

## BLAMEWORTHINESS IS TERMINABLE

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*A theory of blameworthiness must answer two fundamental questions. First, what makes a person blameworthy when they act? Secondly, what makes a person blameworthy after the time of action? Two main answers have been given to the second question. According to interminability theorists, blameworthiness necessarily doesn't even diminish over time. Terminability theorists deny this. In this paper, I argue against interminability and in favour of terminability. After clarifying the debate about whether blameworthiness is interminable or terminable, I argue there's no positive case for interminability. I then respond to three objections to terminability. In doing so, I clarify the nature of blame, self-blame, and posthumous blame. I also give theoretical reasons in favour of the view that a person's blameworthiness for a minor wrong can not only diminish but also cease completely.*

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Suppose a person commits a minor wrong—such as a theft—early in her life. In committing this theft, she exercises control, she is moderately reasons-responsive, she identifies with her action, she has a fair opportunity to act otherwise, she knows that stealing is wrong, it was easy for her to resist stealing, and she's responsive to the wrong-making features of her action.<sup>1</sup> Thus, she is blameworthy for the theft.

Suppose she then later apologises and pays compensation to the victim. Through apologising to her victim, she shows the victim moral attention and concern, she accepts the victim's blame, and she demonstrates that she feels guilty about what she did. She then reforms her character such that theft is no longer an option for her. Believing she has earned forgiveness, the victim then forgives her, and they reconcile. While nothing can undo that the wrong was committed—no one can change the past, after all—the victim treats the wrongdoer as if the wrong didn't occur. The victim correctly judges that the

<sup>1</sup> That is, she meets the conditions proposed by Frankfurt (1971), Zimmerman (1988), Fischer & Ravizza (1998), Arpaly (2003), Brink & Nelkin (2013), Nelkin (2016), and Sliwa (2016).

wrongdoer is trustworthy again and has regained full moral standing in the moral community, and the victim no longer holds the wrong against her. In short, the wrong has been rectified and the wrongdoer has been redeemed. Call this the case of **Redeemed Wrongdoer**.

Question: Does Redeemed Wrongdoer's blameworthiness for committing the wrong at least diminish after she has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself?

According to the *terminability theorist*, the answer is yes.<sup>2</sup> Redeemed wrongdoer is at least less blameworthy and potentially not at all blameworthy given her moral transformation, meeting all her reparative duties, feeling sufficiently guilty, and having been forgiven by the victim.

According to the *interminability theorist*, however, the answer is no.<sup>3</sup> Once a person becomes blameworthy to degree *D* for performing an action *A*, they necessarily remain blameworthy to degree *D* for *A*-ing. Nothing can change this. No amount of moral transformation, guilt, apology, and forgiveness can affect the degree to which a person is blameworthy for an action. Blameworthiness is an *interminable* property—that is, it's a property that once you instantiate it, you'll forever instantiate it.

In this paper, I argue that blameworthiness is a terminable property. In Section I, I clarify the debate about whether blameworthiness is interminable or terminable. In Section II, I argue there's no positive case for interminability. In the rest of the paper, I consider objections to terminability. In Section III, I argue that The Posthumous Blame Objection fails. In Section IV, I argue that The Self-Blame Objection fails. In Section V, I argue that The Ethics Objection fails. Through responding to these objections, I clarify how blaming the dead works, how self-blame works, and the nature of blame itself. Moreover, while I only appeal to the intuition that a person's blameworthiness can diminish, my response to The Ethics Objection reveals theoretical reasons in favour of the view that a person's blameworthiness for minor wrongs can not only diminish but also cease completely.

## I. CLARIFYING THE TERMINABILITY/INTERMINABILITY DEBATE

The first thing to clarify is what the debate between terminability and interminability theorists is about. To see this, we must first appreciate that there are two foundational questions a theory of blameworthiness must answer. First,

<sup>2</sup> Terminability theorists include Shoemaker (2012), Khoury (2013, 2022), Matheson (2014, 2019, 2023) Khoury & Matheson (2018), Ransoomair (2021), Tierney (2022), Carlsson (2022), and Portmore (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Interminability theorists include King (2014), Fischer (2014), Clarke (2022), and Howard (2023).

what, if anything, makes a person blameworthy *when* they act? Secondly, what, if anything, makes a person blameworthy *after* the time of action? Call the first the *becoming* question and the second the *remaining* question. An adequate theory of blameworthiness must answer both questions: we need to know both how a person can become blameworthy for anything at all *and* how a person remains blameworthy as time passes if we're ever to appropriately blame a person beyond the time at which they act, given that most, if not all, blame occurs after the time of action.

Let's next consider how the debate should be framed. Randolph Clarke (2022) doesn't frame his defence of interminability as a defence of interminability, but rather as a defence of what he calls PERMANENT—that is, the thesis that once a person is blameworthy, they remain blameworthy forever. However, it's misleading to construe the debate as being between those who think blameworthiness is permanent and those who think it isn't because this suggests that terminability theorists deny that there's any sense in which blameworthiness is permanent. However, terminability theorists agree that in one sense blameworthiness is permanent. No one can change the fact that a person was blameworthy *at the time of action*—that is, that a person met the conditions on becoming blameworthy when she acted. No one can change that fact because no one can change the past (Khoury and Matheson 2018: 207). Terminability theorists merely deny that a person necessarily remains blameworthy forever, and in only this sense do they think that blameworthiness isn't permanent. Construing the debate in terms of acceptance and rejection of PERMANENT is therefore misleading.

Let's now clarify what the minimal commitments of terminability and interminability theorists are. As we'll see, terminability is a very weak thesis. By contrast, interminability is a very strong thesis. Both are theses about the persistence of the property of *being blameworthy to degree D for performing an action A*—or what I'll sometimes call the blameworthiness property.

According to interminability theorists, once you instantiate the blameworthiness property, you'll instantiate it forever—just as you forever instantiate the property of *being born [wherever you were born]*. If someone were writing a story of your life, there could be no change in where you were born in new chapters—that is, where you were born is an interminable property of yours. The interminability theorist claims that blameworthiness is also like this. Once your blameworthiness for an action is written in the moral story of your life—or what is sometimes called your *moral ledger* (e.g. Feinberg 1970; Zimmerman 1988)—it's forever there. New chapters cannot change the fact that you are blameworthy for an action if you were once blameworthy for that action.

If all properties were like the property of *being born [wherever you were born]*, then interminability would be obvious. But they aren't. There are many properties we instantiate—including even intrinsic properties—that we instantiate at  $t_1$  but not at  $t_2$ . For example, suppose that John was a good dancer at  $t_1$ —

that is, he instantiates the property of *being a good dancer* at  $t_1$ . By  $t_2$ , he may no longer be a good dancer—that is, he may no longer instantiate the property of *being a good dancer* at  $t_2$ . So, just because he was a good dancer at  $t_1$ , it doesn't mean we can accurately attribute him the property of *being a good dancer* at  $t_2$ . We can say at  $t_2$  he *was* a good dancer (at  $t_1$ ), but that's importantly different. The property of being a good dancer, then, is a terminable property. A person can become a less good dancer and then cease being a good dancer altogether. Any theory that implies otherwise is one we ought to reject with great haste.

According to terminability theorists, the property of *being blameworthy to degree  $D$  for an action  $A$*  is terminable in the sense that you can possess this property at  $t_1$  but not at  $t_2$ . Terminability theorists disagree about what leads to a diminishment in the degree of blameworthiness over time, but they are united by the view that there can at least be a diminishment in the degree to which a person is blameworthy as time passes. This means that a person might instantiate the property of *being blameworthy to degree  $D_{10}$  for an action  $A$*  at  $t_1$ , but then at  $t_2$  come to instantiate the (distinct) property of *being blameworthy to degree  $D_9$  for an action  $A$* . So, if someone were writing the moral story of such a person's life, there could be change in the person's blameworthiness in new chapters. So, rather than imagining one's moral ledger to be a mere single sheet of paper with credits and debits listed, the terminability theorist rather construes one's moral ledger to be more like a story with chapters. When each new chapter arises, there's a question about whether the person remains blameworthy to the same extent as they once were, just as there's a question about whether a once good dancer remains a good dancer as time passes.

To show that interminability is false, the terminability theorist must only find a type of case in which blameworthiness diminishes by even the smallest amount over time. This is sufficient to undermine interminability because, according to this thesis, even the tiniest diminishments of blameworthiness are conceptually impossible—that is, on this view, once a person instantiates the blameworthiness property, she'll forever instantiate it.

Terminability theorists typically also hold that blameworthiness can cease altogether. But one could endorse terminability and disagree that a person can cease being blameworthy completely. While I endorse the view that blameworthiness can in principle cease altogether, determining the extent to which blameworthiness can diminish is an intramural debate for terminability theorists. Whether, and the extent to which, there are diminishments of blameworthiness in real life is also a separate question.<sup>4</sup> So, the terminability theorist only needs to establish that diminishments of blameworthiness are conceptually possible because interminability implies that such diminishments are

<sup>4</sup> See Phillips (2022) for a critique of Khoury & Matheson (2018) that questions the real-life applicability of their terminability theory.

conceptually impossible. Hence, interminability is a very strong view, and terminability is a very weak view.

It's also important to make clear that terminability theorists don't hold that ceasing to be blameworthy amounts to being exculpated. They likewise don't claim that wrongdoers are partially exculpated when their blameworthiness diminishes. As far as I'm aware, no terminability theorist has made this claim, implicitly or explicitly. Even if one has, they shouldn't. Ceasing to be blameworthy isn't an exculpation, and neither is diminishing blameworthiness a partial exculpation. It doesn't change the fact that a wrongdoer was blameworthy at the time of action. Indeed, for something to diminish or cease it must be there in the first place, while exculpation implies that someone was never in fact blameworthy. In other words, a person is exculpated if and only if they never *became* blameworthy. The conditions on becoming blameworthy tell us how a person first comes to instantiate the blameworthiness property, and the conditions on remaining blameworthy tell us how a person continues to instantiate the blameworthiness property as time passes.

It's also crucial to distinguish between criticism of terminability *theories* and criticism of *terminability* (the rejection of interminability). Problems for particular terminability theories don't necessarily imply that terminability is false. Consider the following. Many think that a person who commits an atrocity cannot cease being blameworthy, no matter how much they change or attempt to repair their wrong (e.g. Fischer 2014; see also Radzik 2009: 84; Phillips 2022: 18). This objection can be raised against certain terminability theories. However, it doesn't speak against all terminability theories. At best, it limits the scope of what kind of wrongs a person can cease being blameworthy for committing. It doesn't speak against the conceptual possibility of a person's blameworthiness for committing a minor wrong diminishing or even ceasing altogether. Interminability theorists therefore cannot appeal to cases in the same kind of way that terminability theorists can: it's compatible with terminability that there are some kinds of acts for which a person's blameworthiness cannot diminish.

It's also crucial to make clear what blameworthiness amounts to. At issue in the debate between terminability and interminability theorists is a conception of blameworthiness according to which if a person is blameworthy, then she is fitting target of blame.<sup>5</sup> The terminability theorist's view is thus that if a person ceases to be blameworthy, it means that they are *no longer* a fitting target of blame, where fittingness is a matter of accurate representation or evaluation

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Carlsson (2022) who holds that the fittingness of blame is forever, but the deservingness of blame isn't. He holds this view because he holds that while desert is reasons-giving, fittingness isn't. The sense of fittingness at issue in the debate, though, is one that holds that fittingness is reasons-giving. Carlsson thus agrees with the important point: the property that gives us reasons to blame is such that a person needn't instantiate it forever. I set aside this complication in what follows.



blameworthy to fittingly blame them. The fact that *at one time* a person who met the conditions on becoming blameworthy for a wrong was once a fitting target of blame cannot change. That this is possible, though, is just a general (though undertheorized) phenomenon about our emotional lives, and not something that speaks against terminability. Terminability theorists only hold that it's mistaken to blame Redeemed Wrongdoer to the same extent *in the present*—that is, after she has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself because, as they see it, once she does so, she is at least less blameworthy than she once was.

What, then, is the sense of blame at issue between terminability and interminability theorists? I suggest we take the relevant sense of blame at issue to be the *holding against* conception of blame, in which blame most minimally involves holding an action against a person (e.g. Nelkin 2018; Brink and Nelkin 2022; Clarke 2022). We can hold an action against a person by being angry with them, by holding them to reparative duties, by being disappointed with them, and by changing our relationship with them. But we don't hold an action against a person by merely grading their actions and attributing blemishes to their moral story.

Finally, let's consider what I take to be a key point of contention between terminability and interminability theorists—namely, the representational content of blame. For the interminability theorist, blame merely involves a *historical* evaluation—that is, one that looks at a person's whole life so far and checks for any impermissible conduct. However, for the terminability theorist, blame also involves a *present* evaluation—that is, an evaluation that speaks to the present properties (things which *are* true of the person rather than things that *were* true of her) that a person has at the time they are blamed.<sup>7</sup> As we'll see, an implication of terminability is that when we blame a person for

a particular process associated with that emotion. But the process view doesn't say that feeling these emotions changes *the fact* that constitutes the reason that one has to feel the emotion. For example, it doesn't change the fact that a loved one died and that this gave us reason to feel grief. Rather, feeling these emotions for long enough changes the *background conditions* of those emotions (Na'aman 2021: 251). For example, John grieves Sally *because* she died—that is, her death gives John a reason to grieve her. But a background condition—that is, a condition that *enables* Sally's death to be a reason for John to grieve—is that John is in love with Sally. So, grief is fitting for John to feel because Sally died *and* because John loves Sally. On the process view, then, foreground conditions (i.e. facts that give a person a reason to feel an emotion) *and* background conditions (i.e. facts that enable foreground conditions) are considered the fittingness conditions of that emotion (Na'aman 2021: 252). But it's always possible to change these background conditions by thinking back to the past. So even if John has been through the relevant grieving process and his reason to grieve Sally has been disabled, he might find a photo of her or even just remember an experience with her vividly and then feel full-blooded grief again, even if only momentarily. In other words, his vivid experiential memory *re-enables* his reason to grieve her. But this gives us reason to doubt the plausibility of the process view (see Matheson, *ms*).

<sup>7</sup> This is similar to a distinction made by Carlsson (2022) between attitudes that are *indexed to the past* and ones which are *indexed to the present*.

performing an action, we not only attribute to them the performance of an impermissible act for which they are responsible, but we also take that action to, in some sense, still speak for the person *at the time she is blamed*. It's in part because the action still speaks for the person that we can still hold it against her. If the action didn't speak for that person anymore, it would be a mistake to continue to hold it against her. Importantly, terminability theorists can disagree on what this 'speaking for' amounts to (and even whether this is the best way to explain the nature of blame's present evaluation). Why should we think that blame involves a present rather than a merely historical evaluation? In Section V, I argue that it's blame's present evaluation that gives blame its sting, and so given that having a sting is an essential feature of blame, we ought to think that blame involves a present rather than a merely historical evaluation.

## II. THE POSITIVE CASE FOR INTERMINABILITY

Let's now turn to the positive case for interminability. First consider, what I'll call, The Entailment Argument:

If one is guilty of a moral offense, then one is culpable for it. And one who is culpable for an offense is to blame for it. To be to blame for something is to be worthy of blame, or blameworthy, for it. Hence, blameworthiness is forever: once blameworthy for an offense, always blameworthy for that offense. And since one is worthy of blame just in case blame would be fitting, we may add that once one is blameworthy for an offense, it will always be the case that some possible instance of blame of one for that offense would be fitting. (Clarke 2022: 2582)

This argument has two problems. First, each of the responsibility concepts (guilty, culpable, being to blame, blameworthy, being a fitting target of blame) used in the argument have the same meaning, so it isn't clear where the argument finds support for its substantive conclusion. It seems to just state interminability. Of course, one might think that trivial truths make good premises if they contribute to a valid argument with the consequence that interminability is a trivially true thesis.

But the conclusion doesn't follow because the argument fails to distinguish between becoming and remaining blameworthy. This is the second, and more important, problem. It doesn't follow that because a person is guilty/culpable—that is, blameworthy—*when she acts* that she is blameworthy *after the time of action*. In order to secure this inference, one must assume that becoming blameworthy is sufficient for remaining blameworthy. This flagrantly begs the question against the terminability theorist because the truth of this claim presupposes what The Entailment Argument is trying to prove—namely, that interminability is true. Again, the distinction between becoming



and remaining blameworthy is just a fundamental one that a theory of blameworthiness needs to respect—even if you think that blameworthiness cannot even diminish over time. There’s no escaping the distinction between becoming and remaining blameworthy, just as you cannot escape the distinction between becoming and remaining fearsome.

The Entailment Argument therefore fails. We haven’t been given any reason to think the blameworthiness property is interminable like the property of *being born* [*wherever you were born*]. There’s nothing about fittingness that means a person necessarily remains a fitting target of an attitude once she becomes a fitting target of an attitude. Fittingness is about accurate evaluation, and it’s uncontroversial that something can be accurately evaluated in one way at  $t_1$  and then accurately evaluated in another way at  $t_2$ . In other words, it’s uncontroversial that a person can be a fitting target of an attitude at  $t_1$ , but not be a fitting target of an attitude at  $t_2$ . We therefore need some reason why becoming blameworthy implies remaining blameworthy.

Similar problems plague, what I’ll call, The Sufficiency Argument. Suppose a person becomes blameworthy for  $x$  today.

...surely they are still [blameworthy] for  $x$  tomorrow. And the next day. And next week. Indeed, because what explains why they are [blameworthy] for  $x$  is that they meet the sufficient conditions on [blameworthiness] with respect to  $x$ , they will indefinitely satisfy those very conditions with respect to  $x$ . Thus, the [blameworthy] are interminably so. (King 2014; see also Tognazzini 2010: 160)

The conclusion of this argument also doesn’t follow. Just because a person has become blameworthy it doesn’t follow that she’ll forever remain blameworthy, unless we assume that interminability is true, but that’s exactly what the argument is trying to show. King (2014) does offer implicit support for the claim that becoming blameworthy is sufficient for remaining blameworthy by pointing out that because there are interminable properties, there’s no problem with holding that blameworthiness is also an interminable property. But while it’s coherent that blameworthiness is interminable, we need some reason to think it’s true. No such reason has been given. So, The Sufficiency Argument fails.

Finally, consider The Fit-Making Fact Argument. According to Howard (2023), there are attitudes that are forever fitting. His main point is that the fit-making facts can never change. For example, the fact a person inexcusably wronged us never changes. To say a person inexcusably wronged us is another way to say a person is blameworthy for wronging us because being excused implies we weren’t blameworthy in the first place; an unexcused wrong, then, is a wrong that a person is blameworthy for performing. Because the fact that a person inexcusably wronged us can never change, Howard infers that blaming emotions, such as guilt and resentment, are forever fitting. However, he assumes that blameworthiness is interminable in making his case. Howard

doesn't give any argument to support the claim that blameworthiness cannot even diminish, perhaps because he also overlooks the distinction between becoming and remaining blameworthy, and so he erroneously holds that being inexcusably wronged by a person is forever a reason to blame that person. While I agree, as discussed above, that we can always think back to the person when they were blameworthy, this doesn't mean that the person remains blameworthy in the present. People, like bears, are persisting entities that can survive going through significant changes, and so the attitudes that they were once fitting targets of can cease to be fitting. The only thing on offer appears to be an appeal to intuition directly in favour of interminability. Given that terminability theorists have provided arguments against interminability and given facts about the nature of change and its implications for fittingness, something more than an appeal to intuition in favour of such a substantive view is required. The Fit-Making Fact Argument fails.

No good positive case for interminability has so far been offered. This has an important upshot: we have no prior reason to prefer interminability to terminability. The interminability theorist's remaining strategy is to try to provide compelling objections to terminability—that is, a negative case for interminability. In what follows, I consider three objections to terminability. I argue each fails.

### III. THE POSTHUMOUS BLAME OBJECTION

According to The Posthumous Blame Objection, because we sometimes fittingly blame the dead, death cannot extinguish blameworthiness (Clarke 2022). Any theory of blameworthiness that implies the dead are necessarily not fitting targets of blame must therefore be rejected. Khoury & Matheson (2018: 209), for example, claim that death extinguishes blameworthiness. The idea is that because death extinguishes all the properties a person has, this also includes a person's blameworthiness. So, blameworthiness doesn't persist beyond death. Clarke finds this incredible: How can we fittingly blame Hitler if he isn't now blameworthy? However, terminability theories have no problem explaining posthumous blame.

First, they could just deny Khoury and Matheson's claim that death extinguishes blameworthiness. The terminability theorist holds a view about what makes blameworthiness diminish, and they don't need to agree that death is among those factors. So, while The Posthumous Blame Objection might identify a problem for specific terminability theories, it doesn't provide an argument against *terminability*. That is, if Clarke is right and it really is an absurd implication that blameworthiness doesn't persist beyond death, this doesn't undermine the view that a person's blameworthiness can at least diminish over time. It at best only undermines particular terminability theories, such as

Khoury and Matheson's. On a possible terminability theory, a person remains blameworthy until she is forgiven. This view can appeal to whatever grounds Clarke might offer for holding that death doesn't extinguish our properties and hold that a person can cease to be blameworthy after death if she is forgiven posthumously.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, those who endorse the claim that death extinguishes blameworthiness can still explain posthumous blame. Even if a person's blameworthiness doesn't persist because they don't persist, we can still think back to when the person was alive and fittingly blame them. When we blame a dead person, we blame them as they were when they were living. Posthumous blame, then, is similar to thinking back to when a person was blameworthy and blaming them then. Both take some imaginative effort. The important difference is that when a person is alive and her blameworthiness for a past action diminishes, they have *new* evaluative properties rather than *no* current evaluative properties.

Khoury & Matheson (2018: 209) can perhaps be criticised for not spelling out their point about posthumous blame and so Clarke's (2022: 2586) claim that 'what [Khoury and Matheson]...accept is not posthumous blame but, rather, posthumous judgments of past blameworthiness' isn't incorrect per se. However, we've seen that we can accept that death extinguishes blameworthiness and posthumous blame remains coherent: our blame is about someone in the past and so they don't need to be blameworthy in the present for our blame to be fitting. This is similar to how we might admire a dead friend's dancing ability ('John was such a good dancer') or feel embarrassed by our own earlier dancing ability ('I used to be such a terrible dancer'). By showing how we can attribute blameworthiness to Hitler *when he was alive*, Khoury and Matheson presumably didn't think there was much problem with explaining posthumous blame. I take them to have thought if we can accurately attribute blameworthiness to X, we can fittingly blame X.

What about Clarke's claim that we say that Hitler *is* blameworthy rather than Hitler *was* blameworthy? Even if we do sometimes speak this way, it isn't clear we should take such language to identify anything important about the nature of blameworthiness. This seems more like loose talk. It also isn't clear what is gained by saying that Hitler *is* rather than *was* blameworthy. We can blame him just as well either way. The Posthumous Blame Objection also fails.

#### IV. THE SELF-BLAME OBJECTION

Let's now consider The Self-Blame Objection. Howard (2023) argues that because self-blaming emotions remain forever fitting regardless of what a

<sup>8</sup> For more on forgiveness and terminability, see Section V.5 and Khoury (2022).

wrongdoer subsequently does, blame remains forever fitting—in other words, blameworthiness is interminable. Let's flesh out this argument.

Consider Redeemed Wrongdoer again. Howard's (2023: 84) point is that this kind of person might still feel emotions like guilt for what they have done even if they have transformed, apologised, felt guilty, made amends, been forgiven, and so on. He goes on to say that:

... if it's fitting for me to feel guilty for wronging someone, then it's fitting for that person to resent me for what I did. This principle follows from the fact that if it's fitting for me to feel guilty for wronging someone, then I'm blameworthy for wronging them; and if I'm blameworthy for wronging someone, then it's fitting for them to resent me for doing so.

(Howard 2023: 84)

Howard's argument, then, rests on the claim that it's fitting for Redeemed Wrongdoer to feel guilty for what she has done.

It seems plausible to me that a person like Redeemed Wrongdoer might still feel guilty for what she has done. I think most of us can think back to a wrong done as a teenager and still feel guilty even if we have changed significantly since then and made appropriate amends. However, that people feel emotions doesn't alone establish that these emotions are fitting. The Self-Blame Objection therefore needs more support.

To support the fittingness claim, one can appeal to the further claim that if people in certain circumstances are generally prone to feeling a particular emotion, it's at least *prima facie* plausible that this emotion is fitting. If this is a plausible claim, there are plausible grounds for thinking that Redeemed Wrongdoer's feelings of guilt are fitting. If these feelings are fitting, it might well be that Redeemed Wrongdoer remains blameworthy.

But why think that Redeemed Wrongdoer remains *fully* blameworthy (or as blameworthy as she was when she acted)? If she doesn't remain fully blameworthy, interminability is false. As discussed, this is enough to show that terminability is true. And it seems very hard to resist the claim that Redeemed Wrongdoer's blameworthiness at least diminishes a tiny fraction.

Of course, though, one might claim that Redeemed Wrongdoer can still fittingly feel guilty to the same extent as she could prior to redeeming herself. If that's right, perhaps interminability is true. Let's accept that someone like Redeemed Wrongdoer might feel guilty to the same extent as she fittingly could prior to redeeming herself. It's then *prima facie* plausible that such feelings are fitting because redeemed wrongdoers are prone to such feelings of guilt. However, there's an alternative—and I think more plausible—explanation of what these feelings are about.

Start by considering that when a person feels guilty about something they've done wrong, they usually (if not always) *remember* what they have done. That is, if you are having an occurrent feeling of guilt, you are usually

remembering what you did wrong. Momentarily thinking about something else will typically lead you to not feel guilty for a time. Such remembering isn't just *semantic*—that is, a person doesn't just remember that they have done such and such. Rather, such remembering is *experiential*—that is, the wrongdoer effectively re-lives her past, at least to some extent (see e.g. Michaelian 2016). By being able to re-live the past this way, a person can continue to find the fitting grounds for certain emotions. Even though Redeemed Wrongdoer has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself, she can still, in effect, inhabit her earlier unredeemed self. In doing so, Redeemed Wrongdoer can come to find the fitting grounds for self-blame—namely, by taking her past unredeemed self to be her present self. As Velleman and Hofweber (2011: 13) argue, 'the structure of memory leads [a person] to conflate [her] remembering self with the self of the experience remembered'. In other words, we often mistake our past remembered self for our present self.

Of course, if terminability is true, then Redeemed Wrongdoer has committed an error: because her blameworthiness has at least diminished, she has reason not to blame herself as much as she once had reason to blame herself. This highlights an important feature of being redeemed: in the course of morally transforming and making amends, a person arguably must hold onto her past conception of herself in order to cement her moral transformation and to ensure that she continues to make amends. This is perhaps why wrongdoers often have a duty to remember their wrongs. This means that once Redeemed Wrongdoer has redeemed herself, she may not be able to conceive of herself as redeemed—at least not for a particular period of time (exactly how long is up for dispute). As long as her memory of her earlier unredeemed self is intact or accessible to her, Redeemed Wrongdoer can still come to remind herself of how she was in the past. Such reminders can act to reinforce her redemption. So, while Redeemed Wrongdoer is making an error in overly blaming herself now, she is doing so for admirable reasons.<sup>9</sup> She is doing so because she has changed and because she wants to continue being a better person. Hence, we can accept that Redeemed Wrongdoer might continue to blame herself *as if* she remains blameworthy to the same extent without holding that she *in fact* remains blameworthy to the same extent. The Self-Blame Objection therefore fails.

## V. THE ETHICS OBJECTION

The most powerful objection to terminability is what Khoury and Matheson (2018: 221–2) call The Ethics Objection. According to this objection, any insight from terminability theories can be captured by interminability theories

<sup>9</sup> See Jacobson (2013) for more on feeling unfitting emotions for admirable reasons.

by taking these insights to be ethical rather than metaphysical. That is, cases that purport to show that a person's blameworthiness can diminish, and perhaps even can cease altogether, in fact only highlight considerations relevant to the ethics of blame. This objection therefore targets terminability rather than any particular terminability theory.

In this section, I first clarify how the objection works. I then outline and elaborate Khoury and Matheson's response to this objection. I then consider Clarke's implicit attempt to undercut it. I then argue that Clarke's attempt fails. As we'll see, my response to Clarke gives us good reason to think that a person's blameworthiness for a minor wrong can cease altogether. For this reason, I'll henceforth focus only on those terminability theorists who hold that Redeemed Wrongdoer ceases to be blameworthy. Finally, I consider whether it's possible to rescue The Ethics Objection, and thus interminability, by considering the implications of terminability for how we understand forgiveness.

### *V.1 The Best Explanation*

According to terminability theorists, Redeemed Wrongdoer ceases to be blameworthy after she has morally transformed, met her reparative duties, felt sufficiently guilty, and been appropriately forgiven by the victim (though terminability theorists disagree about what exactly is sufficient for Redeemed Wrongdoer to cease being blameworthy). According to the interminability theorist, however, she remains blameworthy to the extent she was blameworthy—that is, she continues to instantiate the property of *being blameworthy to degree D for the theft* regardless of anything that she does after the theft.

Importantly, even proponents of The Ethics Objection agree that Redeemed Wrongdoer is *not* an all-things-considered appropriate target of blame. However, they disagree with terminability theorists about what the best explanation of this judgement is. While terminability theorists say the best explanation is that Redeemed Wrongdoer has ceased to be blameworthy, proponents of The Ethics Objection say that the best explanation is that Redeemed Wrongdoer remains as blameworthy as she was but cannot be appropriately blamed (because she has redeemed herself).

### *V.2 Khoury and Matheson's Response: Blame Involves a Present Evaluation*

Khoury and Matheson's response to The Ethics Objection relies on a minimal conception of blame and blameworthiness, according to which being blameworthy involves having a (moral) flaw. According to this response, when we blame we attribute a flaw to the person being blamed. It's the attribution of this flaw that ties the person *when she's being blamed* to herself at the earlier time *when she became blameworthy*. In other words, continued possession of the flaw is

sufficient for remaining blameworthy (where remaining blameworthy assumes that the person has already become blameworthy).

On Khoury and Matheson's view, this flaw is to be understood in purely psychological terms—that is, the flaw is composed of the distinctive attitudes that were expressed in the action the person is being blamed for performing. Of course, one might be a terminability theorist but reject this kind of purely psychological account of blameworthiness over time (e.g. Carlsson 2022; Portmore 2022; Tierney 2022). Even so, all terminability theorists can employ a version of Khoury and Matheson's response. While they couch their reply in terms of their flaw account, its essence is that blame necessarily involves a present evaluation (see Section I).

### V.3 Clarke's Pre-Emptive Response

Clarke implicitly attempts to pre-empt Khoury and Matheson's response to The Ethics Objection by trying to undermine the minimal conception of blame that Khoury and Matheson appeal to. Clarke argues that wrongdoers who commit wrongs remain flawed even if they morally transform (or become brain dead). In other words, he argues that blame only involves a historical evaluation.

To see Clarke's point, consider two people's moral life stories: Redeemed Wrongdoer's and Innocent Person's. Redeemed Wrongdoer's is a story of wrongdoing along with her subsequent redemption. Innocent Person's is a story that contains no wrongdoing at all. Redeemed Wrongdoer has a flaw early in her life story that she then sheds through rectifying her wrong and re-deeming herself. Innocent Person has no flaws whatsoever in her life story. Clarke's point, I take it, is that the Redeemed Wrongdoer's life still has a flaw—namely, a flaw *in her past*. If we were to compare these two life stories, the first life is flawed in a way that the second life isn't.

Khoury and Matheson take it to be irrelevant that a person had a flaw in their past. They claim that what matters for blame is whether a person has a flaw *now*—in other words, blame involves a present evaluation. We can understand them as saying that when we blame a person for an action, we represent them *as continuing to possess the flaw* that was expressed in the action. That is, the present possession of a flaw is part of the representational content of blame. Clarke hasn't provided us any argument against this conception of the representational content of blame.

Clarke holds that the representational content of blame is rather something like the following: when we blame a person for an action, we represent them *as having once had a flaw*—in other words, blame involves a merely historical evaluation. But this sense of blame seems uninteresting. Representing that a person *once* had a flaw doesn't have the same sting as representing a person as *still* having a flaw.

To see this, first consider another two life stories. The first is again Redeemed Wrongdoer's. The second is Unredeemed Wrongdoer's. Suppose that each performs the same kind of wrong, but only Redeemed Wrongdoer has morally transformed, met her reparative duties, felt sufficiently guilty, and been appropriately forgiven. On Clarke's view, both can be fittingly blamed to the same extent. In other words, there's no relevant difference between how much blame Redeemed Wrongdoer and Unredeemed Wrongdoer merit. So, if another person blames each of them for their wrong to a particular extent, she cannot be criticised for making a mistake. (She can, though, be criticised for making an ethical error in blaming the Redeemed Wrongdoer.)

But notice that there's a difference in what one might fittingly attribute to Redeemed Wrongdoer and Unredeemed Wrongdoer, respectively. We can attribute to each that they performed an action, that the action was morally impermissible, that their respective actions are unexcused, and that they each have a flaw in their past. But we can *also* attribute *continuing to a possess a flaw* to Unredeemed Wrongdoer. It's implausible that when we blame Unredeemed Wrongdoer, we're only attributing to him what we can fittingly attribute to Redeemed Wrongdoer. Something more goes into the attributions that at least partly constitute of our blame of Unredeemed Wrongdoer. It isn't just that Unredeemed Wrongdoer has failed to redeem himself. Our blame also includes that he continues to possess a flaw. It's the attribution of a flaw (or another present property) that gives our blame of Unredeemed Wrongdoer the characteristic sting of blame. Whereas what we can fittingly attribute to Redeemed Wrongdoer lacks that characteristic sting. If we try to blame Redeemed Wrongdoer *while also* taking into account her redemption, it's hard to see how such 'blame' could sting at all for her. Consider the thought we might have: 'You did something wrong but now you've rectified that wrong and redeemed yourself'. I don't see how this could sting Redeemed Wrongdoer even in principle. Indeed, this is the kind of thing we would say to someone to *stop* them blaming themselves, so it isn't clear how it can even constitute blame, let alone capture its characteristic sting. I suspect that blame of the redeemed is often imagined without taking into account their redemption.

Of course, this kind of thought could take Redeemed Wrongdoer back to her earlier self and lead her to the kind of self-blame I discussed in the previous section. This is also true of nostalgic comments from friends—they can make us reflect on our earlier actions—but such comments aren't a form of blame. So, just because the above thought may cause Redeemed Wrongdoer to inhabit her earlier self, it doesn't make it a form of blame. Moreover, the above thought itself isn't what stings. What stings is the self-blame Redeemed Wrongdoer engages in when she imagines herself before she had rectified her wrong and redeemed herself. Such blame stings because the person takes themselves to be how they were in the past. That is, such blame involves a



mistaken present evaluation, one which ignores one's redemption. While such blame fits who the person was in the past, once the person acknowledges their redemption and thereby appreciates the thought for what it is, it doesn't sting.

The attitudes we can fittingly form about Unredeemed Wrongdoer therefore plausibly constitute blame, whereas attitudes we can fittingly form about Redeemed Wrongdoer don't plausibly constitute blame—at least not a form of a blame that is more than attributing a (past) blemish in one's moral story. We can of course fittingly 'blame' Redeemed Wrongdoer in this sense, but I agree with Clarke (2022: 2581) that this doesn't seem sufficient for what we typically think of as blame. Hence, we have good reason to think that blame involves a present evaluation and that it's because of this present evaluation that blame has its characteristic sting.

#### *V.4 Blame as Holding Against*

One way for Clarke to defend his position is elaborate his account of blame. If he can explain how we can fittingly blame Redeemed Wrongdoer with a set of attitudes that has blame's characteristic sting, then he has a plausible case that Redeemed Wrongdoer remains blameworthy. On his view, blame essentially involves holding an action against a person. He writes:

In blaming someone for something, in the sense at issue here, *you hold that thing against her*. Having fully forgiven a wrongdoer, you might no longer hold her offense against her despite continuing to accept the judgment about her record.

(Clarke 2022: 2581; my emphasis)

On this view, we can fittingly hold the wrong against Redeemed Wrongdoer and we can fittingly hold the wrong against Unredeemed Wrongdoer. Even if we wouldn't hold the wrong against Redeemed Wrongdoer (because she's redeemed), there's no factual mistake being made when the wrong is held against her.

But Clarke isn't very specific about what he thinks 'holding against' amounts to. He says it's more than attributing a (past) blemish (or flaw) on one's moral record. He also says that 'Angry indignation is one way of holding something against someone, but it is not the only way' (Clarke 2022: 2582). But what are the other ways? He doesn't say. I'll consider three possibilities and argue that there's no plausibility to Redeemed Wrongdoer being a fitting target of any of these senses of 'holding against'. Given that Redeemed Wrongdoer isn't a fitting target of these three forms of holding against, I'll argue it's implausible she remains a fitting target of indignation.

One possibility is that holding against can involve to trying to hold a person to the *moral debts* that she incurred through acting wrongly (e.g., Nelkin 2018). However, Redeemed Wrongdoer has no moral debts: she has met all her reparative duties. Because Redeemed Wrongdoer has no moral debts, it

isn't fitting to hold the wrong against her on this basis. We therefore cannot understand what Clarke means by 'holding against' as also involving holding someone to their moral debts.

Another possibility is that holding against can involve *condemnatory disappointment*. According to Telech and Katz (2022), this is a response that isn't as strong as angry blame. Even so, both angry blame and disappointed blame involve, at root, condemnation. However, disappointed blame arises in cases in which we invest normative hope in a person. Such hope is 'essentially agent-directed, as it is for some agent to meet, or aspire toward, the attainment of some normative standard or ideal' (Telech and Katz 2022: 862). For example, we have hope *in* another person *to be an honest person* and then their behaviour thwarts that hope and disappointed blame becomes fitting. Such disappointment calls for a particular reparative reaction—namely, 'self-disappointed guilt... and to personally make amends' (Telech and Katz 2022: 857). Among what the person should do to make amends is to become a person who attains the relevant normative standard or ideal—that is, to make herself a worthy candidate for others to have normative hope in again.

Redeemed Wrongdoer has given others reason to have hope in her again by morally transforming and meeting her reparative duties. So, she's a worthy candidate for others to have normative hope in again. But once a person is again a worthy candidate for others to have normative hope in, it seems that condemnatory disappointment is no longer a fitting a response. Such disappointment would involve an inaccurate assessment of a person like Redeemed Wrongdoer. We therefore cannot understand what Clarke means by 'holding against' as also involving condemnatory disappointment.

Another possibility is that holding against can involve *relationship change*. According to Scanlon (2008), blame essentially involves changing one's relationship with the blamee. Perhaps, then, this is a way to hold a wrong against Redeemed Wrongdoer without involving any affective attitudes. One way of changing a relationship with a person is not to trust them as much. Suppose that Friend comes to not trust Redeemed Wrongdoer because Redeemed Wrongdoer stole from her. According to Scanlon, even if Friend doesn't have any affective attitudes about Redeemed Wrongdoer, Friend blames Redeemed Wrongdoer by changing how much she trusts Redeemed Wrongdoer.

No longer trusting Redeemed Wrongdoer seems fitting prior to her redemption. But through redeeming herself, Redeemed Wrongdoer has done three things: (1) she's morally transformed, (2) she's met her reparative duties, and (3) she's communicated that she's morally transformed and met her reparative duties, perhaps through apologising to Friend, compensating Friend, or engaging in other reparative acts. According to Radzik (2009), once a wrongdoer morally transforms, she's trustworthy again, and once she communicates her transformation (e.g. through apologising to her victim), she gives others

evidence that she's trustworthy again. So, it no longer seems fitting for Friend to continue to distrust Redeemed Wrongdoer.

Of course, we might imagine that Friend doesn't come to trust Redeemed Wrongdoer again. Does this mean that Friend still blames Redeemed Wrongdoer? Perhaps. It's often *understandable* that victims don't ever again trust those who have wronged them, even if they are trustworthy again. But just because a reaction is understandable, it doesn't mean it's fitting. So, it might be that Friend still holds the wrong against Redeemed Wrongdoer, but this is no longer fitting and rather simply understandable. Equally, it might be that this holding against isn't understandable either. There are some cases in which it isn't understandable for a victim not to regain trust with someone who has wronged her in the past. Questions about understandability turn on the specific details of the case, including the nature of wrong and the relationship between the victim and wrongdoer. The important point for the moment is that because holding against can remain understandable even when it's no longer fitting, we cannot therefore understand what Clarke means by 'holding against' as also involving relationship change.

But what, then, about indignation? It isn't clear how indignation can be a fitting response to a person when relationship change and disappointment aren't and the person has paid all their (relevant) moral debts. How can indignation involve an accurate evaluation but relationship change and disappointment don't? How can indignation involve an accurate evaluation when a person has fully rectified her impermissible conduct? Given that Redeemed Wrongdoer isn't a fitting target of three weak forms of holding against, I think it follows that Redeemed Wrongdoer also isn't a fitting target of a strong form of holding against such as indignation. So, we cannot understand what Clarke means by 'holding against' as involving indignation.

It therefore isn't clear what Clarke means by 'holding against' in the case of Redeemed Wrongdoer. Because there are no good candidates for what counts as a fitting form of holding against with respect to Redeemed Wrongdoer, The Ethics Objection fails.

What does holding against amount to, then? While it usually takes other forms, I propose that holding against essentially involves attributing a present property, such as a flaw, to a person. When we hold a wrong against a person, then, we take it to say something about the person, and such blame stings because it's saying something about them, as they are now.

Note that my overall response to The Ethics Objection gives us reason to think that a person's blameworthiness for a minor wrong can cease altogether. It doesn't seem that any form of blame, including even the most minimal form of blame (holding the wrong against the wrongdoer) can be fitting *after* the wrongdoer has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself.

### V.5 *Forgiveness*

One might try to rescue The Ethics Objection, and so interminability, by considering implications that terminability has for other aspects of our responsibility practices. For instance, does terminability imply an odd view of forgiveness?<sup>10</sup> To be forgiven, a person must first be blameworthy. If a person ceases to be blameworthy, it might seem there's no grounds to forgive her. Terminability might therefore seem to imply that even though a person has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself, she cannot be forgiven. Interminability theorists, on the other hand, seem to fare better: they can say that blameworthiness is forever, but the all-things-considered appropriateness of blame and forgiveness can change depending on whether, and the extent to which, the person has rectified her wrong and redeemed herself.

Terminability doesn't imply an odd view of forgiveness, though. Terminability theorists can accept that forgiveness requires its target to be blameworthy and simply hold that the act of forgiveness is *also* necessary for a person to cease being blameworthy. On this view, redemption might still be necessary to make forgiveness appropriate, but it's the act of forgiveness that changes the person's status from blameworthy to no longer blameworthy. On a stronger (and more implausible) view, forgiveness changes whether a person is blameworthy regardless of whether she has earned it. Alternatively, terminability theorists can hold that forgiveness is more like an acknowledgement that a person has ceased to be blameworthy than something that changes a person's status (see Khoury 2022). Either way, the appeal to our forgiveness practices doesn't salvage The Ethics Objection.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Blameworthiness is terminable. It's intuitive that it can at least diminish, and there are theoretical reasons for holding that it can cease altogether. Importantly, I have only argued that blameworthiness for minor wrongs can diminish and cease altogether. It's a further question whether this applies to all kinds of wrongs. Still, this is enough to undermine interminability as this implies there are no acts for which blameworthiness can diminish, let alone cease, over time. Moreover, I have undermined both the positive and negative case for interminability.

For those who wish to develop a particular terminability theory, this is an exciting time. There are several views that have been proposed, and several problems for each view. I think this debate has the potential to not only advance our understanding of the conditions on remaining blameworthy, but

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this objection.

also the conditions on remaining praiseworthy, as well as the conditions on becoming praiseworthy and becoming blameworthy.<sup>11</sup> A focus on the diachronic aspects of our responsibility practices has the potential to lead to a paradigm shift in philosophical investigation into these practices.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Archer & Matheson (2020) for an implicit suggestion of an account of praiseworthiness over time.

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