

# IT CANNOT BE FITTING TO BLAME GOD

MARCUS WILLIAM HUNT   
*Concordia University Chicago*

This paper argues that it cannot be fitting to blame God. I show that divine immutability, even on a weak conception, implies that God's ethical character cannot change. I then argue that blame aims at a change in the ethical character of the one blamed. This claim is directly intuitive, explains a wide set of intuitions about when blame is unfitting, and is implied by most of the theories blame offered in the philosophical literature. Since blame targeted at God aims to change God's ethical character, an impossibility, such blame is not fitting. I then draw on this conclusion to sketch a new theodicy. I argue that a necessary condition on being blameworthy is that one can be blamed under some possible condition. So, God cannot be blameworthy. Further, I argue that if someone cannot be blameworthy, then they cannot do wrong. Wrong actions tend to make us blameworthy, but since God cannot be blameworthy nothing can tend to make him blameworthy – God cannot do wrong.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A small empirical literature examines blame and anger targeted at God. People blame God for negative life events, such as a serious illness or the death of a loved one.<sup>1</sup> In one study, 62% reported that they were sometimes angry at God.<sup>2</sup> Another study found that both theists and atheists sometimes find it difficult to forgive God.<sup>3</sup> Anger at God predicts a decline in belief in God<sup>4</sup> and a decline in religious behaviours such as prayer.<sup>5</sup> Blame and anger towards God is a topic of common pastoral concern.<sup>6</sup> Blame and anger towards God is a theme in biblical texts, such as Psalm 22 and the Book of Job. Such attitudes do not seem to be unequivocally condemned by the biblical tradition; perhaps some forms of blame and anger towards God are part of what it means to 'wrestle with God' (Genesis 32:28). The question of whether God can blame or be angry has been addressed in the contemporary philosophical literature<sup>7</sup> but the question of whether we can ever fittingly blame God has not. My argument is this:

1. God's ethical character cannot change.
2. If someone's ethical character cannot change, then it cannot be fitting to blame them. Therefore,
3. It cannot be fitting to blame God.

I do not argue for the truth of (1), but I show that it is something to which almost every theist is committed because it is entailed by the divine attribute of immutability. After explaining the idea of fittingness, I explain the claim that underlies the necessary condition posited by (2), that 'blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed' (hereafter, 'the claim'). I provide three reasons for accepting the claim. First, I show that the claim is directly intuitive using a thought experiment. Second, I show that the claim is a good explanation for intuitions about the conditions under which blame is unfitting. Third, I show that most theories of blame offered

in the philosophical literature state the claim, explicitly or implicitly, which is what we would expect if the claim is true. So, blame targeted at God aims to change God's ethical character. Since God's ethical character cannot change, (3) it cannot be fitting to blame God. This is a significant conclusion given how such blame figures in (ir)religious attitudes and behaviours. I proceed to draw on (3) to sketch a new theodicy:

4. Only if someone can be fittingly blamed can they be blameworthy. Therefore,
5. God cannot be blameworthy.
6. If someone cannot be blameworthy, then they cannot do wrong. Therefore,
7. God cannot do wrong.

(4) is the claim that, as a necessary condition, to be blameworthy involves being a fitting target of blame under some possible condition. Yet, there is no possible condition under which God is fittingly blamed, so (5) God cannot be blameworthy. Regarding (6), I argue that doing wrong tends to make one blameworthy. Yet God cannot be blameworthy, so nothing can tend to make him blameworthy, so (7) God cannot do wrong. I finish by answering two objections. In each premise (1-7) the modal terms 'cannot' and 'can' are employed in the metaphysical register (rather than, say, the psychological or practical register).

My argument allows that we can evaluate God in ethical terms, but blocks some negative ethical evaluations—it is distinct from the argument that 'a metaphysically perfect being is not a moral agent'.<sup>8</sup> The argument concerns blame in the interpersonal sense, rather than the sense of causal attribution (*e.g.*, 'I blame the bad weather for the poor harvest') or explanation (*e.g.*, 'This painting is awful. I blame the garish colours').

## 2. GOD'S ETHICAL CHARACTER CANNOT CHANGE

The mutable is that which can change, even if it happens not to. The immutable is that which cannot change. Almost all theists—classical, neo-classical, open—affirm that at least God's ethical character cannot change: 'weak-immutabilism'. Classical theists affirm that God cannot change at all, that God is immutable not just *qua* ethical character but simpliciter: 'strong-immutabilism'. To accept either weak or strong-immutabilism is to accept premise (1). I outline the motivating thoughts of both views.

### 2.1. *Weak-immutabilism*

Weak-immutabilism is motivated primarily by two thoughts. On the one hand, God must undergo some types of change to interact with human beings in the fullest sense. For instance, God must first feel anger at Winnow when she steals, then forgive Winnow when she repents, then entertain Winnow's new petitionary prayers, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, God must not be able to undergo some other types of change in order to be reliable, rather than capricious, in his dealings with human beings. Both thoughts have *prima facie* scriptural support (Numbers 23:19, Jonah 3:10).

Weak-immutabilists hold that God's ethical character is immutable: God 'remains fixed in his character',<sup>10</sup> God is immutable with respect 'to his character, that is, to his moral qualities',<sup>11</sup> 'God's salvific telos must be unchangeable'<sup>12</sup>. Even 'process theists reject the idea of a deity whose moral character is ever questionable'.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of a human being, a change in (i) dispositions to ethical emotions, (ii) ethical virtues, (iii) ethical standards, or (iv) ultimate intentions towards others, are changes in ethical

character. So, weak-immutabilism claims that changes in these properties do not occur whatsoever in God. This list is not an exhaustive account, much less an analytic definition, of ethical character: it identifies some aspects of ethical character, and so the sorts of things that blame aims to change.

*Dispositions to ethical emotions.* God's dispositions towards feeling ethical emotions, emotions involving ethical evaluations, cannot change. If at T1 God has a disposition to feel righteous anger (or jealousy, or compassion, or disappointment) under conditions of type X, then at every T God has a disposition to feel this way under conditions of type X. This allows that, as conditions change, the ethical emotions that God actually feels will change.

*Ethical virtues.* God cannot become more or less ethically virtuous. If at T1 God is perfectly generous, then at every T God is perfectly generous. Virtues involve dispositions to act.<sup>14</sup> So, if at T1 God has a disposition to the action-type 'smiting' under conditions of type X, then at every T God has a disposition to smiting under conditions of type X. This allows that God manifests his immutable ethical virtues by performing different actions under different conditions.

*Ethical standards.* The standards by which God ethically evaluates actions cannot change. If at T1 God evaluates actions as ethically permissible or impermissible by, say, whether they promote or impede human salvation, then at every T God evaluates actions by this standard. This allows that at T1 God evaluates a token action as good and at T2 evaluates a token action of the same type as bad.

*Ultimate intentions towards others.* Examples of ultimate intentions towards others include wanting them to flourish, wishing them harm, or being indifferent towards them. Our ultimate intentions towards someone inform, in myriad ways, how we treat them and feel about them. If at T1 God's ultimate intention towards Winnow is to will her good, then at every T this is God's ultimate intention towards Winnow. This allows that God adopts and abandons more proximate intentions towards Winnow, *e.g.*, at T2 God teaches her humility by arranging challenging circumstances, at T3 God sends her a rainbow to cheer her up.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. Strong-immutabilism

Strong-immutabilism was the default view 'from the patristic period until the late eighteenth century'.<sup>16</sup> Classical theists infer God's strong-immutability from a variety of other divine attributes. According to Plato, God is perfect, yet change is either towards or away from perfection. According to Aristotle, God is the cause of all change and so is himself unchanging. According to Boethius, God is atemporal yet change requires time so God is unchanging. According to Aquinas, God is simple, without parts, and change is a change of some part, so God is unchanging.<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary commentators characterise strong-immutabilism as the view that God's intrinsic properties cannot change, which allows that God's extrinsic properties can change.<sup>18</sup> As an example of intrinsic change, it cannot be the case that at T1 God is angry and then that at T2 God is not angry. As an example of extrinsic change, it can be the case that at T1 God is worshipped by Winnow and that at T2 God is not worshipped by Winnow. In the former example God changes, but in the latter example it is only really Winnow who changes. For our purposes, it is unnecessary to spell out the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties, or probe the exact bounds of strong-immutabilism, since every such account would agree that there can be no change in God's ethical character: virtues, ethical standards, *etc.*, are clearly intrinsic properties.

Immutability is concerned only with change, a temporal concept. Divine immutability rules out that God could have one set of intrinsic properties and then have a different set of intrinsic properties. It does not itself rule out the modal claim that God's intrinsic properties could be

different than they are. If in some possible world Winnow is not a thief, divine immutability does not require that in that world God would have mental states that are about Winnow being a thief.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. IF SOMEONE'S ETHICAL CHARACTER CANNOT CHANGE, THEN IT CANNOT BE FITTING TO BLAME THEM

#### 3.1. *Fittingness and function*

According to one category of theories, blame is a particular type of intentional mental attitude. Within this category, some theories say that blame is a cognition (such as a judgement or belief), others that it is a conation (such as a desire or wish), others that blame is an emotion (often, a form of anger). Intentional mental attitudes have intentional objects, the former are about the latter, *e.g.*, hate and the hateful. Fittingness is a matter of correspondence between attitude and object, between how the attitude presents the world as being and how the world is. As some paradigmatic examples, it is fitting to believe the truth, to love that which is loveable, to feel humour at that which is humorous. By contrast, it is unfitting to hope for bad things, unfitting not to be embarrassed by that which is embarrassing. When an intentional mental attitude is present despite the absence of its intentional object, or when an intentional mental attitude is absent despite the presence of its intentional object, that attitude is unfitting. For example, fear involves a cognition that presents a thing as fearful and involves a conation that presents the fearful thing as 'to-be-fled-from'. So, fear of a duckling is unfitting because ducklings are not fearful and because fleeing from a duckling is not desirable (at least, not in the way that the token of fear presents it to be). Though there may be 'wrong kinds of reasons'<sup>20</sup> for having unfitting attitudes—*e.g.*, one might have prudential reason to believe something that is not true—one has 'reason of fit' to avoid having unfitting attitudes.

According to another category of theories, blame is that which has a particular function, that which is oriented towards a particular goal or function. By analogy, a heart just is that which has the function of pumping blood. For example, as we will see, Angela Smith says that blame is that which has the function of protesting the moral claims implicit in someone's behaviour. On such theories, a wide variety of intentional mental attitudes (beliefs, wishes, moods, *etc.*) can be blame because they perform blame's function, because they participate in the goal of blame. By analogy, an artificial heart made of metal and plastic is a heart because it has the function of pumping blood.

To illustrate the ideas of function and malfunction, consider Atlantic puffins. Atlantic puffins migrate annually to the island of their hatching: natal homing. The goal of natal homing is (something like) 'reaching an environment suitable for procreation'. A malfunction occurs when natal homing behaviour is engaged in but (i) does not tend to serve its goal, (ii) where this is not due to some external frustration. Suppose that the island has recently been carpeted in landmines. The natal homing behaviour does not tend to serve its goal, but because of an external frustration. There's something wrong with the island, not the puffins. By contrast, if a puffin engages in natal homing behaviour in mid-winter, rather than the spring, then this is a malfunction. Likewise, when tokens of blame occur and do not tend to serve their goal, where this is not due to some external frustration, such tokens are malfunctions—as when one blames a dog or blames an innocent person. It can be good for a malfunction to occur because it can, by luck, bring about a good consequence. The puffin may

meet a fishing trawler as it flies home in winter and have the feast of its life. Nevertheless, malfunctions as such are bad because in them a being is striving for a good in such a manner that it will not attain it, where the good that it seeks is not to be found, except by luck. We have reason to try to avoid malfunction. For instance, a teacher has reason to refrain from injecting their eccentric opinions into their classes (a malfunction, relative to the goal of educating), we have reason not to drink methylated spirits (which causes malfunctions in one's body), we have reason not to believe things that are clearly false (a cognitive malfunction), we have reason not to be alarmed about events that are clearly not alarming (an affective malfunction).

### 3.2. *The claim*

Underpinning the necessary condition of (2) is the claim that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed. On a desire or emotion theory of blame, this is to say that one of the things desired when one blames is a change in the ethical character of the one blamed, that blame inclines us to change the ethical character of the one blamed, that we find the satisfaction of the desire in a change in the ethical character of the one blamed. On a function theory of blame, this is to say that the function of blame, what blame characteristically strives to do, the work of blame, is to change the ethical character of the one blamed. The good that blame aims at, conceived in either of these two ways, is a change in the ethical character of the one blamed. I offer four clarifications about the claim.

First, to say that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed is not to say that this is the only aim of blame. Rather, the claim is consistent with the idea that this aim is a part of some more architectonic aim, or that this aim is the more architectonic one and has parts, or that blame has several independent aims. For example, perhaps blame aims to hold responsible, and blame's aim of a change in ethical character is one aspect of holding responsible. So, the claim is about blame's nature, but it is not a complete theory of blame's nature. I am not making the consequentialist claim that blame should be put to the task of changing ethical characters, but a metaphysical claim about what blame is.

Second, to say that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed is not to say that blame aims for this change to be brought about via any means. For instance, if I blame Winnow for stealing and I then remove the portion of her brain that allows her to steal, then blame's aim has not been achieved because her ethical character has not been changed in the right sort of way. The change in ethical character that blame seeks is change brought about via the personal level—change that engages the attitudes, emotions, and projects of the one blamed, especially change brought about in response to being blamed or blameworthy—rather than change brought about via sub-personal manipulation (*e.g.*, surgical, pharmaceutical, hypnotic).

Third, though I speak throughout simply of change, since it is the concept germane to immutability, I hold that blame aims to improve the ethical character of the one blamed, rather than to change it by worsening it, or to change it in ways that are on-balance ethically neutral.

Fourth, the claim that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed does not imply that this is commonly (or ever) someone's motive, intention, or reason, for blaming. By analogy, the motive that a bricklayer has for bricklaying might be that they want to earn money, yet the aim of their action is to build a house. Again, the claim that gratitude aims 'to make a return',<sup>21</sup> aims to benefit the benefactor, does not imply that grateful people ever consciously recognise this fact, or that people are motivated to cultivate gratitude by the thought that they will then be better at benefiting their benefactors. Rarely is the blamer aware of the fact that they aim at something good for the one blamed, or are motivated to blame by this. In a similar

vein, the claim does not relate to the psychological causes of blame (*e.g.*, that we blame others to displace self-blame, that we are more disposed to blame when we are hungry, *etc.*)

Given the role of sociality in regulating ethical sentiments and behaviour,<sup>22</sup> it's a plausible conjecture that we would have a characteristic emotion (desire, *etc.*) that aims to change the ethical characters of others. Blame seems like a good candidate for that conjectured emotion. Those we blame can be described as standing in need of a change in their ethical character—blameworthy things include vicious dispositions, bad ultimate intentions towards others, misguided ethical standards. Often, we keenly feel the need to change our ethical characters when we are blamed or recognise our blameworthiness. Citing the fact that one is blameworthy as a reason for wanting to change one's ethical character seems sensible, rather than a *non sequitur*. With the background plausibility of the claim that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed thus stated, I offer three main reasons for accepting it.

*Reason 1: the claim is directly intuitive*

Here is a case which shows by direct intuitive judgement that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed:

Finn and Winnow live in the same apartment building but do not know each other well. Finn knows that Winnow has been stealing some of his mail. Finn encounters Winnow on the stairs. He says: 'You've been stealing my mail! What the heck Winnow! That was really wrong of you! Some of that mail was really important—you have harmed me! How dare you!?' Winnow makes a confused noise and scurries into her apartment.

A week later, Finn and Winnow encounter each other again. Winnow then says either (A) or (B):

- (A) 'I will never steal mail again. After you confronted me, I reflected on what I had done. I used to think that stealing mail was not a big deal, but now I understand that it is. I would feel ashamed to do it now, it would pain me to do it, it would be contrary to the respect that I now understand that I owe to persons. These changes are stable.'
- (B) 'I will never steal mail again. After you confronted me, I came to realise that I won't always get away with it, whereas I used to think that I would.'

Let's stipulate that Finn blamed Winnow; that he had a certain desire, or a certain anger, or that he protested the moral claim implicit in Winnow's behaviour, *etc.* (the description of the scenario is agnostic between these theories). Let's also stipulate that, in both (A) and (B), what Winnow says is true and that Finn *knows* this; that Finn's epistemic situation is unambiguous; that, unlike in real life, he would have no grounds for retaining a healthy suspicion about Winnow's ethical character.

Does the change that Winnow reports in (A) achieve the aim of Finn's blame (at least in part)? Intuitively, yes. Indicating this is that, just as a token desire should subside once it is satisfied, or just as the Atlantic puffin should stop flying once it reaches home, Finn's blame of Winnow should greatly diminish once he learns (A). So, the change exhibited in (A) is something at which blame aims. Again, let's stipulate that after hearing (A) Finn continues to feel towards Winnow exactly as he did before, that Winnow's ethical transformation has no impact on his feelings. Can we continue to judge that he fittingly blames Winnow? Intuitively, no. We might say that Finn continues to be irritated by Winnow's past behaviour, that he is upset, that he blames but blames unfittingly, *etc.*, but not that he blames her fittingly.

Certainly, Finn might want more than *just* a change in Winnow's ethical character—such as an actual apology, the return of his mail, or compensation—but if (A) does not at all achieve the aim of Finn's putative token of blame, it is not really a token of blame. By contrast, in (B) it

seems that Finn may continue to blame Winnow without diminishment. In this case, Winnow's ethical character has not changed, even though her behavioural disposition has changed. This indicates that change of the type exhibited by (B) is not what blame aims at.

*Reason 2: the claim best explains intuitions about when blame is unfitting*

It is intuitive that blame is unfitting when targeted at beings meeting the descriptions listed below, (i-viii). I include putative examples in parentheses. In some cases, the putative examples are of beings that only meet these descriptions by a physical or psychological contingency rather than by a metaphysical necessity, but we can conceive of the metaphysically necessary equivalents and think of our intuitions about whether blame would be fitting.

- (i) Beings that lack an ethical character (a rock, a tree).
- (ii) Beings that lack the capacity to understand what blame is (an infant, a vicious dog).
- (iii) Beings that lack the capacity to apprehend that they are being blamed (a person with severe alexithymia).
- (iv) Beings that lack the capacity to care that they are blamed, for whom being blamed has no motivational impact, who cannot feel the 'force' or 'sting' of blame (a person with psychopathy).
- (v) Beings that lack the agential capacity to change that for which they are blamed; who cannot, say, pursue becoming more honest over time (a person with dementia).
- (vi) Properties that originated in choice but which are now unchangeable (a deeply ingrained addiction, an ethical vice originating in an unhealable childhood trauma).
- (vii) Properties of the deep past (the dishonesty of the person who was dishonest thirty years ago but who now is impeccably honest).
- (viii) Properties that do not need to be changed (the person who has the right ultimate intentions towards others, who does what is best because they are ethically virtuous).

The unfittingness of blaming beings that meet descriptions (i-viii) is well-explained by the claim that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed. (i-viii) are different factors in virtue of which a change in the ethical character of the one blamed cannot occur (either absolutely, or in the way that blame aims for such change to occur, via the personal level), different loci across which this property is shared.

One candidate for a better explanation of (i-viii) might be that people can only be fittingly blamed for that which is under their control.<sup>23</sup> However, it seems that this suggestion does not explain (ii-v), in which the beings could have control over their bad actions but are nevertheless not fittingly blamed for them. That is, it seems *prima facie* possible for a being to lack the capacity to understand what blame is, or understand that they are being blamed, and yet be able to control their actions. Rather, the control standard of blame seems to pick out a subset of the ways in which tokens of blame can be unfitting because of how blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed: if someone lacks the ability to control their actions, blaming them would not help to change their ethical character.

*Reason 3: many theories of blame imply the claim*

That many different theories of blame imply that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed provides highly consilient evidence for this claim. It is the sort of thing that we would expect to observe if the claim is true, and something we would expect not to observe if the claim is false. Not every theory of blame implies the claim, but an argument from consensus does not require complete unanimity to be persuasive. The only theories that clearly do not imply the claim are cognitive theories on which blame is simply a judgement, *e.g.*, 'the judgment that a person failed to show proper regard for others'.<sup>24</sup> Such judgements may be

characteristically utilised by some more ultimate mental project that aims at changing ethical character but, according to cognitive theories of blame, blame is not itself that project. There are several strong reasons to think that cognitive theories of blame are independently implausible, *e.g.*, that on them judgements of blameworthiness would amount to blame,<sup>25</sup> but I cannot prove this here.

**Conative theories of blame:** George Sher offers the only conative theory of blame. Sher argues that blame involves a desire: ‘that the person in question not have performed his past bad act or not have his current bad character’.<sup>26</sup> The second disjunct of the desire is the claim. The first disjunct of this desire is that something in the past have been other than it was. Given that the past cannot now be made to be other than it was, this is a desire that cannot be satisfied. This unsatisfiable desire gives rise to substitute desires that can be satisfied:

...it remains possible for him [the wrongdoer] to come to appreciate in retrospect—and thus also for someone else to bring him to appreciate in retrospect—the force of the very moral reason that he ignored or flouted in prospect.... If a wrongdoer or a bad person does thus come to see the error of his ways, his doing so will not satisfy the relevant D [desire of blame]; but it will resemble the (impossible) outcome that would satisfy D.<sup>27</sup>

The desire of blame that cannot be satisfied concerns a modality, that things had been different than they were, which is not a desire for change as such. Yet the substitute desires are desires to change the ways that things are, and things to do with the ethical character of the one blamed.

**Emotion theories of blame:** Emotion theories of blame usually claim that blame is anger, or a type of anger such as resentment or indignation.<sup>28</sup> In turn, these theories claim that the anger that is blame involves desires to engage in: ‘sanctioning responses... such as avoidance, denunciation, reproach, censure’;<sup>29</sup> ‘certain adverse or unwelcome treatment... “sanctions”’;<sup>30</sup> ‘to scold or punish’;<sup>31</sup> ‘sanctioning people who are appraised as wrongful’;<sup>32</sup> ‘aggressive and sanctioning behavior’.<sup>33</sup>

In most cases these authors do not give theories of the aim of sanction, punishment. However, it seems that most such theories imply the claim. In Plato’s account of punishment in *Gorgias*, the purpose of punishment is to heal the soul of the offender from ‘the disease of injustice’,<sup>34</sup> and Aristotle concurs that punishment is a ‘curative treatment’ for vice.<sup>35</sup> On a common accounting, there are rehabilitative, restorative, retributive, and deterrence theories of punishment.<sup>36</sup> Rehabilitative theories of punishment clearly imply the claim. So do restorative theories (supposing that things like a change of heart, a *sincere* apology, or a *sincere* effort to make amends are aspects of restorative punishment). With respect to retributivism, it is plausible that retribution aims (in part) at changes in ethical character. For the retributivist, that someone who is punished ends up having a change in ethical character is not an entirely fortuitous accident or mere causal consequence of punishing. It is at least a part of the aim of punishing, even if another aim is simply to harm the offender:

The internal aim of these sanctioning behaviors is... to get the wrongdoer to acknowledge her wrongdoing, feel remorse, apologize, make amends, and commit to doing right in the future. It achieves this aim by imposing burdens—the pain of punishment, the sting of reproof.<sup>37</sup>

The theory of punishment that, perhaps, does not support the claim is the deterrence theory. However, it seems that some forms of deterrence theory would support the claim, since the deterrence of repeated offence, and potential offenders, can take the form of shaping moral character, rather than being an appeal to prudence. For instance, public executions and the stocks, and online reports of the local court, do not just deter the public by scaring it, but by inviting the public to



regard the offender as having an ethical character unworthy of emulation. The crowd jeering and throwing rotten vegetables at the one punished, or commenting angrily on the webpage, participate in this aim of the punisher.<sup>38</sup> I now turn to functional theories of blame.

**Blame as punishment:** Some hold that blame is that which has the function of punishing in a relatively mild and informal way.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that theories of punishment imply the claim, so do these theories.

**Blame as aligning moral understanding:** Miranda Fricker argues that the goal of blame in its paradigmatic form is ‘to inspire remorse in the wrongdoer, where remorse is understood as a pained moral perception of the wrong one has done’.<sup>40</sup> This in turn serves a more architectonic goal, making the target of blame ‘see things differently and mend their ways... to bring increased alignment of the moral understandings of wronged and wrongdoer’.<sup>41</sup> In its less paradigmatic forms, such as the blame of the dead who can no longer feel remorse, Fricker states that blame approximates this architectonic goal in a vicarious way, ‘present here in another form’,<sup>42</sup> namely, influencing the moral understandings of the living. This view implies the claim in both of the goals that it mentions: inspiring remorse in the wrongdoer and altering their moral understanding are examples of changing ethical character.

**Blame as protest:** Angela Smith offers this theory of blame:

To blame another is... to modify one’s own attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward that person as a way of protesting (i.e., registering and challenging) the moral claim implicit in her conduct.<sup>43</sup>

In turn, blame does this because its ‘protest primarily targets the false moral claim implicit in the behaviour of a wrongdoer and seeks from the wrongdoer herself some kind of moral recognition of this fact’.<sup>44</sup> This theory implies the claim, since the goal of blame is to change the moral claims that the one blamed makes through their behaviour, a change in their moral understanding of what moral claims their past behaviour implied.

**Blame as signalling:** According to David Shoemaker and Manuel Vargas, the function of blame is ‘signaling of the blamer’s commitments, including a commitment to the enforcement of those commitments’,<sup>45</sup> ‘manifested in a willingness to police breaches of those norms’.<sup>46</sup> In turn, the aim of enforcement is ‘to ensure both that you [the one blamed] are reminded of the importance of the norm and that it will subsequently have a firmer place in your normative deliberations’.<sup>47</sup>

**Blame as conversation:** According to Michael McKenna, blaming is part of holding someone morally responsible, by engaging them in a particular kind of conversation (or something analogous to a conversation):

When one holds another morally responsible by blaming her... what she communicates can be understood on analogy with engaging in a conversation with the agent who initiated that exchange... It is then open to the blamed agent to extend the “conversation” further by means of offering an excuse, a justification, an apology, and so on.<sup>48</sup>

For McKenna, one of the ‘answers’ to the ‘conversational question’ that blame ‘asks’ is to revise one’s mode of behaviour:

Due to blame’s communicative and conversational role... there is an expectation that the one blamed ought to reply by offering an apology or an explanation, revising modes of behavior, and so on.<sup>49</sup>

*Upshot*

The claim that blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed has a plausible prior probability, is directly intuitive, explains well a set of intuitions about when blame is unfitting, and is implied by most theories of blame. These inductive arguments make (2) more plausible than its negation.

That blame aims to change the ethical character of the one blamed means that blame is only fitting if a change of ethical character in the one blamed is metaphysically possible. Considered as an intentional mental attitude, blame of God presents God as having an ethical character that can change, but this is false. Such blame is not targeted at the right intentional object; an ethical character that can change. Considered as a function, blame of God strives for a non-existent good—a possible change in God's ethical character. By analogy, the fear that tomorrow  $2 + 2$  will equal 5 is unfitting because it is not metaphysically possible that  $2 + 2$  will equal 5. Again, attempting to heal a rock is a malfunction of the healing art because it is not metaphysically possible that rocks be in good health. In these examples, the good at which the desire or function aims is not to be found (no danger to avoid, no sickness to heal). So, we may conclude that (3) it cannot be fitting to blame God. Love him or loathe him, we cannot change him, and so we should not try to by blaming him. I now build on (3) to sketch my new theodicy.

## 4. ONLY IF SOMEONE CAN BE FITTINGLY BLAMED CAN THEY BE BLAMEWORTHY

Here are three reasons for affirming (4), that the metaphysical possibility of being fittingly blamed is a necessary condition of being blameworthy. For one thing, I cannot think of any clear counter-examples to this claim. These would be cases in which someone was blameworthy even though there was no metaphysically possible condition under which they are fittingly blamed. For another thing, when we want to show that someone is blameworthy despite the fact that no one actually fittingly blames them, what we do is conceive of metaphysically possible conditions under which they could be fittingly blamed. For example, we show that the egoist is blameworthy by conceiving a world in which there are non-hypocrites who have the standing to blame him, we show that the last living human is blameworthy by conceiving that someone else was still alive to blame them. The sense of this procedure relies on (4). Lastly, a plausible analytic definition of 'blameworthy' just is 'can be fittingly blamed under some metaphysically possible condition,' that blameworthy just means 'can be fittingly blamed.' This analysis would imply (4). Analogously, it would be odd to say that someone was trustworthy if it was not fitting to trust them under any metaphysically possible circumstance.

The reader might be tempted to think that someone could be blameworthy, even if it were a metaphysical impossibility that they be fittingly blamed, in the following way. I think this temptation results from the difficulty in following thought experiments with our affects. One *might* be able to conceive (I am not sure) that, by a metaphysical necessity, only 1 person existed, and that, by a metaphysical necessity he would immediately cease to exist upon wronging himself. Wouldn't he be blameworthy and yet unblameable? To answer in the affirmative, the only obvious procedure is to imagine that if the man had not immediately died, or that if someone else had existed, then they would have blamed them. In doing so we violate the terms of the thought experiment. Rather, as makes sense for an interpersonal attitude, for the intentional object 'the blameworthy' to be instantiated in reality there must be more than one possible person, or one person who can look back upon their wrongdoing. By analogy, for the intentional object of

sexual jealousy to be exemplified involves the existence of more than two possible people, for the shameful as an intentional object to be tokened requires that there is a possible observer. For the blameworthy as an intentional object to be tokened requires that there is not only one to be blamed, but one who could blame.

If the foregoing discussion is right, then, since God cannot be blamed, God also cannot be blameworthy. I now proceed to showing those who cannot be blameworthy cannot do wrong.

##### 5. IF SOMEONE CANNOT BE BLAMEWORTHY, THEN THEY CANNOT DO WRONG

Sometimes one performs a token action that is not actually wrong, because one has a justification, even though it is of a type that is wrong. For example, it is wrong to kill people, but to kill people out of self-defence is, let's say, justified. (6) allows that God performs action types that are typically wrong but which he has some justification for performing. This is a possibility that, it seems, many theodicies depend on—*e.g.*, God allows something very bad to happen, but because the allowance achieves a greater good God has not done wrong, has a justification. Sometimes one performs a token act that is actually wrong, but one has an excuse, meaning that there is a sense in which it was not really oneself that acted; in such cases 'it is not quite fair or correct to say baldly "X did A"'.<sup>50</sup> For example, it is wrong that Winnow stole bread from the shop, but she may have excuses, such as that she was forced by someone else to steal the bread, that she was brainwashed into thinking that bread has a right to be liberated, *etc.* (6) says nothing against the possibility that God performs actions that are wrong but has excuses (though this seems to be a possibility that theodicians would not make use of, since excuses seem to depend on deficiencies of an agent). (6) says that God cannot have done wrong in the paradigmatic sense, that is, without justification or excuse: his doing something that *actually* is wrong, and *his* actually doing it.

My reasons for accepting (6), that blameworthiness is a necessary condition on wrong-action, are fourfold. For one thing, I cannot think of a case in which someone has done wrong (in the paradigmatic sense) and yet is not blameworthy. This is what we should expect if blameworthiness is a necessary condition of wrong-action. For another, when we want to show that someone did not do wrong (in the paradigmatic sense), one thing that we point to is our judgement that they are not blameworthy, the sense of which procedure is supplied by (6), *e.g.* 'Nobody could blame you for cracking under such pressure, so you didn't do wrong (you had a justification or excuse)', 'Nobody could blame you for not putting up with such behaviour, so what you did was not wrong (you had a justification or excuse).' Further, when we want to show that someone has done wrong (in the paradigmatic sense), one thing that we can point to is our judgement that they are blameworthy. For instance, we might say: 'Your friends love X-ing. You are blameworthy for X-ing. So, that your friends love X-ing is no justification for your X-ing, and what you did was wrong!'; or 'You had some prudential reason for X-ing. You are still blameworthy for X-ing. So, some prudential reason is no excuse for X-ing and what you did was wrong!' The sense of this procedure is supplied by (6), that the presence of wrongness guarantees the presence of blameworthiness, that the presence of the conditioned guarantees the presence of its necessary conditions. Lastly, though it seems doubtful that 'blameworthy action' can be analytically defined in terms of 'wrong action', or vice versa, it seems plausible that the two are a conceptual couple, that they are necessary and sufficient conditions for one another. That is, one thing that we mean by 'blameworthy action' just is an action that is wrong, that one thing we mean by 'wrong action' just is an action that is blameworthy. Put otherwise, wrong actions just are those actions which tend to make us blameworthy, a tendency blocked by justifications and excuses.

Since God cannot be blameworthy, and since one cannot do wrong without being blameworthy, God cannot do wrong. As God cannot be blameworthy, nothing can have the tendency to make him blameworthy, as if something is not metaphysically possible there can be nothing that tends to bring it about.

## 6. OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

*'(2) is false. My brother is so deep in his dishonesty that he cannot change. The ethical character of one who is dead cannot change. Yet, in both cases blame can be fitting.'*

With respect to the dishonest brother, it is plausibly the case that someone can be so vicious that they 'cannot' change in various senses: practically (their habit is so ingrained that there's not enough time remaining in their life for it to change), economically (attempts at changing this habit would be extremely costly), or physically (if it is a physical necessity that the universe ends in a few minutes from now). However, these are all weaker modalities than the metaphysical. So, blame remains fitting in these cases (though perhaps quite fruitless, imprudent). In such a case, blame is oriented towards a real good, an honest brother, but one that cannot be achieved. By contrast, a metaphysical impossibility is not a real good: an honest tree, an everlasting hour, the best part of no whole, an immutable God whose ethical character can change. Stated in terms of function, blame of the brother is a case in which blame does not tend to serve its function but where this is due to some external frustration. By contrast, no function can tend to achieve, or be oriented towards, a metaphysical impossibility.

With respect to blame of the dead, I note three strategies of response without deciding between them. One strategy is to say that blame of the dead is fitting because the one who is dead still exists and has an ethical character that can still change. This is a strategy available to those who believe in purgatory or the post-mortal continuation of theosis<sup>51</sup>—Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. A second strategy is to deny that blame of the dead is fitting. Plausibly, it is fitting to judge that someone who is dead is blameworthy, and to imagine how you would blame them if they were still alive, but not fitting actually to blame them. Indeed, most of the theories of blame discussed above do not directly accommodate fitting blame of the dead—arguably, the dead cannot be punished, or have a pained moral perception of their wrongdoing, engage in a conversation, and so forth. A final strategy is to suggest that blame of the dead is fitting, but only because of its effects on the living. This is a strategy very widely pursued in the literature. Shoemaker and Vargas say that 'blaming the dead is mostly a signal for the living'.<sup>52</sup> Smith says that blame of the dead is fitting because blame 'can have as a secondary aim moral recognition on the part of the wider moral community'.<sup>53</sup> Fricker says that in blaming the dead we 'attempt to affirm or test out our own moral understanding more generally in exchanges with others in our moral community'.<sup>54</sup> I am not sure that this strategy is satisfying, since it seems to confuse the usefulness of blaming the dead with the fittingness of blaming the dead.

*'Drawing from Sher, one might argue that the desire of blame is a past-tensed modal desire (that things have been different than they were). Or, one might argue that the desire of blame is a modal desire (that things be different). Commonsensically, a desire for change is made sense of by some modal desire; we want things to change because they could be better. So, (2) is false; blame is modal rather than temporal, and so is not ruled out by immutability.'*

I offer one reason for thinking that the desire of blame is not a past-tensed modal desire, and one reason for thinking that the desire of blame is not a modal desire.

The idea that there can be past-tensed modal desires is in tension with three major theories of what desire is. Action theories of desire define desiring X as having a disposition to act to bring about X. Attention theories of desire define desiring X as being disposed to attend to reasons to bring about X or being disposed to attend to reasons to avoid not-X. Pleasure theories of desire define desiring X as having a disposition to take pleasure in X.<sup>55</sup> Each of these theories invokes some disposition. The problem is that we cannot have the relevant dispositions about past-tensed modalities. There is no act that can make the past other than it was, so I cannot have an action-disposition to make the past other than it was. Given this, it makes no sense to say that I have a disposition to attend to reasons to make the past other than it was, since there can be no such reasons. Again, it makes no sense to say that I have a disposition to take pleasure in X if the occurrence of X is a metaphysical impossibility; there is no circumstance under which this potential could be actualised. By contrast, a desire for change is compatible with each of these theories of desire. One may bite the bullet and insist on a desire theory of blame that is incompatible with three of the major theories of what desire is, but this is a heavy theoretical cost. My response here allows that other conative intentional mental attitudes may be about past-tensed modalities—wishes, preferences, regrets.

Similarly, the idea that there can be modal desires that are not also temporal is in tension with three major theories of what desire is. A desire for change is the desire that some present state of affairs, A, be replaced with a different possible future state of affairs, B. So, a desire for change refers to at least two different modalities, A and B. Such a desire is temporal and modal. It is not just an atemporal desire ‘that not-A obtain and that B obtain’. As we noted above, the three major theories of desire say that desire involves a disposition: a disposition to act, a disposition to attend to reasons for acting, or a disposition to take pleasure. Such theories imply that desire is temporal because dispositions are temporal: to say that I have a disposition is to say that I have a disposition to change in some way (to start acting to bring about B, to start attending to reasons for B, to start taking pleasure in B). Desires are temporal, future-oriented, rather than purely modal. Desires are for the continuation of present states of affairs into the future, or for bringing about new states of affairs.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It cannot be fitting to blame God. A good that blame aims at is a change of ethical character, but God’s ethical character cannot change. In turn, God cannot do wrong because doing wrong would tend to make him blameworthy, whereas he cannot be blameworthy since there is no possible condition under which he could be blamed. If my argument is correct then, in a certain respect, many traditional theodicies are redundant; they defend God from charges of wrongdoing and blame, whereas in fact God is not the right sort of object for such charges.

### Notes

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13 Donald Viney, 'Process Theism', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/>.

14 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1107b 17.

15 Classical theists would not accept this characterisation of God's ethical character. Divine simplicity means that there is a single divine thought and a single divine action, which are identical with one another and with God (William Vallicella, 'Divine Simplicity', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2019]: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/>). Pure actuality means that God does not have any unrealised potential, such as a disposition to act or emote (Charles Dubray, 'Actus Purus', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* [1907]: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01125b.htm>). Atemporality means that God does not act, cognise, or emote, at any time (Natalja Deng, 'Eternity in Christian Thought', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2018]: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/eternity/>). Impassibility raises questions about which ethical emotions God experiences (Anastasia Scrutton, 'Divine Passibility: God and Emotion', *Philosophy Compass* 8, no.9 [2013]: 866–74). Yet, classical theists do affirm that God cannot change ethically, however they think best to express this.

A reviewer raises the issue that the term 'character' may imply something acquired—something that becomes over time. Whilst character is acquired in our own case, I'm not sure that this is implied by 'character'. If it is, I disclaim this implication, but cannot think of a preferable term. I have in mind *hexis* ('stable disposition', 'characteristic') more than *ethos* ('habit') (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 306, 309).

16 Williams, 'I. A. Dorner', 722.

17 For a summary, see Brian Leftow, 'Immutability', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/immutability/>.

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