DESERT OF BLAME

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The blameworthy deserve blame. So runs a platitude of commonsense morality. My aim here is to set out an understanding of this desert claim (as I call it) on which it can be seen to be a familiar and attractive aspect of moral thought. I conclude with a response to a prominent denial of the claim.

Before getting down to business, a few preliminary remarks are in order. First, the desert claim is not about the meaning of ‘blameworthy’. It is a substantive claim about the normative status of blame of the blameworthy.

Second, what is offered is not a reductive analysis. I connect the desert of blame to a number of normative and evaluative phenomena: the fittingness of blaming emotions, conditions the satisfaction of which renders one blameworthy, reasons to blame, justice in one’s attitudes toward oneself and others, and the value of a blameworthy person’s being blamed. Drawing these connections is a way of clarifying what the desert of blame comes to. The procedure leaves desert unanalyzed. That, I think, is as it should be; desert is as fundamental a normative phenomenon as any.

Third, the blameworthiness at issue is a mode of *moral* responsibility. We might say that when one is so blameworthy, the blame of which one is worthy is *moral* blame. Some argue that in addition to moral blame, there are varieties of nonmoral blame—blame, for example, for poor athletic performance or for aesthetic failure, when no moral fault is imputed. If there is such nonmoral blame, there might be worthiness of it that is not a mode of moral responsibility. Such a thing lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Some philosophers distinguish two or more varieties of moral responsibility, and thus two or more varieties of moral blameworthiness.[[1]](#footnote-2) One kind, often called *accountability*, is such that those who are so blameworthy can appropriately be *held to account* for what they have done. Holding someone to account in the relevant way can include having and expressing emotions such as resentment or indignation toward that person, and it can include various kinds of adverse treatment of her, including the imposition of penalties or punishment. It is blameworthiness of this kind that is my focus here.

Some who deny that anyone deserves blame accept that anyone who *could* properly be held to account for wrongdoing *would* deserve blame. They contend that no one ever bears such blameworthiness. I hope to persuade at least some who hold this view that there is less reason than they have thought to deny blameworthiness of this kind.

1. Fittingness and Desert

‘Blame’ can refer to an attitude or to behavior that expresses, or purports to express, such an attitude. The first is prior to the second in the following sense: when conduct counts as blaming behavior, it does so because it expresses, or purports to express, attitudinal blame. I focus first on desert of attitudinal blame and subsequently (section 5) turn to desert of behavioral blame.

Blaming attitudes are multifarious, though, as Peter Strawson (1962) emphasized, they are often reactive emotions. You feel guilty or remorseful for your own wrongdoing; you resent someone for having wronged you; you are indignant about a wrong done to another. Guilt, remorse, resentment, and indignation are object-directed emotions, emotional attitudes toward some person(s), the one(s) being blamed. An instance of one or another of these emotions appraises its object with respect to something—some offense or bad outcome—that is imputed to that person (or those persons). (I say more about the appraisal shortly.)

Object-directed emotions can be fitting or unfitting responses to their objects. Fear can be fitting in response to a tiger; it is an unfitting response to one’s shadow. Grief can be a fitting response to the death of a spouse; it would be unfitting in response to cancellation of *The Love Boat*. Similarly, admiration, contempt, amusement, disgust, and a wide variety of other emotional responses can be fitting or unfitting. Blaming emotions are among these; they can be fitting or unfitting responses to persons.

A fitting object-directed emotion, it is commonly held, is one that correctly appraises its object. Fear, it may be said, appraises its object as fearsome, amusement its object as funny, disgust its object as disgusting, and so forth. Instances of these emotions are fitting only when their objects have the evaluative properties that these attitudes appraise them as having.[[2]](#footnote-3) The blaming emotions, it may be said, appraise their objects as blameworthy for some offense.[[3]](#footnote-4) They are fitting, then, only when their objects are so blameworthy.

When someone is blameworthy for something, there is a fact about her *in virtue of which* she is blameworthy. Perhaps she did something morally wrong, acting freely when she did, knowing that she was doing wrong, moved by malevolent motives, and without a history of manipulation or extreme deprivation that would excuse her conduct. Some such fact will ground the fact that she is blameworthy for the offense.

Much of the debate about moral responsibility concerns what conditions can constitute such a grounding fact, that is, what conditions can render one blameworthy for something. I do not address this question here. Leaving it open, we can nevertheless see that a fact in virtue of which one is blameworthy renders fitting, or grounds the fittingness of, certain blaming responses. For example, it can render fitting a response of resentment from one who was wronged. Those who are blameworthy, then, can be fittingly blamed (for that for which they are blameworthy), with the fittingness of blame grounded in the fact in virtue of which they are blameworthy.

Fittingness is not itself a kind of moral propriety. A wide variety of attitudes can be fitting or unfitting, and their fittingness or lack thereof is not itself a moral matter. There need be nothing morally amiss with fear of one’s shadow, nor with lacking fear of a tiger. Conversely, moral considerations favoring or disfavoring an attitude can be unrelated to fittingness. It can be morally objectionable to envy something that is nevertheless enviable, or to be amused at a joke that, although funny, is offensive (D’Arms & Jacobson, 2000, pp. 81-82).

Still, the preceding point allows that a fitting attitude can possess a kind of moral propriety, and possess it in virtue of the very consideration that renders it fitting. I suggest that blaming attitudes provide actual instances of this possibility. Although the fittingness of blame and its desert are not one thing, what grounds an offender’s desert of blame is just what renders fitting a blaming response to her, which is to say, just what renders her blameworthy.[[4]](#footnote-5) A blaming attitude is deserved, then, if and only if it is fitting.

When a person deserves something, there is a basis—a desert basis, it is commonly called—for that person’s desert of that thing. The desert basis is something *in virtue of* *which* the person deserves that thing (Feinberg, 1970, p. 58; Miller, 1976, p. 88). The suggested view accords with this conception. Since blame that is deserved is fitting, and since it is deserved in virtue of the very thing that renders it fitting, what grounds its fittingness serves as the desert basis for deserved blame.

The ground in question has features that we should expect to find in both the ground of fittingness and the basis of the desert of blame. It provides a backward-looking consideration—one concerned with the agent’s current or past conduct or character—that favors a given response.[[5]](#footnote-6) (I say more about this point in section 3.) Irrelevant to this consideration are blame’s instrumental value, the standing of the blamer to blame, or her pattern of blaming others. Fitting blame might, in some case, be all things considered morally wrong; it might be useless or even counterproductive; it might be hypocritical if one never blames oneself for the kind of offense in question despite repeatedly committing it, or unfair if one has singled out only this offender for blame for this kind of conduct. The same possibilities exist for deserved blame. Conversely, blame can be undeserved as well as unfitting despite being highly beneficial, entirely sincere, and equitably distributed. And neither the fittingness nor the desert of blame hinges on epistemic warrant for that response.

An understanding of the nature of an object-directed emotion provides us with a grasp of its standard of correctness, thereby pointing us to conditions that render it a fitting response. In the case of blaming emotions, conditions that render them fitting are those that render someone blameworthy. (A comprehensive theory of moral responsibility will identify those conditions; but, again, that is not my task here.) Given the proposed understanding of the desert claim, we are similarly pointed to conditions that render blaming emotions deserved, for these are the very same conditions. On this construal of the desert claim, then, we are not left at the mercy of unguided intuition about desert in judging whether instances of blame are deserved. Given the shared ground, we may find in our thoughts about when reactive emotions are fitting helpful guidance in judging when these attitudes are deserved.

Of course, we will not always be sure about this matter. But we are not totally at sea. We commonly have a good sense of when various emotional responses, including those that constitute blaming attitudes, are fitting and when they are not. And a wealth of theoretical work on fitting attitudes over the past few decades has sharpened our philosophical understanding of the matter. The connection of desert to the fittingness of blaming emotions, then, provides guidance for our judgments about when, given the platitude with which I began, attitudinal blame is deserved.

Some theorists hold that blame need not be emotional. (I am inclined to agree.) Is the suggested understanding of the desert of blame applicable to unemotional blame (assuming that there is such a thing)? Consider a withdrawal of friendly feeling or an abandonment of trust, undertaken because (as one sees it) the person toward whom this change in attitude is directed is to blame for a certain misdeed. Though one is not angry, one might cease to think warmly of the blamed person, no longer take pleasure in her successes, become disposed to tell others of her misdeed, and be disinclined to associate with her in ways that one has done in the past.[[6]](#footnote-7) It seems that such a psychological stance, given the supposed basis, can be a fitting or an unfitting response to someone’s conduct; when friendly feeling or trust become unfitting, it can be fitting to withdraw or abandon them. On the suggested view, considerations that render such an alteration in one’s attitudes fitting would also render it deserved. If a response of this sort, lacking as it is in affect, can nevertheless count as blame, it is, I suggest, the sort of thing that can be deserved blame.

We might have less clear an understanding of a standard of correctness here than we have in the case of blaming emotions. But it is not as though we lack criteria altogether. Coldly resolving to cut someone out of one’s life just because she decided not to stop for milk on the way home is a gross overreaction. There is something unfitting and morally amiss with this response; it is disproportionate, not deserved on the basis just of this offense.

1. Just Attitudes

I take the desert of blame to be an aspect of justice. The proposal finds support in the commonsense view that to blame the innocent is to do them an injustice. The injustice, it is natural to think, consists in the fact that they do not deserve blame. To lack this injustice, blame must be deserved. As the desert claim has it, blame will be deserved only when it is blame of the blameworthy. (The effort here is not to establish the desert claim on independent grounds, but, rather, to clarify it by drawing various connections.)

The injustice in blaming the innocent is *substantive* rather than *procedural*: it obtains however scrupulous one might have been in arriving at the blaming attitude. Likewise the justice in deserved blame: it can obtain even if one blames hastily or without sufficient evidence of guilt. Further, the justice here is noncomparative, not a matter of whether other agents who have acted similarly are similarly blamed.[[7]](#footnote-8)

The aspect of justice that I have invoked is a matter of attitudes of a certain kind—blaming attitudes—being held toward those who deserve to be objects of them, and of their not being held toward those who do not deserve to be their objects. Having such an attitude is not itself administering a sanction, inflicting punishment, or subjecting someone to hard treatment in response to a (perceived) prior wrong. Insofar as retributive justice is justice with respect to these latter responses to wrongdoing, desert of attitudinal blame lies outside its scope.

Indeed, one can be deservedly blamed even if one is never made aware of it and experiences nothing as a result of it. A blamed person often remains unaware of unexpressed blame, which can nevertheless be deserved. And the dead can be deservedly blamed for their misdeeds, though (I assume) they are never aware of our responses to them. (Of course, this is not to say that blame of which one is never aware is commonly *all* that an offender deserves.)

Precisely on the grounds that attitudinal blame is often harmless, some deny that fitting attitudinal blame generally has the status of being deserved. David Brink and Dana Nelkin hold that “when one is deserving of something for acting culpably, one deserves a form of treatment that sets back one’s interests or harms one in some way” (2022, p. 190). Indeed, on their view, *only* responses that so affect one’s interests are deserved for blameworthy conduct. “Desert in the realm of responsibility,” they contend, is “valenced”: the responses deserved must be good or bad, and good or bad *for* the one deserving them (p. 190; see also Nelkin, 2016, pp. 176-177).[[8]](#footnote-9) The benefit or harm need not be *felt*—it need not be a positive or negative *experience* (Nelkin, 2016, p. 177); but it must be an alteration, for better or worse, of the interests of the recipient. An attitude held by another that in no way affects the interests of its object is thus not something deserved on the basis of blameworthy conduct. Since attitudinal blame, they hold, often does not affect the interests of the blamed, it is often not deserved, even when it is fitting.[[9]](#footnote-10)

One might accept Brink and Nelkin’s desideratum on what can be deserved but insist that attitudinal blame always satisfies it. Being blamed, it might be said, is contrary to an objective interest that each of us has in being thought well of in respect of morality. (To say that the interest is objective is, in this instance, to say that a person has it independently of whether she cares about being thought of in this way.) Being blamed thus sets back one’s interests, whether one learns of the blame or not, and indeed even if it is in some way also beneficial.[[10]](#footnote-11) (Being thought blameworthy, even if one is not also blamed, would do so as well.) Even the dead, one might say, can suffer such reputational harm. A comparison might be drawn with the respect that is owed to rational beings. A denial of such respect might be something of which one never learns, one might never experience anything unpleasant as a result of it, one might be indifferent to it or even welcome it. But it might be said that we each have an objective interest in being so respected, an interest that is set back when the deserved respect is denied.

Whatever we think of this reply, the desideratum itself is questionable. We commonly speak of things deserved by persons when we would think them deserved without regard to their impact on the interests of the recipient. A student can deserve a certain grade. But it is not thought that whether a grade is deserved hinges on whether it will advance or set back the recipient’s interests, or indeed on whether it will have any such impact at all. A grade of C might benefit one student, who needs to pass just one more class to graduate; it might damage another’s prospects for a competitive scholarship; and it might neither help nor hinder a third. Whether the grade has any such impact is irrelevant to whether it is deserved.

Regarding what can be deserved due to wrongdoing (albeit not wrongdoing by the one said to deserve), consider the following example from Fred Feldman and Brad Skow (offered in service of a different point):

Suppose I deserve an apology from my neighbor in virtue of the fact that he (inadvertently) tore up some of the plants in my yard. But suppose also that I do not really care about my yard, or about the quality of my relationship with my neighbor. Getting the apology would mean nothing to me, nor would I be upset if my neighbor did not apologize. The apology would not make my life better or worse. (2020)

There does not appear to be anything incoherent in the supposition that the apology is nevertheless deserved. In light of such cases, I do not think that what can be deserved on the basis of blameworthy conduct is restricted in the suggested way.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Closer, I think, is Joel Feinberg’s suggestion that “the deserved object must be something generally regarded with favor or disfavor even if, in some particular case, it is regarded with indifference by the person said to deserve it” (1970, p. 61). Attitudinal blame passes this test (as do grades and apologies). We generally dislike being blamed when we are aware of it, and blame of which one remains unaware is still the *kind* of attitude that we generally dislike being the object of. Even blame that happens to benefit its recipient fits the bill. Further, as T. M. Scanlon (2018, p. 121) points out, we have reason to care about how others regard us. As something that it is reasonable to disfavor, even if on rare occasions one is indifferent to or desirous of it, blame passes what might be thought a normative test faced by candidates for desert: not only do we generally dislike being the object of it, but we have good reason to do so.

There is at least one blaming attitude, guilt, that is always bad for the one blamed. (If remorse differs from guilt, then there are at least two.) In the case of a deserved feeling of guilt, what is deserved is a painful recognition of one’s blameworthiness for something (though what is deserved might be very slight). The proposal here might thus be said to have a retributive aspect.

It is nevertheless not committed to the view that the blameworthy deserve to have suffering inflicted on them. For the feeling of guilt is not the infliction of suffering on oneself. Inflicting suffering is performing an action; feeling guilty is being in an affective state. An offender might inflict this state upon herself. But her act of doing so is not the state that, in performing that action, she brings about. And desert of feeling guilty is not desert of having that feeling inflicted on one, not even desert of having it inflicted on one by oneself.

1. Reason to Blame

A claim that someone deserves blame is often taken as purporting to cite a reason to blame. I think it better to see the claim as indicating the character of a certain reason, identifying it as a consideration of a certain aspect of justice. The reason in question is, or is encompassed in, a fact in virtue of which the person is blameworthy, and thus deserving blame.[[12]](#footnote-13) It is the basis of one’s desert of blame, then, that provides the reason. Having cited that basis, one does not cite an additional reason by saying that blame is deserved. (Similarly, rather than say that the fact that someone is blameworthy is a reason to blame, we might better say that the reason in question is provided by the fact in virtue of which the person is blameworthy.)

The reason in question is not merely permissive; it favors blame. And it can be enough, by itself, to render blame sufficiently justified; no further reason needs to be added to achieve this normative status. But, of course, this reason is not conclusive; it does not alone settle the question of whether blame is adequately justified. It can be outweighed by reasons not to blame; sometimes, all things considered, one should not blame one who deserves blame.[[13]](#footnote-14) The reason in question will be sufficient, then, only in the absence of such countervailing reasons.

A desert basis does not, I think, provide a prima facie duty, obligation, or requirement to blame. A prima facie duty (obligation, requirement) is one that, if not opposed by countervailing considerations, becomes one’s actual duty (obligation, requirement). And a desert basis for blame does not have that normative force. Although we can owe it to someone to blame a certain offender, when we do, considerations other than the desert basis (such as one’s relationship with the victim) are, I think, what generate the obligation.

Vastly many people are blameworthy for vastly many things. Given this fact, an implication of the suggested view is that vastly many people deserve blame for these misdeeds, and there is reason to blame each of them for each of their offenses. Are we wrongly ignoring most of these reasons?

I would think that the reasons in question are reasons *for* very many, if not all, of us. But if *having* a reason requires somehow registering it—being aware of, recognizing, or grasping it—then most of these reasons are *had* by few if any of us. Moreover, we have far better things to do than to seek them out. We have lives to live, and for almost all cases of blameworthy conduct it would be an irrational use of our limited cognitive and emotional resources to so much as consider them.

Compare our situation with respect to belief. Each of us can access evidence for vastly many beliefs that are of no importance to us. Given our interests, and given our finite cognitive resources, we should not so much as consider many of these things. Similarly, I think, given our interests, and given our finite evaluative resources, we should not so much as consider most of the misdeeds that have been done. The reasons that there are for us to blame in these cases do not give us reason to attend to them.

This observation addresses, I think, an objection that George Sher raises against the view that attitudinal blame essentially involves anger or the withdrawal of goodwill. (I take no stand here on that view.) The problem arises, he says, if we attempt to combine such a conception of blame with the idea (which he accepts) that blame can be deserved. Given blame’s moral character, it would follow that not only those directly affected by the offense but anyone who knows of it, including the wrongdoer herself, may appropriately react to her with anger or a withdrawal of goodwill, and that such responses remain appropriate long after the misdeed in question.[[14]](#footnote-15) The implication, he says, is “too dark to be credible” (2006, p. 87).

The desert of blame is not its overall appropriateness, nor even its overall moral appropriateness. That there are so many reasons for us to blame so many does not imply that we should do so. Indeed, I have suggested, we have good reason not even to turn our attention to vastly many of the reasons there are favoring blame. We have far better things to do. Moreover, even when an offense for which someone is blameworthy is of interest to us, we often have reason not to blame, to instead forgive, allow the offender another chance, or simply let bygones be bygones.

Avoiding the injustice of blaming the innocent has a high priority. Maximizing the relevant form of justice in blaming every blameworthy person for everything for which each is to blame is of no significant importance.

It might be thought that this conception is objectionably deflationary. When something is deserved, it might be said, there is a weighty reason favoring it. What grounds desert might be thought to outweigh non-moral considerations, and since it is a matter of justice, to trump other kinds of moral consideration as well.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Such a view badly misconstrues desert. A consideration that grounds desert of blame favors that attitude, but in light of countervailing considerations one might lack sufficient reason to blame. Indeed, one might have sufficient reason not to do so.

Again, the view might be said merely to provide a label, affixing ‘desert’ to something that we will have already recognized as stemming from blameworthy conduct. But there can be a point to calling things by their right names. Identifying a fact in virtue of which someone is blameworthy as grounding desert indicates the kind of moral significance that this fact has. It matters to the justice of possible responses. Unless some such fact obtains, blame is substantively unjust. The obtaining of such a fact can render an instance of blame just. Even if we have no obligation to maximize such justice, the blaming attitudes that we do possess prima facie ought to be in this respect just.

There is, moreover, an evaluative implication of the identification. It is not generally true that a state of affairs in which something receives a fitting response is, in virtue of that fact, in some respect good. (It might be neither good nor bad that you are surprised at something unexpected.) But a state of affairs in which someone is the object of deserved blame is, with regard to that attitude, just; and what is just is in some respect good. Justice is valuable, whereas fittingness per se is not. There is, then, something non-instrumentally good in an offender’s being deservedly blamed. More precisely, other things being equal, there is something non-instrumentally better in a blameworthy offender’s being deservedly blamed than in her not being so blamed.[[16]](#footnote-17) The former is better in some respect given the justice in it that is lacking in the latter.

1. Desert and Value

Axiological claims like the one just asserted are sometimes presented as definitions or analyses of desert. It might be said, for example, that an offender’s deserving to be blamed consists in, or is a matter of, its being non-instrumentally better (all else being equal) that, having committed the offense, the person be blamed than that having so offended, she remain unblamed. I have suggested, differently, that the axiological claim is explained by the desert claim. What makes the state of affairs in which the offender is blamed better (in some respect) is that there is justice in it that is lacking in the comparison state, the justice being a matter of the offender’s being deservedly blamed.

The comparison I have drawn is nevertheless the usual one that is drawn in discussions of desert. In contrast, Douglas Portmore links desert of blame to a different evaluative comparison. He holds that blameworthy persons deserve to suffer guilt, regret, or remorse for their offenses, and in explication he says:

someone deserves something (say, X) if and only if, as a matter of justice and in virtue of her prior activities or possessed characteristics, she merits X in the sense that entails that the world in which she gets X and merits X in this sense is, other things being equal, non-instrumentally better than the world in which she gets X but doesn’t merit X in this sense. (2022, p. 53)

The worlds we are to compare are not (A) one in which the agent is blameworthy and suffers guilt, regret, or remorse and (B) a second in which the agent is blameworthy but suffers no such thing. Rather, they are (A) and (C) a world in which the agent is not to blame but still suffers guilt, regret, or remorse.

Having acknowledged that there is justice in someone’s receiving a deserved response, it is puzzling that Portmore does not advance the usual comparison. Further, rejection of it sits uneasily with his observation that “we find the idea of just taking a pill to rid ourselves of our guilt morally problematic” (2022, p. 58). In taking the pill, one who deserves to feel guilt moves from a more just state of affairs to one that is less just. And Portmore judges that doing so “makes the world morally worse, other things being equal” (2019, p. 56). That judgment seems to reflect a commitment to the usual comparison.

1. Behavioral Blame

We can communicate attitudinal blame in speech acts of various kinds, including accusation, admonishment, castigation, condemnation, denunciation, dressing down, rebuke, reprimand, reproval, scolding, and upbraiding. Communicating blame in these ways is blaming; such acts, when they express, or at least purport to express, attitudinal blame, may thus be called acts of blaming. These are the exemplars of behavioral blame on which I focus here.

Literally pointing the finger at a culprit can also be an act of blaming. Slamming a door or giving someone the cold shoulder can express, and can be understood as meant to express, blame, but it seems strained to call these acts of blaming.

Blaming attitudes can be expressed, and understood to be expressed, also in the pronouncement or administration of penalties or punishment. But one can punish without having a blaming attitude toward the recipient, and what justifies a punishment need not be something for which the recipient is worthy of moral blame. The offense need not involve moral wrong. There can be punishment without condemnation (a point emphasized by Kelly [2018]).

It is widely recognized that attitudinal blame is not a sanction. Equally true is that sanctioning need not be blaming. And an act of blaming is often neither sanction nor punishment. (The one blamed might be long dead.) Although there is overlap of the justification of punishment with that of behavioral blame, there is considerable difference as well. It is only the latter that is my focus here. How are we to understand desert of it by the blameworthy?

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, p. 82). Since an act of blaming is, at least when directed at the one blamed, a mode of treatment that commonly expresses attitudinal blame, the remark suggests the following view of desert of such behavioral blame: it is deserved if and only if it appropriately expresses deserved attitudinal blame.

As with desert of attitudinal blame, the appropriateness at issue here cannot be an all-things-considered matter, nor even an overall moral appropriateness. Assuming that behavioral blame can be deserved, a wrongdoer can deserve it even if, because it would have disastrous consequences, everyone should refrain from it. Conversely, if great harm is threatened unless one engages in an undeserved act of blaming, it may be that one should do so.

In the case of attitudinal blame, the view that I have suggested is that desert of it shares a basis with a particular kind of appropriateness of reactive emotions, namely, fittingness. Similarly, it might be said that the relevant kind of appropriateness of behavioral blame is a kind of correctness that an act of blaming can have or lack in virtue of being an act of blaming. Such correctness may be in part, as Feinberg’s remark suggests, a matter of being a natural and conventional expression of attitudinal blame. Among other things, convention determines the meanings of words and sentences employed in the speech acts in question. And conversational and social conventions may contribute to determining standards of correctness of acts of blaming.[[17]](#footnote-18)

But there is more to it than this. It might be in some sense natural, and it might accord with local convention, to publicly upbraid someone who deserves no more than a private reprimand, or to repeatedly castigate someone who deserves no more than a one-time rebuke. Correctness of an act of blaming provides a normative standard against which natural inclinations and conventions can themselves be judged.

Let us say that behavioral blame that in the relevant respect correctly expresses deserved attitudinal blame *fittingly* expresses that attitude. On this view, then, behavioral blame is deserved if and only if it fittingly expresses deserved attitudinal blame.

Although I find this view appealing, I doubt that invoking a kind of correctness here provides a great deal of help in guiding our judgments of which acts of blaming are deserved. The guidance, I expect, would likely run in the opposite direction. We might think an act of blaming correct or incorrect, in the indicated respect, because we judge it deserved or undeserved. This is not to say that the proposal is mistaken about what it is for behavioral blame to be deserved, only that the proposal is less helpful in practice than we might have hoped.

Recognition of a role for desert in the justification of behavioral blame can nevertheless make at least three contributions to a view of the normative status of such conduct. First, it can provide an understanding of an important respect in which behavioral blame of the innocent, no matter how instrumentally valuable it might be in some case, is morally flawed: the innocent do not deserve to be so blamed. Second, desert favors ordinal proportionality; for example, greater behavioral blame is deserved for assault than for a simple lie. Third, we have at least some idea as well of non-comparative proportionality of behavioral blame, which can be understood as favored by desert. An angry tirade in response to an isolated instance of a forgotten quotidian commitment can be undeserved even if one is blameworthy for the failure. Construing desert of acts of blaming in terms of the correctness of that activity (*qua* behavioral blame) in expressing deserved attitudinal blame delivers a way of understanding these judgments, even if it does not sharpen them.

A different approach to desert of behavioral blame might parallel Scanlon’s account of desert of punishment. Punishment, he observes, commonly expresses blame. And attitudinal blame, as well as its expression, can be deserved, “made appropriate *simply* by facts about what a person is like or has done, where the qualification ‘simply’ rules out…justifications appealing to institutions or to the good effects of treating people in the way in question” (2018, p. 120). However, he holds, desert plays only a limited role in the justification of punishment.

The idea of desert plays no role either in justifying or limiting the kind of hard treatment, such as imprisonment, that a just institution can impose for certain crimes. Imposing hard treatment as a penalty for certain crimes can be justified only by the social benefits of such a policy, and such hard treatment is limited by the cost that it is fair to impose on an individual in order to promote these benefits. (p. 123)

The imposition of specific punishments for specific criminal offenses receives a contractualist justification. There is an important social goal: protecting ourselves and our possessions. The strategy for promoting this goal involves creation of a risk of punishment; a range of activities are declared illegal and their commission subject to punishment. Safeguards are introduced to provide fair opportunity to avoid incurring the penalties. Principles indicating in what circumstances which penalties are incurred by whom must be such that they cannot be reasonably rejected by anyone motivated to find such principles that others similarly motivated cannot reasonably reject (1998, pp. 263-267). The justice of a specific punishment is a matter of its being prescribed by a fair social regime, not a matter of individual desert.

Although Scanlon does not do so, one might propose that desert plays an analogously circumscribed role with respect to behavioral blame across the board. One can deserve *that* blame be expressed toward one in response to one’s wrongdoing. But desert does not figure in the justification of this or that specific kind of behavioral response. Such justification is a matter of accord with principles of behavioral blame that cannot be reasonably rejected by anyone motivated to find such principles that others similarly motivated cannot reasonably reject. The goals, strategies, and safeguards that figure in this deliberation will differ from those for punishment. And in contrast with punishment, the behavioral responses governed by the resulting principles will mostly be informal rather than institutional. These principles might be said to be secondary moral principles, setting norms of response to (apparent) violations of primary moral principles.[[18]](#footnote-19)

It would, I think, be reasonable for the contractors to favor norms respecting the two kinds of proportionality mentioned earlier, even if in the end they settle for principles allowing for some departure from them. This preference suggests that a principle of desert, or something closely akin to it, is prior to the outcome of such deliberations and that desert bears not just on *whether* but on *how* blame is to be expressed.

Michael McKenna takes a third approach to desert of behavioral blame. His focus is “directed blame,” the communication of blame to the one who is blamed. Situating such acts within his conversational theory of moral responsibility,[[19]](#footnote-20) he sees them as analogous to contributions to conversations, responses to prior acts by others that are themselves seen as having (negative) moral meaning.

Directed blame, McKenna observes, can set back three kinds of welfare interests of the recipient, interests each of us has in (i) being unhampered in pursuit of our normal social activities, (ii) not having to deal with demands to account for or apologize for our conduct, and (iii) maintaining an emotional stability that directed blame commonly upsets. Directed blame thus tends to harm its recipients. However, although it is common knowledge that this is so, in blaming, unlike in punishing, we need not intend harm. A further important difference is that the harms of blaming are of a lesser order than those of punishing.

McKenna advances the following axiological thesis:

Because it is noninstrumentally good to harm by blaming one who is blameworthy for a morally wrong act (where the harms in blaming are limited just to those identified on the conversational theory), there is a reason that favors doing so. (2019, p. 273)

The goodness of the harm in blaming, he says, “provides a practical reason *favoring* blaming” (p. 259). The harm that it is non-instrumentally good for the offender to receive is said to be

no more than what is involved in that person having a proportionately pained response to others altering their interpersonal relations with her—and altering them as would befit their communicating to her their moral demands and concerns from a place of proportionate moral anger. (p. 279)

As I understand the view, the axiological claim is meant to say “what a claim of desert comes to,…what desert is (as it bears on blame)” (p. 260, n. 18). To be deserving of the indicated harms is for it to be non-instrumentally good that one receive them.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The proposal resembles in some respects the first considered in this section. But there are significant differences. One is that, on the first approach, the reason favoring behavioral blame is provided not by the value of harming the offender, but by her conduct that renders her blameworthy. That conduct is the basis of her desert, and she deserves blame because of that conduct. Further, on the first approach, desert of blame explains the value of an offender’s being deservedly blamed: that state of affairs is good in some respect because it is just. The value is a consequence of the desert, not constitutive of it. In contrast, McKenna’s view appears to be that desert of directed blame consists in the value of certain harms’ being done to the offender.[[21]](#footnote-22) Moreover, what is said to be good, on the first approach, is that the offender is deservedly blamed, not that she is harmed, or harming her.

There is a difference as well in the scope of the proposals. McKenna offers an account of desert of the expression of blame to the one who is blamed. However, we often engage in behavioral blame that is not so directed—we express blame to third parties, often of wrongdoers whom we will never encounter, sometimes of those long dead—and work would be needed to extend McKenna’s account to such cases.[[22]](#footnote-23)

I favor the first of these three approaches. But it must be acknowledged that it does not provide a sharply defined idea of exactly what behavioral blame is deserved by whom, for what, and when. In fact, I think that we have only a rather vague conception of this matter. Still, the principles of proportionality provide important guidance.

1. A Denial of Desert

Desert of attitudinal blame, as construed here, is a pre-institutional—or better, non-institutional—moral status. It is a normative status that is not grounded in any normative quality of social arrangements that is itself exclusive of desert. It is prior as well to (not explained by) the value of any consequences of our practice of blaming. The view advanced here thus differs from the two-tiered account of desert favored by Manuel Vargas. As he sees it, the bases for desert of blame are the moral qualities of agents and their actions; these provide first-order justifications for our blaming attitudes and judgments. But these things count as bases of desert because blaming in accord with a norm that so counts them contributes sufficiently well to our remaining, and becoming even more, responsive to morally relevant considerations (2015, pp. 2666-2667; 2022, p. 21). As it might be put, the grounds of desert count as such because treating them as such is beneficial in the indicated respect. I do not see desert of blame as dependent in this way on the consequences of our recognition of it. If our practice of blaming as we do were fruitless or deleterious, we might have good reason to alter or abandon it; but that would not render anyone less deserving of blame. If we could build even better beings by counting different things as bases of desert, that would not make them so.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Following Derk Pereboom, it has become customary to call desert lacking any consequentialist or contractualist ground “basic desert.” Pereboom characterizes as follows a kind of moral responsibility one’s bearing which implies that one can basically deserve one or another response:

For an agent to be *morally responsible for an action in the basic desert sense* is for the action to be attributable to her in such a way that if she was sensitive to its being morally wrong, she would deserve to be blamed or punished in a way that she would experience as painful or harmful, and if she was sensitive to its being morally exemplary, she would deserve to be praised or rewarded in a way that she would experience as pleasurable or beneficial. The desert at issue is basic in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve such blame or punishment, praise or reward, just by virtue of having performed the action with sensitivity to its moral status, and not, for example, by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations. (2021, pp. 11-12)[[24]](#footnote-25)

I do not see desert figuring in exactly this way in moral responsibility. True, commonly a blameworthy person will deserve at some time to experience some degree of guilt for what she has done, and guilt is unpleasant. But there might be moral infractions for which one can be blameworthy that are so minor that any feeling of guilt would be an overreaction; an affectless variety of self-blame might be all, in the way of one’s own intentional attitudes, that is fitting in response to them (Clarke & Rawling, 2022, p. 235). The difference in what response is fitting tracks a difference in how bad the offense is; it does not imply that we have here a different kind of moral responsibility. Second, a blameworthy person can eventually feel all of the guilt that she deserves, and then deserve no more; but exhausting in this way the attitudinal blame that one deserves from oneself does not render one henceforth blameless for the offense in question (Clarke & Rawling, 2022, pp. 234-235). Finally, the no-longer-existing dead remain blameworthy for their misdeeds, but they no longer deserve any painful or harmful experiences, for they are utterly incapable of experience of any kind (Clarke, 2022, p. 2591).

Still, there is an important similarity between desert as I construe it and what Pereboom calls basic desert: neither depends on any consequentialist or contractualist ground. It is thus noteworthy that Pereboom denies that we bear the kind of moral responsibility that brings with it such desert. In order for blame to be basically deserved, he maintains, we would have to satisfy certain metaphysical conditions of freedom that might be impossible, and which, even if possible, our evidence reveals we fail to satisfy (2014, ch. 3).[[25]](#footnote-26)

He does not, however, reject moral responsibility or blameworthiness altogether. Pereboom proposes a “forward-looking” notion of responsibility, forward-looking in that the normative status of blame depends largely on blame’s consequences, notably its contribution to “protection from harmful immoral behavior, reconciliation with those who have done one wrong, moral formation of those disposed to do wrong, and retention of integrity of victims of wrongdoing” (2021, p. 36).[[26]](#footnote-27) Largely, but not exclusively; he states: “Some backward-looking elements in my view are required for justifying blame, for example that the agent did in fact act badly” (2015, p. 285). A fact that I see as grounding an agent’s blameworthiness, and thus the agent’s desert of blame, Pereboom sees as required if blame is to be justified.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Pereboom finds it intuitive that “there is value in the recognition by an agent who is blameworthy in the largely forward-looking sense that I have set out that he is blameworthy” (2015, p. 288). I take him to be referring here to non-instrumental value. Perhaps the idea is that when an agent has done wrong with the required sensitivity to her act’s wrongness, it is non-instrumentally better (other things being equal) that she recognize that she is blameworthy for her misdeed than that she fail to recognize this fact. Further, Pereboom agrees that “a sense of pained remorse is a morally fitting additional response” (p. 288; see also his 2021, p. 49).[[28]](#footnote-29) Yet he denies “that the blameworthy deserve to suffer such pain” (2015, p. 288).

What, we might wonder, is the difference between remorse being morally fitting and its being deserved? Generic fittingness is not a kind of moral propriety. But it is a specifically moral fittingness that Pereboom affirms, and that would be a kind of moral propriety. So is desert. Further, what would render remorse morally fitting would be the prior moral offense. For one is remorseful about that misdeed; one’s remorse appraises one as blameworthy for it. What would render the emotion fitting is what renders one blameworthy, as appraised. And that is what I say would render the response deserved. So, what does the difference between our views come to?

Pereboom sees the difference to concern the permissibility of intentionally imposing this pained response. “If pain were basically deserved on account of wrongdoing, this would give rise to a prima facie moral permission for suitably situated agents to intentionally impose it on the wrongdoer for a non-instrumental reason” (2021, p. 50). In contrast, he holds, although pained remorse can be morally fitting, it is never permissible intentionally to impose it for a non-instrumental reason (that is, I take it, for its own sake).

The desert claim is that the blameworthy deserve blame. I have said that attitudinal blame that is deserved is that which is fitting. In my view, this can include the painful response of remorse. In some cases, then, remorse is deserved. It might mislead to rephrase this as a claim that, in these cases, *pain* is deserved. What is deserved is *remorse*. The point is a small one; let us set it aside.

Pereboom does not explain why he thinks desert would give rise to a prima facie permission to inflict pain. The following line of thought might be offered for something similar. When an offender deserves to feel remorse, it would be just that she experience it. A just state of affairs is in some respect non-instrumentally good. Hence it would be in some respect non-instrumentally good that the offender experience the deserved remorse. And now, if a state of affairs would be in some respect non-instrumentally good, there is a non-instrumental reason to bring it about, a reason that does not stem from its having any further consequences. Thus, when an offender deserves remorse, there is a non-instrumental reason to bring it about that she experience it.

In section 2, I endorsed the view that there is something good in a blameworthy person’s suffering a deserved feeling of guilt: there is justice in such a state of affairs. The value, I have said (section 3), is non-instrumental. I would say the same about remorse, if that differs from guilt. But I also accept that there is something non-instrumentally *bad* in anyone’s having a painful experience: it feels bad to have one. If these values give rise to reasons, then, when someone deserves to feel remorse, there might be both a non-instrumental reason *favoring* intentionally bringing it about that she experience that emotion, and a non-instrumental reason *disfavoring* intentionally bringing about that state of affairs.[[29]](#footnote-30)

What is there more (or stronger) reason to do? I do not see that the desert claim is committed to any uniform answer here. It seems at least possible that the answer will vary from case to case, and that it might often be that on balance non-instrumental reasons *disfavor* intentionally inducing remorse in the wrongdoer. One’s reasons not to intentionally bring about a painful experience for no further purpose might be quite strong, and one’s reasons to bring about deserved attitudes in others rather weak.

It might be objected that our reason not to inflict painful experience for its own sake is, more precisely, a reason not to inflict *undeserved* painful experience. When a painful experience would be deserved, the thought is, there is no such reason disfavoring inflicting it for its own sake. I do not see that the desert claim is committed to such a view. One’s desert of a bad experience does not imply that there is nothing bad in one’s having that experience. If in this respect my view departs from a widespread understanding of desert, I accept the difference.

Consider the case not of self-blame but of blame by one person of another. Suppose that Al does not blame Berta, though he could fittingly do so. There would be some justice, I say, in Al’s fittingly doing so, and thus that state of affairs would be in some respect non-instrumentally good. But if this fact provides a third party, Carl, with a reason to induce Al to fittingly blame Berta, that reason is not a very strong one. Someone who spent her time responding to such reasons would be an unbearable busy-body.

There is a reason to blame any blameworthy agent, a reason encompassed in the fact in virtue of which that agent is blameworthy. But this is not a reason stemming from the value of the agent’s feeling remorse. It stems, rather, from the misdeed. And it is a reason to blame, not a reason intentionally to impose remorse. What the agent deserves, when she deserves to feel remorse, is to have that experience; it is not to have that experience imposed on her.

How greatly does Pereboom’s view differ on these matters? As I read him, he accepts that there is value in a blameworthy agent’s painless recognition of the fact that she is blameworthy; what he seems to affirm is its being in some respect non-instrumentally good. Indeed, since pained recognition encompasses recognition, it would seem that he would accept that there is non-instrumental value in the latter response as well, when it is morally fitting. If the non-instrumental value of a possible state of affairs can give rise to a reason favoring bringing it about, then, it seems, Pereboom, too, should acknowledge that when remorse would be morally fitting, there might be a non-instrumental reason favoring imposing it.

Perhaps a difference arises if we consider a case in which an agent has come to a painless recognition of her wrongdoing but feels no remorse. Might there be a non-instrumental reason to nudge her toward remorse? If she deserves to feel remorse, then, I should say, there might be. Perhaps Pereboom’s view is that there would not be.[[30]](#footnote-31)

If that is correct, what is the normative import of the fact, affirmed by Pereboom, that the further response of remorse would be morally fitting? Would it not be non-instrumentally better in some respect that the wrongdoer move from a state in which she has only the painless recognition to one in which she has this morally fitting response? Does *she* not have a reason favoring such a move? It would be odd to hold that the moral fittingness is entirely normatively impotent.

Finally, imagine that an innocent person is blamed. I say that an injustice is done to her, for she does not deserve blame. Suppose that this instance of blame has many of the consequences that, as Pereboom sees it, provide forward-looking justifications of blame. He will nevertheless judge it unjustified. But is there any injustice here? If so, in what does the injustice consist, if not that the person does not deserve to be blamed? An advantage of seeing things as I have proposed is that we can account for the judgment that it is unjust to blame the innocent. It is not clear that Pereboom can do the same. Perhaps he rejects the judgment.

1. Conclusion

Attitudinal blame can be a fitting or an unfitting response to a person. When it is fitting, a fact in virtue of which that person is blameworthy is what renders it so. I have suggested an understanding of the desert claim on which this same fact renders the person deserving of blame. Desert here is an aspect of justice: blame is an injustice unless it is deserved. A fact in virtue of which one is deserving of blame encompasses a consideration favoring blame, but this is a defeasible reason. Other things being equal, it is, in respect of justice, non-instrumentally better that a blameworthy person be deservedly blamed than that she not be. I see this evaluative fact as due to the justice of deserved blame, not as constituting it.

I sketched three approaches to desert of behavioral blame. On the first, such blame is deserved just in case it is a correct (fitting) expression of deserved attitudinal blame. On the second approach, although expression of blame can be deserved when attitudinal blame is deserved, desert does not figure further in the justification of this or that specific kind of behavioral blame; the latter receives a contractualist justification. The third approach takes desert of blame directed at the one blamed to consist in the non-instrumental value of that person’s being harmed in specified ways. I favor the first of these approaches.

I considered in light of the suggested construal Pereboom’s denial that any of us ever deserve blame. His alternative view accepts something very close to the desert claim, and where it differs, it does not seem to me preferable.

I took the platitude that the blameworthy deserve blame as my starting point, and my goal has been to set out a sensible and attractive construal of that claim. I have not offered a demonstration of its truth. But perhaps the explication offered here will have undermined some common objections to the desert claim. It strikes me as an intelligible and defensible bit of commonsense moral thought.[[31]](#footnote-32)

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1. Watson (1996), Darwall (2006, p, 69), and Shoemaker (2015), among others, distinguish accountability from other varieties of responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Commonly, the evaluative properties in question are graded—something can be more or less fearsome—and a fitting emotion is proportionate, neither an overreaction nor an underreaction, appraising its object as possessing the degree of the relevant property that it in fact has. Hence the use of ‘only when’ rather than ‘when and only when’ in the text here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The appraisal will be characterized differently by proponents of response-dependence accounts of blameworthiness (e.g., Shoemaker, 2017; D’Arms & Jacobson, 2022), on which blameworthiness is explained in terms of the correct appraisal of one or another blaming emotion. I am not convinced that blameworthiness is explained in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. An alternative to my proposal is to construe desert as a kind (or species) of fittingness. Feinberg (1970, p. 82) suggests this alternative, and McKenna (2022, pp. 173-174) endorses it. An advantage of my way of putting things is that we may see fit as a uniform relation, one that can obtain whether or not moral matters are at issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Desert judgements are justified on the basis of *past* and *present* facts about individuals, never on the basis of states of affairs to be created in the future. Desert is a ‘backward-looking’ concept, if we regard the present as the limit of the past; utility is a forward-looking principle” (Miller, 1976, p. 93). For similar thoughts, see Feinberg (1970, p. 58) and Kleinig (1971, p. 73). There is dispute about whether the claim holds in every case; see, e.g., Feldman (1995). Nevertheless, it seems apt with respect to desert of blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Scanlon (2008, ch. 4) recognizes such dispassionate stances as examples of blame. It bears emphasizing that what is at issue here is a certain attitudinal stance, not conduct toward which that attitude disposes one. Granted, the attitude is in part a disposition toward certain conduct. Still, we can distinguish the attitude from any such conduct, and the question of desert can be raised separately about the attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Feinberg (1974) similarly contends that holding a derogatory judgment about someone can be noncomparatively just or unjust. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. As a rationale for this view, they suggest that it would be hard to complain of unfairness if nothing bad will happen to you or others (2022, p. 190). But one has a ground for complaint when one has been done an injustice. Hence the proffered rationale does not settle the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Brink and Nelkin write: “The distinction between situations in which blame is harmful and those in which it is not crosscuts the distinction between expressed and unexpressed blame” (2022, p. 191). The view thus appears to imply that in the case of both attitudinal and behavioral blame, fitting blame sometimes is and sometimes is not deserved, for it sometimes does and sometimes does not affect the interests of the blamed.

   Brink and Nelkin claim that blameworthiness and desert nevertheless have a necessary connection: “One who is blameworthy is also, and for the same reasons, deserving of a setback of interests or a harmful response” (2022, p. 191). I doubt that the no-longer living villains of the past—Pol Pot, for example—remain deserving of harmful responses from anyone, though I am confident that they remain blameworthy. For more on this point, see Clarke (2022, p. 2591). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Nelkin (2013, p. 124) suggests that being resented by a hateful person can be good, or at least not bad, for you. But since resentment includes at least an appearance of the blamed person’s having committed an offense, it would in any case set back the indicated interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Mulligan, likewise, rejects the view that, when it comes to personal desert, “the desert object must be either beneficial or injurious to the desert subject” (2018, p. 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The grounding fact might include considerations that are not themselves reasons favoring blame but are, instead, “enabling conditions” (in Dancy’s [2004, pp. 38-52] terms), conditions the obtaining of which is required if other considerations encompassed in the grounding fact are to count as reasons favoring blame. For more on this point, see Clarke and Rawling (2022, p. 220). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Feinberg observes, “a person’s desert of *X* is always a reason for giving *X* to him, but not always a conclusive reason,…considerations irrelevant to his desert can have overriding cogency in establishing how he ought to be treated on balance” (1970, p. 60). Kleinig (1971, p. 76) concurs. I would say that the desert basis, rather than desert, provides the reason. Note, as well, that attitudinal blame is not in any ordinary sense a matter of *giving* anything to the object of one’s blame, nor in an ordinary sense a matter of one’s *treatment* of that person. One’s attitude is *directed at* the blamed person, in the sense that it is blame *of* her. Nothing need be sent or received. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Sher alludes here to Strawson’s characterization of indignation and moral disapprobation as “vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues” (Strawson, 1962, p. 199) of resentment. Thus, it is not only victims of wrongdoing who would have reason to be angry or withdraw goodwill. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. “Moral desert, as I understand it, is the view that culpable wrongdoing morally determines how we should respond” (Kelly, 2018, p. 48). If ‘determines’ means settles the question, this is not my view of desert. Likewise, I think that Kinghorne overstates matters when he says that the “consideration of desert trumps most—if not all—other considerations” (2021, p. 217). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “It is implicit in the idea of desert that it is good or desirable for A who has performed P [and deserves B on the basis of having done so] to have B; the world is in a better state when he has B than when he does not have it” (Miller, 1999, pp. 135-136). My claim is a bit weaker; I say better *in a respect of justice*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. This point is emphasized by McKenna (2013). Below I discuss some differences between the view suggested here and that advanced by him. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Lenman (2006) advances a contractualist justification for practices of holding responsible, though he does not discuss desert. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. McKenna sets out the theory in his 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Directed blame will sometimes fail to produce any of these harms. When it fails, it is unclear whether, on McKenna’s view, it is deserved. And the indicated reason for engaging in it will be lacking. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. The remark quoted above from McKenna (2019, p. 260, n. 18) suggests this interpretation. However, elsewhere he says that the world in which the offender is made worse off in the indicated ways by being a recipient of directed blame is better (than one in which her offense does not receive this response) “because she deserves it” (p. 269). This latter remark suggests that desert is more fundamental than, and explains, the value in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. McKenna makes a start on this task in his forthcoming, ch. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Clarke and Rawling (2022, pp. 232-234) set out a similar objection to Vargas’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Pereboom does not mention here that to be so deserving, the agent must have acted freely. Perhaps sensitivity to the moral status of the action is thought to encompass a reasons-responsive kind of freedom. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. What would have to be the case, he argues, is that we exercise irreducible agent causation that is not subject to laws of nature, whether deterministic or probabilistic. While he does not conclusively rule out the metaphysical possibility of such causation, he maintains that empirical evidence counts decisively against its actuality. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. I do not, of course, deny that the consequences of blame can provide reasons for or against blaming. In the case of attitudinal blame, these will be wrong-kind reasons, but nevertheless relevant to whether all things considered one should blame. And in the case of behavioral blame they will at least commonly be right-kind reasons. The consequences of saying something are relevant to whether one should say it. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. I am not sure exactly what Pereboom means here. I would not think that the view is that there can be *no* justification for blaming an innocent person, nor that there cannot be *sufficient* justification. Perhaps the intent is just that an important justification of blame is lacking when the blamed person is innocent of the offense in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. In his 2021, Pereboom puts this point in terms of regret rather than pained remorse. But regret can be fitting in response to things other than one’s own agency; some emotional response focused on one’s own agency would be a better choice here. I shall continue to discuss the point in terms of remorse, as Pereboom put it in the earlier work. Further, since remorse is to some extent painful, to simplify the wording I henceforth omit the adjective. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. I say “might” because reasons are reasons *for* someone or other, and whether there is anyone for whom there are these reasons will, I think, depend on further factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. The case resembles one introduced by Nelkin (2019, p. 186) involving “the Look,” a special power to bring about feelings of guilt just by looking at someone in a certain way. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, many thanks to Andrew Eshleman, John Fischer, Coleen Macnamara, Michael McKenna, Dana Nelkin, Piers Rawling, Dave Shoemaker, Manuel Vargas, Michael Zimmerman, and a referee for this journal. Work on the paper was supported by a fellowship at the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)