepts of desert, of the ground of desert, and of legitimate demand, as well as (perhaps) involving reference to the very feeling with that content.

Even setting aside the relation of fittingness to desert—and prescinding from a commitment to cognitivism—it is challenging to spell out the fittingness of feeling guilty in terms of accuracy of presentation. D’Arms and Jacobson observe that “considerations of fittingness can be divided into two kinds, corresponding to two dimensions of fit: one can criticize an emotion with regard to its *size* and its *shape*” (2000: 73). An emotion that presents its object as having an evaluative feature that, in fact, the object lacks is unfitting on grounds of shape. An overreaction might be fitting with respect to shape but is unfitting on grounds of size. Accuracy of presentation is meant to capture both of these dimensions of fit.

The intensity of a token feeling of guilt would, we imagine, be at least part of what constitutes its size. The strength or breadth of its motivational profile might also be thought to matter. The motivational tendencies of guilt, too, can change over time without one’s take on how blameworthy one is having changed. How, then, to think of fit as accuracy of presentation is a question we leave unsettled.

1. *Reason to Act*

**Reason** identifies a reason to be subject to an emotion: a fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy for something is (at some time) a reason (what we have called an *f*-reason) for one to feel guilty for that thing. As we observed, being subject to an emotion is not performing an action. But is there a reason for action in play when someone has an *f*-reason to feel guilty?

Dana Nelkin (2019) argues *against* the following thesis: there is a *pro tanto* reason to induce feelings of guilt in the blameworthy. Imagine, she suggests, that one person has culpably wronged another. (The offense is not trivial, but it is not grave, either.) You have the power of The Look: simply by looking at a person in a certain way, you can bring about in her a feeling of guilt.[[15]](#footnote-15) But the offender has resolved never to do this kind of thing again. Either her relationship with her victim is irreparably damaged, or all has been forgiven. And no one besides you and the offender is around to notice what she feels now. Nelkin maintains that you would not be making a mistake, leaving a reason on the table, by taking a pass on inducing a feeling of guilt.

Suppose that the fact in virtue of which the offender is blameworthy is (at present) a sufficient *f*-reason for her to feel guilty. (We say more about the parenthetical addition in section 9.) Then we are committed to affirming something that Nelkin denies. But we find the affirmation acceptable.

Granted, the mere fact that a certain attitude would be fitting does not entail that anyone has a reason to act so as to induce that attitude. If you’ve been told a funny joke, your feeling amused would be fitting; there is a consideration that favors your so responding. But there need be no one who has a reason to induce in you that response. Things differ, we think, when a fitting attitude is deserved and one’s having it would be just.

Having a sufficient *f*-reason to feel guilty, we have said, suffices for deserving to be subject to that emotion. Were the offender to have a fitting feeling of guilt, then, her feeling would be just, what she deserves to feel. Someone’s having a feeling that is just is in one respect (with respect to just emotions) good. Given that you have the power of The Look, then, there is a state of affairs accessible to you that is, with respect to just emotions, better than one in which you stand pat and the offender does not feel guilt. There is then, we accept, a consideration that favors your giving The Look.

But unless more is said about the case, this reason appears insufficient to justify your intervention. Although the offender deserves to feel guilty, she does not thereby deserve to be caused by you to feel guilty. Indeed, she does not thereby deserve to be caused by anyone to feel that way. Although her having the reason she has to feel guilty suffices for her deserving to feel that way, your having the reason you have to give The Look doesn’t suffice for her deserving that you induce in her that feeling.

Anyone inducing in her the feeling of guilt would be harming her, bringing about a state of affairs that is worse (than the status quo ante) for her, presumably without her consent. Imagine the she possesses The Shield: with a mere thought she can neutralize The Look. Would she be within her rights to protect herself from your intervention? It seems to us that she would. It would be just were she to feel guilty, but she is not obligated to submit to your intervention to produce that state of affairs.

Even when what is deserved is an action administering justice, it can be wrong for agents lacking authority to carry it out. Your neighbor’s child might deserve to be disciplined, but it might be wrong of you to administer the discipline. A thief might deserve to have what she stole taken from her and returned to its rightful owner, but it might be wrong of you to carry out this rectification.

Things might be otherwise if you stand in some special relation to the offender. If she is your non-adult child, for example, you might have the authority, as well as a responsibility to help cultivate virtuous dispositions in her, that would justify your giving her The Look.

Indeed, such a case is not entirely fanciful. We do have something approaching the power of The Look with respect to those with whom we are intimate. And we do sometimes make them feel guilty by looking at them in certain ways. When they deserve that feeling, the fact that they do is one reason favoring our so acting, but when we are justified, our conduct is generally supported by further considerations, such as the fact that their felt recognition of their wrongdoing is important to our ongoing relationship with them.

Although Nelkin denies that one’s blameworthiness provides a reason for others to induce a feeling of guilt, she nevertheless finds it “plausible that desert offers a certain kind of *conditional* reason for bringing it about that someone gets what she deserves” (2019: 189). By a conditional reason, she means a fact that is, under certain conditions, a reason for someone, but otherwise is not. For example, if you are in a position in which you must harm someone, and you can either harm someone deserving of it or someone else, the fact that the former deserves to be harmed might be a reason for you to harm her.

If we take reasons to be considerations that can be fairly succinctly expressed—the fact that it is raining, for example—then they are standardly conditional, in the sense that they can count as reasons (for some agent or agents) in some circumstances but not (for that same agent or agents) in others. On the condition that I’m headed out the door, the fact that it is raining might be a reason for me to get my umbrella, but not if what I aim to do is get wet! It might be possible to avoid conditionality of this sort by, as it were, writing the circumstances into the considerations. But much of what we would be left with as reasons would then be so complicated as to be practically inexpressible, given the multitude of possible conditions that can affect whether some (succinctly expressed) consideration is a reason for someone on some occasion.

Given that a consideration might count as a reason only given certain background conditions, what does our disagreement with Nelkin come to? We say that, with the power of The Look, you have a reason to induce guilt that is likely outweighed, given the circumstances; she says that you have a conditional reason, one that might, in other circumstances, contribute to sufficient reason to give The Look. The difference, we suspect, stems from a disagreement about value, to which we now turn.

1. *Value*

We are committed to a qualified variant of another thesis that Nelkin (2019) denies, namely: it is noninstrumentally good that one who is blameworthy feel guilty. Again supposing that the fact in virtue of which the person is blameworthy is (at present) a sufficient *f*-reason for her to feel guilty, if she feels guilty to the right extent for the conduct for which she is blameworthy, then, we say, that feeling is a fitting response to her conduct. What grounds its being fitting also grounds its being deserved. In being deserved by her, her feeling of guilt is just. That she has this just feeling is in some respect good. And the goodness is noninstrumental, not a matter of this state of affairs being a means to something good.

Against such a view, Nelkin urges us to consider the No Guilt Creatures. Although they care about others as we do, they never feel guilt. Otherwise, they respond to recognition of their own wrongdoing largely as we often do, resolving to do better, making amends, and so forth. (Presumably they never sincerely say they’re sorry!) Other things being equal, Nelkin suggests, their world is better than ours.

There are two importantly different ways in which we might understand the thought experiment. On the one hand, we might take it that the No Guilt Creatures are alien beings, members of another species, and utterly lacking a capacity that we humans have. On this understanding, we think that they lack any reason to feel guilty, and the question of their deserving this response simply doesn’t arise. We do not find them superior to us, but none of them is a deficient one of their kind for never feeling as we often do when we do wrong. They are simply a different form of life.

Alternatively, we might think of the No Guilt Creatures as some of us. Each is as capable as the rest of us of feeling guilty, but they deal with recognition of their own wrongdoing in other ways.[[16]](#footnote-16) They are spared the pain of guilt. But, again, we do not think that their way of responding to their wrongdoing is better.

We would gladly forego the pain of stomach ache when we have eaten too much. But unlike that state, the pained feeling of guilt is reasons-responsive. Responding to our culpable misdeeds without ever feeling guilty, while remaining capable of that response, would be failing ever to respond in a way that we sometimes have reason to respond, with a fitting emotion, one that we deserve to feel. We do not find it better to be unresponsive to reasons in this way.

Many emotional responses—being troubled, disturbed, or horrified in response to troubling, disturbing, or horrific events—are unpleasant experiences. Yet these are fitting responses to such events, and commonly when such events occur, we have reason to be subject to these emotions. Were we to remain capable of these responses but never experience anything more than affectless replacements of them, we would be at least partly unresponsive to these reasons. We do not find this state of affairs better than that of our fitting occasional emotional response.

1. *Teleology*

Suppose that someone *s* is blameworthy for *A*-ing in virtue of having freely *A*-ed, knowing that it was wrong for her to *A*, and moved by ill will when she so acted. We have suggested that the fact that *s* so acted is (at some time) a reason for her to feel guilty (to some extent) for *A*-ing, and *s*’s having this reason suffices for her deserving to feel guilty. Her action is then what is commonly called a *desert basis* for that feeling: she deserves this response because she has so acted (Feinberg 1970: 58).

Why is an action of *this* kind a desert basis for feeling guilty? We might say: because it renders one blameworthy for one’s conduct. But why does an action of *this* kind render one blameworthy?

Manuel Vargas offers a theory that answers these questions by appeal to teleology. The “responsibility system” is his term for the array of responses that people exhibit to those regarded as morally responsible agents—responses including judgments of blameworthiness, reactive emotions, blaming behavior such as reprimand and criticism, and the imposition of sanctions (2013: 6). Participants in this system internalize norms governing the responses in question. A specific set of such norms is justified, Vargas maintains, insofar as participation in a system of responses governed by these norms cultivates moral-considerations-responsive agency—insofar as it contributes to our greater responsiveness to moral reasons.

The theory provides a two-tiered account of the normative status of reactive emotions such as feeling guilty (Vargas 2015, 2019). A feeling of guilt is deserved just in case it responds to a desert basis for such a feeling. The norm governing feeling guilty is thus backward-looking. But this norm is in turn justified by forward-looking considerations. Something counts as a desert basis for feeling guilty just in case a norm prescribing response to things of that kind with such an emotion figures in a responsibility system that optimally cultivates moral agency. We think that Vargas goes wrong on this second point.

In feeling guilty, we have suggested, one takes oneself to be blameworthy for something. One’s deserving to have such a feeling is grounded in what grounds the fittingness of that feeling; and the feeling is a fitting response only if one is indeed blameworthy for the thing in question. The desert basis for the feeling will be something for which one is blameworthy.

Whether one is blameworthy for something is distinct from whether it is worthwhile—in any particular case or generally—blaming one for that thing or blaming anyone for things of that kind. Blame’s serving some purpose can bear on the latter question, but it does not bear on the former. Whether participation in a system of responses cultivates moral-considerations-responsive agency depends on contingencies—for example, on whether we commonly take note of moral criticism of just find it boring—on which blameworthiness does not depend.

Vargas says: “If there were a community that never accepted blame, then it is hard to see how blame could play much role in cultivating the relevant forms of agency. In such a community, blame would not be deserved” (2013: 264). But no failure to accept blame would imply that no one is ever blameworthy for anything, even if universal rejection made it pointless to blame.

Feeling guilty on some occasion can be normatively flawed in some respect for failing to serve some purpose. But it is not for that reason unfitting or undeserved. To think that it is is to conflate fittingness or desert with other normative matters.

Analogous things may be said of the fittingness of other emotions. Whether fear of lions is fitting is one thing; whether (in general) fearing lions serves some purpose is another. In fearing something one takes it to be dangerous. And whether something is dangerous does not depend on whether generally fearing such things serves some purpose. Fear might be in some way normatively flawed for failing to serve a purpose; but the flaw is not one of being unfitting.

1. *Qualification*

We come, finally, to clarification and a suggested qualification of the thesis we call **Reason**. First, this thesis says that a certain fact is *at some time* a reason to feel guilty. Perhaps if you have felt guilty enough, for long enough, then a fact in virtue of which you are blameworthy for something is no longer a reason for you to feel guilty for that thing. You might have felt all the guilt that you should for lying to your mom when you were five about eating an extra cookie. Though the misdeed (still) counts among things for which you are to blame, perhaps you no longer have any reason to feel the least bit guilty for it.

Whether the same qualification applies to fittingness and desert we are not sure, though we think that it does. It might no longer be fitting for you to feel guilty for that childhood peccadillo, and you might no longer deserve to feel bad about it. We incline, then, toward the following possibility: if you have felt sufficient guilt for a past misdeed, then although you remain blameworthy for it, the fact in virtue of which you are blameworthy no longer provides a reason for you to feel guilty, and it no longer grounds the fittingness or desert of feelings of guilt on your part.

We part company with those who hold that sufficient atonement can eliminate one’s blameworthiness, and thus the fittingness of blame altogether. Atonement cannot exonerate; it cannot render one not guilty of a moral offense. And as one remains guilty, so, we think, blame remains fitting. In brief: if one is guilty of an offense, then one is culpable for it. And one who is culpable for an offense is to blame for it. If one is to blame for something, then one is blameworthy, or worthy of blame for it. And one who is worthy of blame for something is a fitting target of blame for it.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Andreas Carlsson (2017) has advanced a view on which one is blameworthy for something if and only if one deserves to feel guilty for it, and one’s desert explains one’s blameworthiness. Having felt sufficiently guilty for some offense, having sincerely apologized, having made appropriate reparation, and having been forgiven, he argues, one may no longer deserve to feel guilty for it (Carlsson [date: pp.]). One is then no longer blameworthy for the misdeed.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We do not tie blameworthiness to desert of feeling guilty in this way. Even subsequent to one’s atonement, another person first learning of one’s misdeed might fittingly blame one for it. One remains to blame; blame by others can still be deserved, even if one no longer deserves to feel guilty. But neither do we tie blameworthiness to desert of blame by any particular other. Just as one’s guilt can become unfitting over time, so, we think, another’s resentment can become unfitting. Neither change renders one no longer blameworthy. A third person’s proportionate blame might still be fitting and deserved. Thus, we do not find here an asymmetry between self-blame and blame by others.

Second, a qualification of **Reason**: there might be infractions for which one is blameworthy that are so minor that *any* feeling of guilt would be an overreaction. An affectless recognition of one’s fault might be all, in the way of intentional attitudes, that is fitting in such a case. Although there are facts in virtue of which one is blameworthy for such things, one might never have any reason to feel guilty for them.

Third, if one is blameworthy for something but utterly incapable of feeling guilt, then, we suggest, one does not have a reason to feel guilty for that thing. Reasons to be subject to emotions, we think, resemble reasons for action in this respect. No consideration is a reason for us to give you the moon, because we are incapable of doing that. Similarly, it seems, an individual incapable of a given emotion has no reason to be subject to it.

In fact, everyone who is ever blameworthy for anything will at some time cease to be capable of feeling guilty, for all such agents eventually die (and, we assume, no one is capable of any emotion after her death). This fact provides another reason to hold that a consideration that counts as a reason to feel guilty can cease to be such a reason. The fact that Nixon prolonged the Vietnam War is not now a reason for him to feel guilty, since he is not now capable of having that or any other emotion. Still, he is to blame for the offense.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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1. See, e.g., McKenna (2012: 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More precisely, the theses advanced are generalizations of these claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The proposal satisfies what Rosen (2015) calls phenomenological and naivety constraints: it is consistent with the phenomenology of feeling guilty, and it is framed in terms that everyone capable of feeling guilty is capable of understanding. Several writers take the intentional content of a feeling of guilt to be considerably more complex than what we have suggested. In some cases, the aim appears to be to capture in the emotion’s content all the conditions that must be satisfied if one is to be blameworthy for a certain thing. We do not think that this is an advisable strategy, and some of the resulting accounts we find psychologically unrealistic. We briefly discuss one such view in section 5 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Further, one can feel guilty for a certain thing without believing that one is blameworthy for that thing—indeed, while believing that one is *not* blameworthy. In recognition of this possibility, a reactive emotion such as feeling guilty is sometimes said to be partly constituted by a *thought*, which one might or might not accept; see, e.g., Rosen (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is one respect in which emotion differs from perception. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some writers deny that such a consideration is a reason against having the emotion, rather than merely a reason to want or try not to have it. We think that it is both, though we won’t argue the point here. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The fact that *s* freely *A*-ed would then be what Dancy (2004: 39) calls an enabler. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that, as we see it, fittingness is not itself a moral property. Rather, we hold, in the case of negative reactive emotions, fittingness necessarily coincides with a moral property, viz., being deserved. We shall construe talk of the “moral fittingness” of an attitude to concern that attitude’s being fitting and (in some way) morally appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In this respect, there is an asymmetry between attitudes of moral credit and those of moral blame. The former, if unfitting, are (at least generally) merely gratuitous, not responses that their objects deserve not to be objects of. Exactly why this asymmetry exists is an interesting question, one that we leave unaddressed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We take the expression from Feinberg (1970: 83), who makes similar points about the bearing of desert. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Portmore (2019) writes mostly of an emotion’s being “appropriate,” though he sometimes says “fitting.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Writers who hold that the “appropriateness” of reactive attitudes is just a matter of the truth of a constitutive thought include, in addition to Portmore and Strabbing, Graham (2014) and Rosen (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Na’aman (forthcoming) advances a view of the fittingness of certain emotions that agrees with our judgment here. For a contrary view, see Marušić (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Similarly, one’s sense of amusement at a certain joke, or one’s grief over a loss, tends to fade with time, and it does not seem to us unfitting that it does. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. To clarify, what you can bring about is the real deal—an emotion in having which the offender would recognize her blameworthiness for the misdeed—not simply an unpleasant feeling. Thanks to Derk Pereboom for suggesting this clarification. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nelkin comes to the thought experiment by way of discussing Harman’s (2009) claim that he never feels “non-trivial guilt” (by which he means anything more than simply believing that he has done wrong). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Clarke (ms) provides a more thorough discussion of the view that atonement can diminish or eliminate blameworthiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Portmore ([date: pp.]) similarly holds that one can come to deserve to suffer less (or even no more) guilt for an offense as a result of already having suffered guilt for it, and that one thereby becomes less blameworthy (or no longer blameworthy at all) for that offense. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For comments and discussion, many thanks to Ben Bramble, Tori McGeer, participants at the Workshop on Self-Blame and Moral Responsibility, University of Oslo, September 2019, and participants at the Laurance S. Rockefeller Seminar, Princeton University, October 21, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)