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The Boundaries of Blameworthiness

M. Hadi Fazeli



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

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M. Hadi Fazeli



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

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Abstract

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This dissertation addresses two questions: how does moral blameworthiness change over time, and can it persist beyond death? I defend three claims. First, blameworthiness can diminish and cease entirely during a wrongdoer's lifetime when they receive the harm they deserve. Second, when they do not, it extends beyond the grave. Third, even after death, blameworthiness can still diminish and potentially be erased. I argue that existing accounts of how blameworthiness can or cannot change over time fall into two unsatisfactory camps. Some hold that blameworthiness lasts forever (grounded in unchanging facts about the past), and therefore, fail to explain how it ever ends. Others allow that blameworthiness can diminish and cease during life but struggle with posthumous blameworthiness, because they tie it to features that require a living, conscious agent (such as character flaws, deserved guilt, reparative duties). I develop an alternative account, the *Moral Harm Account*, which grounds blameworthiness in desert of morally relevant harm. On this view, a person is blameworthy when they deserve to be harmed (where harm is understood broadly so that it includes the setback of interests). Blameworthiness diminishes as the wrongdoer receives deserved harm. In order to accommodate posthumous blameworthiness, I argue that people can be harmed after their biological death because they continue to exist as Human Subjects: bearers of interests and biographical properties that persist beyond the grave. This allows the dead to remain blameworthy when they still deserve harm, and for their blameworthiness to diminish as posthumous harms are inflicted on them. This account preserves the intuition that while some of the dead can remain blameworthy over time, others can cease to be.

You alone
are the absolute existence there,
pure being,
for you persist within your own absence — and your absence
is the unequivocal presence of a miracle.

[...]

But a judge sits beyond, on the other side, without the sinister robes of
judges.
Its nature: discernment and equity
Its form: time. —
And your memory, until the eternal of eternal, shall be judged in the
passage of ages.

Ahmad Shamloo, *On the Verge*

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Theodor Adorno once suggested that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz. Witnessing my people suffer under repression and aggression, I've had moments when I thought philosophy was impossible too. Moments of fear. Moments of despair. And yet, those were exactly the moments I returned to philosophy. Not despite the darkness, but because of it. Philosophy, it turns out, is not a luxury of peaceful times for me. It is what I did instead of giving up.

I finished this dissertation during a war. I was not there under the bombs, the way my family and friends were, but I was not absent either. In every word and comma, I imagined fire coming through. Between sentences, I heard the howl of missiles. In paragraphs, I saw buildings collapsing. I lived through the war. It was from a great distance, but I lived through it.

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Chapter I

Preliminaries

1.1 Introduction

Moral blameworthiness has boundaries. It can diminish over time and even cease entirely when certain conditions are met. But when those conditions are not met, blameworthiness extends beyond death. And in the aftermath of death, it remains responsive to what happens next. So, even posthumous blameworthiness can in fact diminish over time and be extinguished. These are the central claims I defend in this thesis.

Consider some cases where I might be morally blameworthy for my conduct. You might find me morally blameworthy for sharing your mildly embarrassing secret at a dinner party, not out of malice but for a laugh; for letting my colleague retain a flattering but false impression of me without correcting them; for noticing that my colleague is struggling at work without doing anything to help them; for consistently interrupting you in a group discussion while letting others finish their sentences. I could judge myself to be blameworthy for these things, recognize my faults, and feel guilty about them. If I am blameworthy for any of these actions or omissions, I am blameworthy at the moment of doing them. But I might plausibly remain blameworthy the next day, the next month, the next year, until I die, or maybe even after my death. I might be blameworthy for many things in my life, but in these cases, I am blameworthy for moral wrongdoings. And since I am blameworthy for moral wrongs, my blameworthiness is moral. It is moral blameworthiness that I will be specifically concerned with in this dissertation.¹

¹ Blameworthiness is not exclusively a moral notion. There are non-moral senses in which a person can be blameworthy, at fault, or criticizable for what they have done or believe. *Epistemic* blameworthiness, for instance, concerns failures in one's intellectual conduct like forming unjustified beliefs, or being dogmatic or intellectually careless. *Aesthetic* blameworthiness involves poor taste or insensitivity to beauty and artistic value. *Professional* or *role-based* blameworthiness concerns failures to meet the standards of one's profession or role, such as when a teacher fails to prepare engaging lessons. *Athletic* or *competitive* blameworthiness applies when a person fails to perform well enough in sports, such as when a striker misses an easy chance to score a goal. *Prudential* blameworthiness concerns failures to act in one's own long-term interests, such as when one recklessly damages one's health or squanders one's resources. *Social* or *etiquette-based* blameworthiness involves violations of social norms and conventions of politeness, like talking loudly in a library. What distinguishes these non-moral forms of blameworthiness from moral blameworthiness is the standards and norms that are invoked and the kind

It seems plausible to think that if I, *e.g.*, apologize for my faults, make amends, and try to repair the damage I have caused, then my blameworthiness for what I have done can diminish or cease. One might claim that if I suffer a certain amount of guilt for not helping an old lady across the street, change my behavior over time, and never do it again, then my degree of blameworthiness may diminish; so maybe now I am no longer blameworthy at all for what I did back then. Similarly, one might think that if I buy a gift for my partner, apologize sincerely, and feel guilt, my degree of blameworthiness for forgetting their birthday could plausibly diminish or even cease entirely. Many wrongdoers who commit wrongs undergo major character reforms in life. They repent and seek to redeem themselves, to atone for their actions.

Some philosophers have argued that if we undergo or do these things, then the grounds for blameworthiness can disappear entirely. I will argue that this can happen more specifically when we receive the *harm* we deserve by being punitively blamed for what we have done. Being deserving of such harm sets the limits of blameworthiness over time. The first claim I defend in this dissertation is that blameworthiness can indeed cease over time.

But suppose now that I do not apologize for my actions. I fail to acknowledge them, fail to make proper amends, fail to make any meaningful changes to my character or behavior, and eventually die completely unrepentant for my wrongdoings. You might certainly think that I must then remain blameworthy, even after my death, and that my blameworthiness does not just vanish with my demise. This claim has, I believe, considerable intuitive appeal. We commonly assign blameworthiness to dead people. Perhaps most obviously, we continue to find people such as Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, and Josef Stalin blameworthy for their heinous crimes. But we also seem to continue to blame people after their death for much less severe wrongdoings. Consider a neighbor who, for years, deliberately plays loud music late into the night, ignores my complaints, and shows a callous indifference to the disruption he causes me. When he dies, I may fittingly

of response that is warranted. Moral blameworthiness involves violating moral norms and deserving, or being a fitting target of, forms of moral blame like guilt, resentment, morally relevant harms, etc., while non-moral blameworthiness involves violating epistemic, aesthetic, professional, prudential, or social norms and deserving the corresponding forms of criticism or correction within those specific domains.

continue to blame him for the sleep deprivation, stress, and misery he inflicted on me, even though his wrongs were nowhere near the scale of genocide or mass atrocity. If I betray your confidence, break a promise, or act selfishly in ways that damage our friendship, and then I die, you will not think that my death suddenly erased my blameworthiness for the betrayal.

But when I die, I cannot feel guilt, cannot apologize, cannot reform my character; nor, one might think, can I be deserving of harm. This raises a puzzle. If blameworthiness depends on capacities that only *existing moral agents* possess, then how can we remain blameworthy after death? The second claim I will argue for is that moral blameworthiness is in fact not always extinguished by death. One of the implications of the view I will defend is a third claim, according to which, even after death, blameworthiness can diminish and potentially cease entirely.

In this dissertation, I aim to show that a robust and satisfying account of blameworthiness over time must allow both for the possibility of changes in a person's status as blameworthy while the person is still alive (in particular, that they can become less or no longer blameworthy), and that blameworthiness (in other cases) can extend beyond death.² In other words, a plausible account of blameworthiness over time needs to explain how blameworthiness can sometimes diminish and even cease in life, and how it can sometimes continue beyond death.

Many moral philosophers disagree with at least one of the two claims I will defend. Some argue that blameworthiness has no limits, and that it is always forever (see, *e.g.*, Callard, 2017; Clarke, 2022, 2025; Howard, 2023; Tognazzini, 2010). Others argue that blameworthiness can diminish or cease entirely in life, but that it can never extend beyond a person's death (see, *e.g.*,

² One might argue that when a wrongdoer doubles down on their wrongdoing, denies their responsibility, or causes further harm related to the original wrong, their overall blameworthiness for the original act increases over time. Against this, one could argue that, in this situation, the wrongdoer is committing new wrongs, each of which generates its own share of blameworthiness. If I spread a harmful rumor about you, and then spread further lies about you to cover up what I did, I arguably do not become more blameworthy for the original rumor itself; rather I am blameworthy for further things, *i.e.*, for multiple distinct wrongs. I do not have a firm view on this, and will not further discuss whether blameworthiness can increase over time. My focus here is only on its diminishment.

Jefferson, 2024; Khoury & Matheson, 2018; Matheson, 2025). However, here I will develop a view that accommodates both of these claims.³

1.2 Moral Responsibility and Blameworthiness

I take moral blameworthiness to be a form of *backward-looking* moral responsibility.⁴ One can be morally responsible in a backward-looking sense not only by being blameworthy, but also by being praiseworthy, or by being answerable for morally significant conduct that makes one neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy (see, *e.g.*, McKenna, 2012, pp. 16–17). When I am morally responsible for breaking my promise to you, the act of breaking the promise is morally significant if it reflects something about my agency, choices, values, or character. According to many responsibility theorists (*e.g.*, Haji, 1998; McKenna, 2013; Nelkin, 2011; Sartorio, 2016; Wolf, 1990), I am morally responsible for what I have done only if I had *control* over it and was *aware*, or should have been aware, of the moral significance of what I was doing. Only if these conditions are fulfilled does it make sense to hold me responsible for it.

Plausibly, though, something more is needed for me to be morally blameworthy for breaking my promise to you. After all, I may be justified in breaking it. To be blameworthy, the promise-breaking must arguably also manifest poor *quality of will* on my part (see, *e.g.*, Strawson, 1962; Watson, 1996). For me to be blameworthy for breaking my promise to you, the attitude or regard I showed toward you in the act also matters, *i.e.*, it also matters whether I acted with ill will, indifference, and so on. The focus is on what my action reveals about my moral character and my will toward you. I need not have caused any actual harm for my action to reflect poorly on me; what matters is the concern (or lack thereof) I displayed. If, for example, I broke my promise to you because I was genuinely confused about the date,

³ As far as I know, no one in the existing literature has yet argued for my third claim, *i.e.*, that even after death, blameworthiness can diminish and eventually cease entirely.

⁴ “Moral responsibility” can also be used in a forward-looking sense, as in *a* responsibility; *a* duty. If I promise to meet you for lunch tomorrow, I have a forward-looking responsibility, *i.e.*, a duty to show up.

or because I was prevented by an unforeseen emergency, then my action does not reflect any ill will or lack of regard for you, and it seems unreasonable to hold me fully responsible. Only if my promise-breaking reveals callousness, indifference, or disregard for your interests and our relationship, and shows that I did not care enough about you or our agreement, am I blameworthy.⁵

In this dissertation, I will assume that, for a person to become morally blameworthy for a wrongful action, it is both necessary and sufficient that they have relevant control and awareness of that action, and that it manifests the agent's poor quality of will. Similarly, for a person to become morally praiseworthy for a morally exemplary action, it is necessary and sufficient that they have relevant control and awareness of that action, and that it manifests their laudable quality of will. When a person is blameworthy, negative reactive attitudes like resentment, indignation, or disapproval, and/or punitive responses like the imposition of (morally relevant) harm or censure, can be fitting and deserved in response to what the person did. When a person is praiseworthy, praise and other positive reactive attitudes such as gratitude, admiration, or respect, as well as rewards, honors, etc., can be fitting and deserved responses and reactions. My focus in this dissertation, however, is specifically on blameworthiness, so I will from now on set praiseworthiness aside.

⁵ Some moral philosophers draw a distinction within moral responsibility between *attributability* and *accountability* (see, e.g., Shoemaker, 2011, 2015; Watson, 1996). Attributability concerns whether an action can be attributed to the agent as a reflection of their deep self, values, or character. It is about whether it makes sense to see the action as revealing something morally significant about the person. Accountability, by contrast, concerns whether the agent can be held to account for what they have done, and whether they are a fitting or deserving target of reactive attitudes like blame and resentment, or certain treatments such as moral censure, harm, and punishment. Given this distinction, moral responsibility in the attributability sense is necessary but not sufficient for blameworthiness. Moral blameworthiness requires not only that the action be attributable to the agent, but also that the agent is accountable for it in a way that makes blaming attitudes and reactions fitting or deserved. Michael Zimmerman (1988, 2022) instead distinguishes between *thin* and *thick* blameworthiness. Thin blameworthiness might be understood as simply making a true judgment that someone is blameworthy, or that they performed an action that was morally wrong. Thick blameworthiness, by contrast, involves not only judgment but also reactive emotions, the imposition of costs or harms, and the actual practice of holding someone accountable through speech or action.

At this point, it seems important to know what the relevant control is. There is a large literature on free will, where this is often understood as the kind of control that is necessary for moral responsibility (see, *e.g.*, Fischer et al., 2007; McKenna & Pereboom, 2016). Much of this literature is concerned with whether free will is compatible or incompatible with determinism, indeterminism, or more generally with a naturalistic view of the world. In this dissertation, I remain neutral on these metaphysical issues. But whatever kind of control is required, I will assume that it at least requires the agent's *reason-responsiveness* (*e.g.*, Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). For me to be morally responsible for breaking my promise to you, I must be able to identify and respond to some moral reasons for or against the act of breaking a promise: reasons that a normal human being would react to in a similar situation. I need not, however, actually identify with and respond to those reasons. If, for example, I suffer from a psychological condition that makes me unable to understand why laughing out loud in someone's face in a certain context would be wrong, then it seems implausible to argue that I am fully responsible for doing this. But if I have the ability to understand why it would be wrong and the ability to appropriately refrain from doing it, then I can be responsible for it, even if I do not exercise my ability and therefore end up laughing out loud in someone's face anyway.

Finally, throughout this dissertation, when I speak of responsibility and blameworthiness for actions, I mean to include not only what we actively do in life, but also what we fail to do and the unintended outcomes we bring about. I can plausibly be morally responsible and blameworthy for my omissions: for neglecting a duty of care, for remaining silent when I should speak up, for failing to intervene when intervention is required. I can also be morally responsible and blameworthy for the bad outcomes I cause, even when those outcomes were not directly intended by me. For the sake of brevity, I will not mention omissions and unintended outcomes explicitly every time, but they are always included in my use of "wrongdoing" unless otherwise specified.

1.2.1 Blameworthiness and the Ethics of Blame

Suppose that I have deceived you about my academic background and that I am therefore worthy of your blame for this. Being worthy of your blame entails that there is a reason for you to blame me. If we are rational, then when we blame, we have a reason to do so. This reason is a *pro tanto* reason. The term “*pro tanto*” is a Latin phrase, meaning *to that extent* or *for so much*. Such a reason is a normative consideration that favors or disfavors a certain action or attitude, such as blaming someone for something. A *pro tanto* reason can be counterbalanced or outweighed by other reasons. As Maria Alvarez and Jonathan Way put it:

If a reason favours my doing something, then I have a *pro tanto* reason to do it: it is to that extent right for me to do it. But there may also be a reason against my doing it: a *pro tanto* reason not to do it. The fact that a joke is funny may be a reason to tell it; but that it will embarrass someone may be a reason against. So, I have a reason to tell the joke and a different reason not to tell it. Whether, all things considered, I ought to tell the joke depends on whether either of the reasons “outweighs” or otherwise “defeats” the other: if the reason for telling the joke is outweighed by the reason against it, then I ought not tell the joke. If neither defeats the other, then, I *may* tell it—but it’s not the case that I ought to tell it. (Alvarez & Way, 2024, Section 2)

Sometimes a *pro tanto* reason for blame may turn out to be conclusive, *i.e.*, it determines what we ought to do *all things considered*. But it may often be the case that what we ought to do, all things considered, is actually to refrain from blaming (ourselves or others). It would certainly be implausible to claim that we always ought, all things considered, to blame ourselves and/or others when we/they are blameworthy. Our human capacity for blame is limited, and we should not reasonably dedicate our whole lives to blaming. We have other pursuits, some of which are more important than blaming. So, even when you have a *pro tanto* reason to blame your partner, say, it does not follow that you should blame them.

One may wonder what sort of a reason this *pro tanto* reason is. According to instrumentalist theories of moral responsibility, to have a *pro tanto* reason is to have instrumental reasons in favor of blame. One may ask, for instance, would it be good or beneficial to hold someone like me responsible and therefore to blame me, in the sense that doing so would be conducive to some

good outcome? I may be appropriately held responsible and blamed, on such a view, in virtue of what can shape my (or other people's) motives and choices in the future. In other words, you blame me and hold me responsible because you want to influence my (or other people's) future actions: *that* is your reason. You want to deter me (or others) from doing the same morally wrong thing again. As Moritz Schlick writes:

The question of who is responsible is the question concerning the *correct point of application of the motive* [...]. [I]n this its meaning is completely exhausted; behind it lurks no mysterious connection between transgression and requital [...]. It is a matter only of knowing who is to be punished or rewarded, in order that punishment and reward function as such—be able to achieve their goal. (Schlick, 1939, p. 61)

For Schlick and other instrumentalists such as J. J. C. Smart (1961) and Richard J. Arneson (2003), the whole practice of holding one another responsible is justified when it helps wrongdoers to refrain from acting in the same way in the future.

In this dissertation, however, my focus is not on such instrumentalist theories of responsibility and blameworthiness. None of the philosophers I engage with in this dissertation have developed such views. Instead, the theories I discuss all tie blameworthiness to what is a fitting or deserved response or reaction to what the wrongdoer has done. To be worthy of blame is thus to be deserving of blame or to be a fitting target of blame (or both).

For the blame of a wrongdoer for an action, omission, or outcome to be *fitting* is for that blame to accurately represent or appraise the wrongdoer in light of their relation to that action, omission, or outcome. For the blame of a wrongdoer to be *deserved*, that blame must be unwelcome or bad for the wrongdoer, while it is *pro tanto* good or just that the wrongdoer is so blamed. If one understands blameworthiness to be a matter of blame being fitting (but not necessarily deserved), then the *pro tanto* reason to blame that is intrinsic to blameworthiness is a matter of accuracy or fit. If one (also) understands blameworthiness as a matter of blame being deserved, then the *pro tanto* reason to blame that is intrinsic to blameworthiness is a matter of desert or justice.

It is worth noting that it may not always be clear whether our intuitions about whether people are blameworthy actually concern their

blameworthiness, or whether they are instead about all-things-considered inappropriateness. When we say that I do not deserve your blame for not taking care of your cat while you were away, or when we say that it does not seem right to blame me for it, we could be expressing either of two distinct thoughts. First, we could be judging that I am not blameworthy; that is, that I do not deserve blame, or that blame would be unfitting given that, for instance, I had a good excuse. Second, however, we could be making a judgment about the ethics of blame; that is, that while I may well be blameworthy for not taking care of your cat, it would nonetheless, for other reasons, be morally inappropriate to blame me. Perhaps blaming me would be cruel, pointless, counterproductive, or harmful to our friendship. Even if I am blameworthy, it may thus be that you should not blame me, all things considered. Distinguishing between these two kinds of judgments is important for interpreting our moral intuitions, and for understanding what is at stake in debates about whether and how blameworthiness can change over time (Khoury and Matheson, 2018, pp. 221–222; Clarke, 2022, pp. 2594–2595; Carlsson, 2024, pp. 688–691).

1.2.2 Degrees of Blameworthiness

Blameworthiness is not an all-or-nothing property; it comes in degrees (one can be more or less blameworthy for what one has done). In a given case, the degree of blameworthiness seems to depend on at least two main factors. The first is the severity of the wrong itself, *i.e.*, how much harm was caused, the seriousness of the moral norm that was violated, and how bad the action's consequences were. Administering genocide or initiating an unnecessary war, for instance, clearly makes one far more blameworthy than not helping a friend in need, even though both actions are morally wrong and ethically bad. The second factor is the intention or will manifested in the action, *i.e.*, whether the wrongdoer acted with malice, callousness, indifference, or was merely negligent. One might plausibly think that acting with deliberate ill will makes one more blameworthy than acting negligently (perhaps not always, but in most cases, I believe).

One's degree of blameworthiness is closely tied to the *principle of proportionality*. A fitting or appropriate blaming response is one that is proportionate to the degree of blameworthiness borne by the wrongdoer. If

I commit a minor wrong, blaming me too harshly is disproportionate and therefore unfitting. Conversely, if I commit a grave wrong, blaming me too mildly fails to recognize the seriousness of what I did. The strength of blame should match the moral weight of the wrongdoing, and this proportionality is essential to understanding what degree of blame I deserve, *i.e.*, what degree is fitting.

The notion that blameworthiness comes in degrees is important for thinking about how blameworthiness may change over time. According to some views in the literature, what the wrongdoer does, what they undergo, and what happens to them after they became blameworthy for a wrongdoing can change their degree of blameworthiness for that same wrongdoing.

1.3 Diachronic Blameworthiness

Moral blameworthiness can be examined from two temporal perspectives. *Synchronic* or *initial* blameworthiness concerns whether and to what degree a person is blameworthy at the time of wrongdoing; for instance, whether I was blameworthy at the moment I lied to you about a serious matter. *Diachronic* or *subsequent* blameworthiness concerns whether and to what degree a person remains blameworthy over time; whether I will remain blameworthy for the lie I told you a week, a month, or even years later (Khoury, 2013; Khoury & Matheson, 2018). If I have apologized to you for my lie, and I have changed my character in such a way that I will never lie wrongfully again, one may reasonably think that I am less blameworthy, or perhaps not blameworthy at all anymore. So, while conditions for becoming blameworthy, *i.e.*, synchronic blameworthiness, concern, for example, control, awareness, and quality of will, diachronic blameworthiness concerns how other conditions that determine whether, for example, radical changes in character and behavior, undergoing morally relevant kinds of suffering and harm, or fulfilling reparative duties might change people's degree of blameworthiness over time. Can a person who was blameworthy at the time of their wrongful action become less blameworthy through later actions or changes in character, or does a person's status as blameworthy remain forever unchanged? Is diachronic blameworthiness always, and in all cases, forever?

Or is it only in some cases forever? And if it is forever (either always or sometimes), does it transcend the wrongdoer's death?

In one sense, it is trivial that blameworthiness is forever (see, *e.g.*, Khoury & Matheson, 2018, p. 207) When you tell me that I was worthy of blame years ago because I arrived late to our meeting, you are expressing a judgment about my status as morally blameworthy at the time of our meeting. I was blameworthy then, and the claim that I was blameworthy then is forever true about me (even if I am no longer blameworthy for it). This is similar to saying that my parents got married in 1984, and that this remains true forever, even if they were to get divorced in the future. However, diachronic blameworthiness concerns whether we remain blameworthy at later times for what we did in the past. This is certainly not a trivial question. When you say that I am *still* worthy of blame for arriving late to our meeting years ago, you are making a substantive claim about what is *currently* the case, not just stating a historical fact.

1.3.1 Personal Identity and Diachronic Blameworthiness

When considering diachronic blameworthiness, it seems crucial that we are talking about *the same person* over time. Personal identity, in other words, seems to be fundamental to diachronic blameworthiness.⁶ Here the question

⁶ There is a vast body of literature on what personal identity is. Very roughly, we may distinguish between three main camps: *non-reductionist* accounts, *reductionist* accounts, and *non-representational* accounts of identity. Depending on which kind of account of personal identity one accepts, one can arrive at different conclusions about diachronic blameworthiness. Non-reductionists (*e.g.*, Lowe, 2009; Madell, 1981; Merricks, 1999; Swinburne, 1974) claim that personal identity is fundamentally personal and based on the subject who experiences the conscious flow of the self. Reductionists (*e.g.*, DeGrazia, 2005; Lewis, 1976; Olson, 2002; Schechtman, 1996; Williams, 1973, 1994) on the other hand, maintain that we can get a grasp on personal identity if we define exactly what it is and what it entails, and conscious experience does not have the final say here. There are many different reductionist accounts of personal identity. According to the so-called *psychological continuity* account, associated with philosophers like Sydney Shoemaker (1970) and Walter Glannon (1998), personal identity depends on continuous psychological connections like memories, beliefs, and character traits. *Bodily continuity* theorists such as Eric Olson (1997) and Bernard Williams (1973, 1957), in contrast, focus on physical continuity, suggesting that personal identity follows the continuous existence of a human organism. *Narrative identity* theory, developed by, *e.g.*, Marya

is what makes us the same person over time, despite all the changes we undergo. If you think that I am still diachronically blameworthy for betraying your trust ten years ago, then you must reasonably assume that I am now the same person as the person who betrayed you. I can only be currently blameworthy for betraying you ten years ago if I am, in some sense, the same person who betrayed you back then. A common way to understand this requirement is to say that I must be at least *numerically* the same person as the one who betrayed you. Many philosophers have argued that personal identity is *necessary* for moral responsibility over time (see, *e.g.*, Locke, [1690] 1979; G. Madell, 2014; Olson, 1997; Schechtman, 1996, 2014; K. Wallace, 2019; Zimmerman, 2012). More specifically, the thought is that if I am not numerically identical to the wrongdoer, then it seems I cannot properly be held responsible for what that past person did. Personal identity (in the sense of numerical identity), on this view, is what grounds the persistence of responsibility over time.

Some philosophers have challenged this assumption, however. Derek Parfit, for instance, has argued that personal identity does not really matter for moral responsibility, and that we can be responsible for past actions even if personal identity (in the sense of numerical identity) does not hold (Khouri & Matheson, 2018; Parfit, 1971, [1984] 1986). Similarly, David Shoemaker (2012) has explored cases where people can no longer identify or be identified with their past actions, will, and agency, and has questioned whether identity is truly necessary for attributing moral responsibility over time.⁷ My own

Schechtman (1996, 2014), suggests that personal identity is constructed through the stories and narratives about ourselves that we identify with or are identified by. For those who believe in *societal identity* like Jacques Derrida (1997), identity is produced by the interaction of external forces. External forces are systems of relations between a person's psychology, the society in which the person lives, and the world. Personal identity, for Derrida, is nothing more than a sign in a text (by which he means the world) that is always susceptible to different interpretations, and which has no integrity or unity in its meaning. Finally, a relatively new approach to personal identity contends that when personal identity is viewed in either a non-reductionist or a reductionist way, something is neglected. On this view, personal identity is non-representational (Köhler, 2021; Simpson, 2017).

⁷ Apart from the question of responsibility, Buddhists, certain non-Western traditionalists, and a few Western philosophers have even rejected the notion of a persistent person entirely. They suggest that what we refer to as "personal identity" is simply a convenient fiction that masks a constantly changing stream of experiences and states. David Hume

proposal on diachronic blameworthiness, which I will present in Chapter IV, is compatible with both the acceptance and the rejection of personal identity (in its numerical sense) as a necessary condition for diachronic blameworthiness.

1.3.2 Death and Diachronic Blameworthiness

One important question when it comes to diachronic blameworthiness is whether people can remain blameworthy for their moral wrongs even after their death. This, I believe, is a question that any account of diachronic blameworthiness must address. If I am blameworthy now, and I do nothing to diminish or extinguish that blameworthiness, and therefore also remain blameworthy tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year, then it seems natural to think that I should also remain blameworthy after my death. As intuitive as this conclusion may seem, however, it poses a challenge for many of the existing views of diachronic blameworthiness. This is because many people in the literature view moral blameworthiness as a property of living, conscious moral agents who possess a character, can feel guilt, can be held accountable, and can respond to moral demands. When a person dies, however, that person ceases to exist as an agent with those features. After their demise, there is no psychology, no capacity for emotion or action, and no ability to engage with the moral community. This is a challenge for many accounts in the literature.

Some philosophers have bitten this bullet and embraced the claim that the dead cannot be blameworthy (Jefferson, 2024; Khoury & Matheson, 2018; Matheson, 2025). Some argue that although the dead are not blameworthy, it may still be fitting to blame them, but this blame is made fitting by the fact that its target was blameworthy in the past (see Matheson 2025). Others might even reject both the claim that the dead are blameworthy and the claim that they are fitting targets of blame for what they did while alive, while still arguing that our practice of blaming the dead can be instrumentally justified. On this last view, by blaming the dead, we are signaling what matters to us. As the living moral agents who can be

and Derek Parfit notably held similar viewpoints and argued that there is no such thing as a unified personal identity.

influenced by blame, we are upholding and reinforcing moral standards and norms. We are deterring living people from future wrongs by signaling to them that if they do the same, they will face the same harm to their reputation after death (*e.g.*, Jefferson, 2024; Shoemaker & Vargas, 2021). Anneli Jefferson writes:

[I]n as far as people care about their posthumous reputation, the practice of praising and blaming the dead will help support moral conduct while individuals are still alive. However, at the time that we blame these individuals posthumously, it is too late to influence them. This means that strictly speaking, the dead are indeed not blame- or praiseworthy. [...] [O]n my account, the correct thing to say regarding dead people is that they acted well or badly and that they were responsible at the time and would have been apt targets of blame. We can also condemn their behaviour, thereby incentivizing the living who care about their posthumous reputation. (Jefferson, 2024, p. 566)

Blaming the dead can also be a way of sustaining narratives, of highlighting certain memories, and of ensuring that the memory of atrocities is not erased or sanitized (Blustein, 2008). It can also be a way for victims and their descendants to express their grief, anger, and sense of injustice, and thereby be relieved (Bell, 2019).

That said, I think that the dead can be blameworthy, that it can be fitting to blame them, and that it can be appropriate to do so even in the absence of any instrumental reasons to blame them. Consider the controversial case of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazi Party in the early 1930s. His *Black Notebooks* (which span from 1931 to 1941 and were published in 2014) contain several anti-Semitic passages, often referencing the stereotype of “World Jewry.” These notebooks have sparked a range of reactions within the scholarly community (*e.g.*, Mitchell & Trawny, 2017). According to those who deny that the dead can be blameworthy (*e.g.*, Matheson 2025), it would be fitting to blame Heidegger now because he was blameworthy in 1976. According to those, like Jefferson, who give a merely instrumentalist justification for blaming the dead, any reason for blaming Heidegger now for his support of the Nazi regime would have to refer to some good result that would thereby be achieved (perhaps that it would help to deter current and future philosophers from endorsing fascist viewpoints and backing dictatorial regimes, and/or that blaming

Heidegger would demonstrate our respect for the victims of Auschwitz by ensuring that we never forget who, in theory or practice, contributed to what happened during that time). In my view, though, death does not erase one's blameworthiness. Moreover, the appropriateness of us blaming the dead does not seem to depend on whether it effectively serves some end instrumentally.

Randolph Clarke (2022, 2025) argues, in line with this, that the dead are indeed blameworthy. However, he argues that they are blameworthy in virtue of what they did at the moment they became blameworthy in life. If the conditions of blameworthiness are met at the time of action, it will, according to Clarke, always be fitting to blame the wrongdoer for what they did, even after their death. That said, as I will argue later, Clarke's view has the implausible consequence that a person's degree of blameworthiness cannot diminish over time, under any conditions. One of my aims in this dissertation, as I mentioned, is to propose an account of blameworthiness that can make sense of posthumous blameworthiness, while allowing for one's degree of blameworthiness to nevertheless change over time.

1.4 Blame

What precisely is it that a wrongdoer becomes and perhaps remains worthy of when they become blameworthy? Philosophers have distinguished several kinds of blame. Distinguishing between different kinds of blame is important for understanding how blameworthiness can change over time. The conditions under which blameworthiness can change over time will likely vary depending on what one takes blame to be, or what kind of blame one takes to be especially significant.

According to J. J. C. Smart (1961) and Garry Watson (1996), blame is a *judgment* that involves a belief about a person, or an assignment of discredit to them, according to which that person has failed to meet some moral standard. Similarly, Michael Zimmerman (2022) argues that what he calls "thin blame" involves making certain judgments about the wrongdoer. Peter Strawson (1962) famously argues that blame involves *reactive attitudes* and *moral emotions* such as guilt, resentment, and indignation; and the many philosophers who have followed him in this have expanded on his view and elaborated on the emotions we naturally adopt in our blaming practices (Bell,

2012, 2013; Darwall, 2006; Hieronymi, 2020; Menges, 2017; Russell, 1995; D. Shoemaker, 2015, 2022; R. J. Wallace et al., 2011).⁸ Other philosophers have argued instead that blame is an *action* or a form of expression that involves moral sanction (Watson, 1996), relationship management (Scanlon, 2008), harm as a setback to the wrongdoer's interests (Brink & Nelkin, 2022; McKenna, 2012, 2024), or forms of morally relevant punishment (Bradley, [1876] 2012; Hart, [1968] 2008). There are also accounts that view blame as multifaceted (Sher, 2005; Werkmäster, 2022).

An important distinction is that between private blame and public blame (see, *e.g.*, Menges, 2017). Private blame is the holding of negative attitudes or judgments about a wrongdoer without expressing them outwardly. You may regard me with resentment or disappointment for something I did a long time ago, without ever expressing or communicating it to anyone else. This would then be an instance of private blame. Public or open blame, by contrast, involves the overt expression or communication of your attitudes in action, through verbal condemnation, social exclusion, punishment, or other forms of censure that you may still impose on me, even after all these years. When you publicly blame me, you communicate your disapproval or demand to me (Macnamara, 2011; Mason, 2019; D. Shoemaker, 2021; Sliwa, 2019; Tierney, 2022), or you just protest against me (Boxill, 1976; Hieronymi, 2001; McGeer, 2012; Smith, 2012; Talbert, 2012).

Among the different kinds of blame that I mentioned above, I think punitive blame, *i.e.*, the kind of blame that involves intentionally harming the wrongdoer with retributive intent, is especially significant for understanding blameworthiness. Punitive blame is not merely a matter of holding negative attitudes, making judgments, or feeling resentment; rather,

⁸ When it comes to the relation between emotions and blame, a further distinction would be between self-directed blame and other-directed blame. Self-directed blame, often taken to involve feeling guilty, is the kind of blame a wrongdoer directs at themselves for their own wrongdoing (Carlsson, 2017; Clarke, 2016; Portmore, 2019). I may feel an ample amount of guilt (or remorse, regret, shame, etc.), and when I do, it reflects my recognition that I have violated some moral norm. Other-directed blame, by contrast, is the blame that you as my victim (or third parties, or the moral community) direct at me for something I have done in the past. This includes attitudes like resentment (from the victim) and indignation (from third parties) (Strawson, 1962; Wallace, 1994). Self-directed blame remains internal and first-personal over time, while other-directed blame is external and relational.

it involves actually doing something to the wrongdoer, imposing costs or burdens on them in recognition of what they deserve. When we engage in punitive blame, we are not just appraising someone. This makes punitive blame an especially important and morally substantive form of blame. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter IV, where I develop my own account of blameworthiness.

As we will see throughout this dissertation, different theories of diachronic blameworthiness may privilege different kinds of blame as central to their views. For instance, a theory that ties diachronic blameworthiness to deserved guilt will focus on self-directed retributive blame, while a theory that ties it to one's unmet reparative duties will focus on communicative, other-directed blame. Being aware of the various kinds of blame clarifies what is at stake in debates about diachronic and posthumous blameworthiness.

1.4.1 Strength of Blame

When it comes to blaming people for their past wrongdoings, one further issue concerns how the strength of blame should be understood. The strength of blame concerns how intense, severe, or forceful/harmful a blaming response is, or should be, in response to a past wrongdoing. This is an important dimension of our blaming practices, as it is related to the degree of blameworthiness we attribute to a wrongdoer for their past moral faults. I can be blamed mildly or severely for what I did, gently or harshly, briefly or persistently, and the strength of the blame should, ideally, be proportionate to the degree of blameworthiness I bear for my past wrongdoing.

The strength of blame can be measured along several dimensions, and these dimensions, I think, can be equally incorporated by the emotion-based and the action-based accounts of blame. One such dimension is *intensity*, *i.e.*, how strongly or harshly your blame is still directed at me for what I did in the past. A second dimension is *duration*, *i.e.*, how long your blaming response is sustained over time. A mild blaming reaction might take the form of a gentle expression of disappointment or a rebuke, while stronger forms may involve resentment, indignation, public condemnation, social ostracism, or even the institutional imposition of morally relevant kinds of harm or punishment.

For purely cognitive accounts of blame, *i.e.*, accounts that treat blame as simply making a judgment that a wrongdoer is blameworthy (without any accompanying emotional or expressive component), however, it is unclear how blame can come in different strengths. It seems that only a difference in the *content* of a judgment or belief could capture different strengths of blame. Regarding this issue, Justin Coates writes:

[C]onsider a purely judgmental theory of blame, according to which blame is identified with the moral judgment (or other belief-like state) that another agent has shown ill will in his or her action. If this theory is true, then it's difficult to see what it is that one agent could deserve *more* of than another agent. For suppose that both A and B are deserving of blame. It follows then that A and B each deserve to be judged as having displayed ill will in their actions. What, then, would it mean for A to deserve twice as much judgment that she has displayed ill will in her action? More belief? More confidently held belief? It's just not clear that one can even make sense of the proposal that agents can be *deserving of more* blame on the judgmental theory of blame. (Coates, 2019, p. 239)

While it can be shown how, on emotion-based and action-based accounts of blame, blame can plausibly come in different strengths, it seems that purely cognitive views are unable to account for this. This might be a reason to opt for one of the former two views.

1.4.2 Death and Blame

As I mentioned in § 1.3.2, blaming the dead seems to be something we do quite often. We blame historical figures such as Benito Mussolini or Hitler for their atrocities. We blame people like Heidegger or Carl Schmitt (the German political theorist best known for his involvement with the Nazi regime) for what they endorsed and wrote. And we continue to blame the wrongdoers who once harmed us or our loved ones, often for much less severe moral wrongs. That said, it is unclear, on some accounts of blame, whether we can in fact blame the dead.

On cognitive views, whereby blame is fundamentally a judgment that a person is blameworthy, and on emotion-based accounts, whereby blame consists in reactive attitudes like resentment, the idea that we can blame the

dead seems relatively unproblematic. We can obviously be angry with the dead and make judgments about who they were as people.

However, if to blame is to make a demand, engage in moral address, or aim to communicate something to the blamee (as, for example, Michael McKenna argues) then it seems that it would make no sense to blame the dead. Blame, on this view, is an inherently dialogical practice and it calls upon wrongdoers to acknowledge what they have done, to respond, to account for themselves, and to participate in a moral exchange. But the dead cannot hear our demands, cannot respond to our moral address, and cannot engage in any form of conversation. In this sense, blaming the dead is like shouting at someone who is totally deaf, or making demands of someone who cannot act. McKenna has thus suggested that blaming the dead is at best derivative:

Blaming the dead is to be explained in the same way. These are derivative cases to be accounted for in terms of how we would respond to the dead were they still alive and were we in a position to alter relevant practices in meaningful ways. (McKenna, 2012, p. 177)

On McKenna's view, when we blame the dead, we respond to them *as we would if they were still alive*. This is a kind of *ersatz* blame that mimics the structure of genuine responsibility without its essential interactive component. If this is right, then the dead cannot be blamed in the full sense, so posthumous blameworthiness remains deeply problematic for any account that ties blame to moral address and communication.⁹

On action-based accounts of blame, which I favor, whereby blame involves doing something to the wrongdoer, and particularly when blame is characterized as aiming at harming the wrongdoer or making them suffer, there is similar problem. On the face of it, one might think that we cannot harm the dead or make them suffer. After all, since they lack consciousness and sentience, they cannot experience anything and therefore cannot suffer. If blame is fundamentally about imposing costs, inflicting suffering, or setting back interests in ways the wrongdoer can feel or register, then blaming the dead would seem to be impossible. This is a genuine problem, yet, as I

⁹ It is not obvious that this problem arises for those who think that blame is characteristically a protest. This is because you can protest what I did in my absence, or after my death.

will explain in Chapter IV, punitive blaming of the dead is in fact possible and makes sense.

1.5 Plan for the Dissertation

In this dissertation, you will notice that I sometimes point to analogies from both theology and law to illustrate my points. My own interest in theology has led me to see how different religious traditions think about sin, misdeeds, responsibility, and desert for harm and punishment. At the same time, I think criminal law clearly demonstrates how courts decide to legally punish those who break the law, and how punishment can diminish, cease, or even persist beyond death. By looking at these two fields side by side, I hope to illustrate what it can mean to blame people and regard them as blameworthy for their past actions, both before and after their death. By bringing these traditions together, I also aim to show that our moral practices, whether religious or secular, often rest on similar foundations, despite their vast differences. They assess that actions matter, and that people are responsible for what they do. Within this broad picture, I believe, theology and law together sharpen our understanding of morality.¹⁰

This is how I will proceed. In Chapter II, I consider the view that blameworthiness is *always* forever. Philosophers holding this view thus deny that blameworthiness can diminish. I present two accounts of this sort (the *Ultimate Responsibility Account* and the *Moral Ledger Account*) and two arguments for the claim that all moral wrongdoers are forever blameworthy for the wrongs they commit in their lives. I argue that all such lines of reasoning should be rejected because, in some cases, blameworthiness plausibly ceases before death.

¹⁰ One might simply deny that there is any analogy between theological and criminal law on the one hand, and morality on the other. One might think that in morality, we are concerned with more nuanced aspects of a person's life, considering a wider range of judgments, attitudes, emotions, speech, and actions that may not necessarily fit into a binary evaluation, as seen in theology or law. For instance, no religious text states that it is a sin to forget a partner's birthday, and no law mandates imprisonment for it. However, in morality, being indifferent or careless can provide legitimate reasons for blame. While I recognize these subtle differences between these domains, I shall nonetheless seek assistance from theology and criminal law to illustrate my points better.

In Chapter III, I then ask whether blameworthiness is *sometimes* forever. Here I examine the existing accounts of diachronic blameworthiness (the *Moral Reform Account*, the *Moral Guilt Account*, and the *Reparative Duties Account*) and argue that, while they can all accommodate the claim that blameworthiness can diminish or cease before death, none of them can plausibly account for how some people can remain blameworthy after their death. I conclude this chapter by stating that, since it is implausible to conclude that the dead can never be blameworthy, we must look elsewhere for an account of posthumous blameworthiness.

Chapter IV proposes such an account, which can also make sense of the diminishment and cessation of blameworthiness over time. I begin by suggesting that moral blameworthiness is essentially about the moral harm people deserve. After defining what I mean by moral harm, I show how my account can explain both how people can get what they deserve before they die, and how they can remain blameworthy after their death, if they did not get what they deserve beforehand. One implication of my view, furthermore, is that even the dead can become less (or cease to be) blameworthy when certain conditions are met.

In Chapter V, I conclude my dissertation with a brief summary, together with some questions for future research.

Chapter II

Not All Blameworthiness Lasts
Forever

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter I, I said that a study of diachronic moral blameworthiness¹¹ is a study of whether and of how moral blameworthiness can diminish or cease over time. A bit more specifically, it is about whether blameworthiness is such that it can diminish and perhaps even cease entirely, or whether it is instead such that it never changes, no matter what happens over time or what the wrongdoer does in response to their wrongdoing.

If blameworthiness is static, then once a wrongdoer becomes blameworthy for a morally wrong action, omission, or bad outcome,¹² their blameworthiness attaches to them in a way that does not respond to subsequent events. On this picture, nothing the wrongdoer does (not even apologizing, performing acts of reparation, feeling guilt, etc.) and nothing that happens to them (punitive harmful blame, punishment, sanctions, etc.) can alter the degree of their blameworthiness for their past action. This is a powerful view with several prominent defenders. If, on the other hand, blameworthiness is dynamic, then it is sensitive to what happens after the wrongful act. It can diminish, it has been argued, through, *e.g.*, the wrongdoer's efforts to make amends (Matheson, 2025; Tierney, 2022), feeling enough guilt (Carlsson, 2022, 2024), or moral reform (Khouri & Matheson, 2018). Some have argued that it can, in principle, even cease entirely if, *e.g.*, the wrongdoer has received all the (morally relevant kinds of) harm they deserve, has felt all the guilt they deserve, or has fulfilled all their reparative duties and satisfied all the moral demands placed on them in virtue

¹¹ As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, there are different senses of blameworthiness, and not all of them are moral. Since, in this work, I am concerned exclusively with moral blameworthiness, *i.e.*, the kind of blameworthiness that arises from committing moral wrongs, and which bears on how a person deserves to be treated by others, I use “moral blameworthiness” and “blameworthiness” interchangeably throughout.

¹² When I speak of blameworthiness for an “action,” a “wrongdoing,” or a “wrongful act,” I mean blameworthiness for a morally wrong action. I also want to include omissions and bad outcomes, as I intend to capture the full range of ways in which a person can be morally at fault. A person can be blameworthy not only for things they actively do, such as lying, stealing, or harming another, but also for things they fail to do, such as neglecting a duty of care, remaining silent when they should speak up, or failing to intervene when intervention is morally required. Also, a person can be blameworthy for outcomes they bring about, even if those outcomes were not directly intended. For the sake of brevity, I will not mention omissions and outcomes every time.

of their past wrongdoing. On this view, blameworthiness is not a permanent stain but rather one that can be removed under certain conditions.

This chapter is devoted to critically examining what I will call the *Hardliner's Claim*, which is the claim (or position) that blameworthiness is static and that it always (*i.e.*, in all cases) lasts forever. Once acquired, blameworthiness never diminishes or ceases. I will evaluate the various accounts that could be or have been offered in defense of this position. My aim is to show why the Hardliner's Claim has seemed compelling to some philosophers in the responsibility literature, to identify where I think it goes wrong, and to explain why we should regard moral blameworthiness differently. In the end, I will thus reject the Hardliner's Claim.

The chapter is structured as follows. In § 2.2, I present and explain the Hardliner's Claim. In § 2.3, I consider an account according to which moral wrongdoers deserve to suffer eternally to a degree determined by the badness of their actions, because they are themselves the sole originators of those actions.

In § 2.4, I turn to a second account, according to which moral wrongdoers are forever blameworthy for a morally wrong action because that action creates a permanent discredit on their moral record, and such discredit remains forever. On this view, blameworthiness is tied not to what the wrongdoer does in response to their past wrongdoing, but only to what they have done in the past. Their past action is on their so-called ledger, and this fact grounds their status as blameworthy, regardless of what happens afterward.

Finally, in § 2.5, I discuss two versions of an account according to which to be blameworthy is to be a fitting target of reactive attitudes, and since the features that make blame fitting at the time of the wrongdoing never change, blame remains fitting forever.

I will argue that all of these accounts rest on questionable assumptions, have counterintuitive implications, and fail to adequately account for the way diachronic blameworthiness functions in our actual practices. In § 2.6, I therefore conclude that we should reject the Hardliner's Claim and look for an alternative account of what constitutes blameworthiness over time.

2.2 The Hardliner's Claim

In the responsibility literature, many people have endorsed the view that once a person commits a morally wrong action and become synchronically blameworthy for it, that person is forever blameworthy for it (Callard, 2017; Clarke, 2022, 2025; Feinberg, 1970; Gert & Duggan, 1979; Glover, 1970; Haji, 1998; Howard, 2018; Lee, 2025; M. Zimmerman, 1988, 2022). I will call this:

The Hardliner's Claim: Once a person becomes blameworthy to degree d for an action, omission, or outcome, they remain blameworthy to degree d for that action, omission, or outcome forever.¹³

According to the Hardliner's Claim, a person's blameworthiness for an action, omission, or outcome thus cannot be reduced or increased by subsequent events; it is forever fixed. If the Hardliner's Claim is correct, then nothing a wrongdoer does after committing a morally wrong action can alter the degree to which they are blameworthy for that act.¹⁴

According to the Hardliner's Claim, blameworthiness lasts *forever*. Here we might understand "forever" in a relatively modest sense, as just covering the entirety of a person's "biological lifetime." On this reading, once a person becomes blameworthy, they remain so until they die, but not beyond that. Alternatively, we might understand "forever" in a more robust and literal sense; we might understand it as lasting not only throughout the person's biological life, but beyond the grave and forever after. I take proponents of the Hardliner's Claim to assume the stronger, more literal reading. On that reading, to say that a wrongdoer's blameworthiness lasts forever is to insist

¹³ What I call the Hardliner's Claim is similar to the view Benjamin Matheson calls "interminability" (2025). It is also another way of formulating what Randolph Clarke calls "PERMANENT" (2022). There may be slight differences between these formulations, but they all address the same core thesis: once blameworthy, forever blameworthy.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that there could be a slightly weaker version of the Hardliner's Claim, according to which a person's degree of blameworthiness may diminish due to that person's responses to what they have done, but never falls to zero. On this view, blameworthiness lasts forever in the sense that it never disappears entirely, even if it might become ever smaller.

that there is no temporal cutoff after which the wrongdoer ceases to be blameworthy for what they did while alive.¹⁵

The Hardliner's Claim concerns all cases of moral wrongdoing, regardless of their gravity or significance. In other words, any person who is guilty of a morally wrong action is forever blameworthy, no matter how trivial or how severe the wrongdoing may be. It does not matter whether we are talking about a person's blameworthiness for cheating on a school test or a mass murderer's blameworthiness for committing genocide. They are both guilty of morally wrong actions in a way that makes them blameworthy for those actions forever, although of course to different degrees. I now turn to examining various accounts that could be or have been put forward in defense of the Hardliner's Claim.

2.3 The Ultimate Responsibility Account

One account that could be provided in support of the Hardliner's Claim is what I shall call

The Ultimate Responsibility Account: Once a person becomes blameworthy to a degree d for an action, omission, or outcome, they remain blameworthy to that degree for their action, omission, or outcome eternally, because they are ultimately responsible for what they did.

This account has not, as far as I know, been explicitly endorsed by any particular philosopher in the modern responsibility literature, but it seems to capture a common intuition among many people about what moral responsibility entails: to be blameworthy for something is to be deserving of some kind of harmful blame (*e.g.*, Carlsson, 2017, 2022, 2024; McKenna, 2012, 2024; Nelkin, 2013; Portmore, 2019). Although none of these philosophers have actually endorsed the Ultimate Responsibility Account, one might adapt their views into a defense of the Hardliner's Claim by arguing as follows: if people are *ultimately* responsible for what they do (G.

¹⁵ Furthermore, I take the Hardliner's Claim to be not merely the claim that blameworthiness persists throughout a person's life in the actual world, but also that there are no counterfactual or possible future scenarios in which a wrongdoer's blameworthiness changes.

Strawson, 1994), *i.e.*, if they are the true originators and executors of their actions in a deep, metaphysically robust sense, then when they commit a wrong, they are violating something that cannot be overlooked; therefore they remain forever blameworthy for it. In other words, if a person is the ultimate source of their own wrongful action, then they deserve harmful blame for it forever; even if they only receive it for a limited length of time, they can never cease to deserve it.

Skeptics about moral responsibility would reject this line of argument, because they deny that people are ultimately responsible for their actions in the required sense (Pereboom, 2014; G. Strawson, 1994). And most realists about moral responsibility would probably reject it too (Fischer, 2006; McKenna, 2008). Since we do not have full control over our genes, our upbringing, our environment, the laws of nature, and so on, ultimate responsibility is therefore impossible. That said, in explaining how someone who believes in ultimate responsibility might argue, Galen Strawson (1994) considers the following entailment: if one is ultimately responsible for a wrongful action, then one deserves eternal suffering for it. Strawson says:

As I understand it, true moral responsibility is responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, then it makes sense, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven. The stress on the words ‘makes sense’ is important, for one certainly does not have to believe in any version of the story of heaven and hell in order to understand the notion of true moral responsibility that it is being used to illustrate. Nor does one have to believe in any version of the story of heaven and hell in order to believe in the existence of true moral responsibility. On the contrary: many atheists have believed in the existence of true moral responsibility. The story of heaven and hell is useful simply because it illustrates, in a peculiarly vivid way, the kind of absolute or ultimate accountability or responsibility that many have supposed themselves to have, and that many do still suppose themselves to have. It very clearly expresses its scope and force. (G. Strawson, 1994, pp. 9–10)

As the argument goes, if a person possesses the full range of capacities that are necessary for acting according to moral standards and still chooses to act immorally, then there exist strong reasons for eternal desert for blame: no matter how much we blame a wrongdoer, they always remain as deserving of blame as they did before. After all, they had total God-like control over the choice to refrain from performing an immoral act; but they did it anyway. In

this sense, the notion of ultimate responsibility can provide a ground for arguing that a wrongdoer deserves eternal harmful blame.¹⁶ Again, although Strawson himself rejects the claim that we are ultimately responsible for what we do (he is a responsibility skeptic), he explains the position that relies on ultimate responsibility with clarity. His articulation of the view helps us see why someone might think that ultimate responsibility entails desert of eternal suffering, punitive blame,¹⁷ or punishment.

I think the Ultimate Responsibility Account fails. If there is even one case—and I believe there are in fact many—in which a wrongdoer’s blameworthiness can cease entirely because they have received the suffering and punishment they deserve for long enough, then the Ultimate Responsibility Account fails.

What a person deserves, on my view, has bounds, and once those bounds are met, a person’s blameworthiness comes to an end. Their moral debt, so to speak, has been paid. Suppose that my close friend borrows my favorite brass fountain pen during a practical philosophy seminar, but they intend not to return it. They borrow it only to use it during the seminar, but they like it, decide to keep it, and leave the department with it in their pocket.¹⁸ That is morally wrong, and my friend is blameworthy for it. They deserve some small amount of blame (given the relatively minor nature of the wrongdoing). Now, suppose that the next time I see them in the seminar, I

¹⁶ Perhaps a parallel argument could be presented for moral praiseworthiness: if a virtuous person acts rightly in a way that reflects their ultimate responsibility, then they deserve interminable praise, perhaps an eternal reward, or even eternal bliss in heaven. Practitioners of Sufism, for instance, hold that God deserves eternal praise, and that gratitude is a forever-fitting response to Him. However, whether this argument holds for praiseworthiness is questionable. If we are ultimately responsible for our actions in the deep metaphysical sense required by this argument, then one may doubt why we should deserve praise for achieving moral perfection. After all, if we are truly the ultimate source of our own virtuous actions, praise may seem less deserved. The asymmetry here is worth noting, but I will not pursue it further in this work.

¹⁷ By “punitive blame,” I mean blame that functions like punishment. Such blame is inflicted with retributive intent and causes harm to the person being blamed.

¹⁸ This differs from our usual habits of borrowing a pen or a lighter and “forgetting” to return it, which we typically regard as innocent forgetfulness rather than wrongdoing. In this case, by contrast, my friend deliberately chose to keep the pen, knowing that I did not allow them to do so.

confront them about it. I blame them in front of everyone. They, in turn, suffer, feel genuine guilt and blame themselves.

In this scenario, my friend seems to have received the punitive blame they deserved; they have suffered enough and received the harm they deserved. At this point, I would argue, their blameworthiness for taking my pen has ceased. They no longer deserve any further punitive blame for it. I now ask in what sense, then, does my friend still deserve interminable suffering? Isn't it rather that they deserved some suffering (in the past tense)? Their desert status, in other words, has changed, and it is no longer the case that they deserve a certain amount of suffering. I therefore find it implausible to say that one now and forever deserves punitive blame and suffering for a minor fault like not paying for a bus ticket or crossing on a red light. Blameworthiness, as desert for punitive blame, is constrained by how proportionate it is to the wrongdoing. This is the proportionality principle. According to this principle, one's desert for suffering and harm in the case of minor moral offenses, like my friend's case, differs significantly from that of more serious wrongs, such as cheating on a partner, betraying a friend's trust in a consequential matter, or causing someone serious harm.

The proportionality principle implies that the amount of punitive blame and suffering that one deserves for minor moral wrongdoings is limited and finite; my blame corresponds to the minor nature of what my friend did. This may not necessarily hold true for all of their actions. If my friend commits a more serious wrong, they may deserve significantly more punitive blame, and it may take much longer for that desert to be exhausted, but as long as it is true for this specific action, I think we can safely assume that desert for blame can end at some point, and that blameworthiness therefore does not last forever in all cases.

My position receives support not only from our ordinary moral intuitions, but also from theology (as we have seen, Strawson uses a similar analogy). Although eternal torment, suffering, and punishment is a familiar notion in theology, not all sinners are deserving of it. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas argues that divine justice requires that each person receives what is due to them, and that sinners therefore deserve suffering as a consequence of their actions. From Aquinas's perspective, both temporal punishments (the sufferings that a sinner endures in this life) and

interminable punishments (damnation in the afterlife) are deserved by a person who has committed a mortal sin against God, who is infinite in goodness and therefore infinitely wronged by sin (*Summa Theologiae*, I–II, Q. 87, Art. 3–4). The term “damnation” refers to condemnation to eternal punishment in hell, but even Aquinas’s theological doctrine only provides a conceptual framework for the kind of eternal desert that applies to those who have committed mortal sin, not *any* sin.

Notice also that many philosophers who believe that moral blameworthiness is fundamentally a matter of deserving punitive harmful blame also think that desert is terminable and that at least some wrongdoers can fully get what they deserve (Carlsson, 2017, 2022, 2024; McKenna, 2020, 2024; Portmore, 2019). Among those authors, those who have a view on diachronic blameworthiness hold that it is terminable because one’s desert for blame can diminish or even cease entirely when one receives the punitive blame or suffering that one deserves. Andreas Brekke Carlsson, for instance, argues that the amount of blame that a person deserves for their past actions correlates with the extent to which they deserve to suffer and feel guilt. On his view, blameworthiness is tied directly to deserved guilt: “If an agent does not deserve to feel guilty, she is not blameworthy” (Carlsson, 2022, p. 192). If a person feels some guilt for what they have done, they become less blameworthy; if they feel all the guilt they deserve and suffer enough from that feeling, they become entirely blameless. One can thus, according to Carlsson, accept the premise that blameworthiness is fundamentally a matter of desert without being committed to the conclusion that this desert is unlimited or everlasting.

There is yet another problem with the Ultimate Responsibility Account, and this has to do with the conditions required for interminable desert for suffering. If there is no afterlife and/or no hell, then one cannot deserve suffering forever, because desert for eternal suffering presupposes the capacity to suffer after one’s life and a place where dead people can suffer. Desert is not merely a matter of what would be fitting in some abstract sense; it is a matter of what can actually be inflicted on a subject who is capable of experiencing it. This means that for the Ultimate Responsibility Account to successfully support the Hardliner’s Claim, there would actually need to be an afterlife and a place like hell. It is not sufficient to say that we would

deserve eternal torment if there were a hell, or that such torment would be fitting in some hypothetical afterlife. The desert claim requires that the wrongdoer actually exists in a state and at a place such that they can receive the suffering they deserve. If there is no afterlife and no hell, *i.e.*, no realm in which the dead may continue to exist and suffer, then the Ultimate Responsibility Account cannot establish that blameworthiness lasts forever. The Ultimate Responsibility Account ultimately fails because it does not take into account that at least some wrongdoers can fully receive the punitive blame they deserve before their death, nor that it is questionable that there is any afterlife or hell.

2.4 The Moral Ledger Account

A second way of defending the Hardliner's Claim that I will present is what I shall call

The Moral Ledger Account: Once a person becomes blameworthy for an action, omission, or outcome, they remain blameworthy for that action, omission, or outcome forever because a past wrongdoing is forever in that person's moral ledger.

A moral ledger¹⁹ is an imaginary list of actions (both morally wrong and morally right actions) that a person has committed over the course of their life, according to which they can be judged and assessed (as a blameworthy or praiseworthy person). It is a kind of comprehensive moral record; it contains all that a person has done (even their morally neutral actions), and it preserves the moral significance of those actions that the person is blameworthy or praiseworthy for. Each entry in the ledger represents a fact about that person's past actions: that they lied, that they helped a stranger, that they broke a promise, that they stood up for justice. As Michael Zimmerman explains,

if there were a ledger of life, its entries would not be made by anyone, nor would there be a purpose to the entries. [...] Rather, the entries would be automatically recorded; they would appear simply by virtue of certain events occurring (events of which the person's moral worth is a function). In this connection, we must particularly guard against

¹⁹ By "ledger," I will always mean a moral ledger throughout this work.

thinking that inward praising and blaming are analogous to the *making* of entries in the ledger; on the contrary, they are analogous to *judging* there to be such entries. (M. Zimmerman, 1988, p. 89)

The concept of a moral ledger has several important features. First, it is typically understood as permanent and unalterable. Once an action is recorded in the ledger, it cannot be erased or rewritten. The past is fixed, and so too is the ledger that records it. Second, the ledger is comprehensive and objective. It does not depend on my memory or your testimony; it is an impartial record of what actually happened. Third, as we will see in this section, we can think of the moral ledger as the basis for what makes a person blameworthy or praiseworthy. If the person's ledger contains morally wrong actions, they are blameworthy; if it contains admirable actions, they are praiseworthy.

The concept of a ledger is not an unfamiliar or peculiar notion invented by moral philosophers; indeed, it appears in various forms across different disciplines and traditions. There is an analogous metaphor in theology, for instance. According to the teachings of Abrahamic religions, when a person commits a sin for which they are guilty, that sin is written in the person's book: a permanent record of their actions that will be consulted on the day of judgment: "And I saw the dead [...]. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" (Revelation 20:12, NIV). According to these teachings, no one can modify their book of life (or action); nor can anyone erase a sin from it once it has been committed and recorded. Although such teachings almost always offer opportunities for repentance, penitence, contrition, or redemption, none of these forms of making amends can alter the content of the book itself. The sin remains inscribed there forever. A person's book will always contain their sins, even if those sins have been forgiven or atoned for in some other sense.

While the notion of a ledger is a metaphor in morality and theology, a person's ledger or record actually exists in concrete form in law. In criminal law, once a person is judged guilty of a crime, that crime will forever remain on their criminal record, regardless of what happens afterward.²⁰ If I commit

²⁰ In some jurisdictions like the U.S., certain offenses can be expunged or sealed under specific conditions, but this is, I believe, an exception rather than the rule, and even then, the expungement typically does not mean that the crime never happened. It means only

a crime and am found guilty, this will be inscribed permanently on my record, even if I serve time in prison, complete my sentence, pay my fines, and fulfill all the obligations imposed on me by the legal system. The conviction is a permanent fact about my legal history. If, at later times, an authority—such as an employer, a licensing board, or an immigration officer—requests a police clearance certificate or my criminal record, what I have committed will be present on that record, along with the fact that, for example, I have served my time in prison and am no longer subject to further legal punishments. The crime is not erased from my record simply because my punishment has been completed. Rather, the record documents both that I am guilty of the crime and that I have been punished enough; these are facts about me, what I have done, and what I have undergone.²¹

Regarding the Moral Ledger Account, there are two claims in particular that we need to look closer at: first, that people are responsible for what they have done (*i.e.*, what is in their moral ledger), and second, that this responsibility lasts forever. I will explain each of these claims in turn. According to ledger theorists (Feinberg, 1970; Haji, 1998; M. Zimmerman, 1988, 2022), a person is morally responsible for the actions recorded on their moral ledger. On this account, responsibility furthermore amounts primarily to appraisability: a person is a legitimate target for praise and blame judgments or assessments. Viewing responsibility in terms of appraisability stands in contrast to viewing it as accountability: a person is accountable when it is appropriate to hold their actions against them by expressing resentment toward them, making them suffer, imposing sanctions, inflicting harm on them, etc. Appraisability concerns whether we can truly judge someone as blameworthy or praiseworthy; accountability concerns whether

that the record is no longer accessible to certain parties such as employers, landlords, educational institutions, licensing boards, and even the general public. When a record is expunged or sealed, it is usually hidden from such routine background checks. However, some parties, like governments, may still retain access under specific circumstances (Jacobs, 2015).

²¹ In a broader context, all ledger views in religious, legal, and moral spheres assess that people remain guilty of their sins, crimes, and wrongdoings forever. This holds true even if they have been tormented, punished, and blamed to the degree they deserved over time, in this life or in the afterlife. In the eyes of ledger theorists, torments, punishments, and blame do not change a person's status from guilty to innocent.

we can fittingly blame or praise them through reactive attitudes and responsive treatment. Zimmerman says:

Moral [responsibility *qua*] appraisability has to do with that type of inward moral praising and blaming that constitutes making a private judgment about a person. [...] Praising someone may be said to constitute judging that there is a “credit” in his “ledger of life,” [...]. Blaming someone may be said to constitute judging that there is a “discredit” or “debit” in his “ledger,” [...]. Someone is praiseworthy if he is deserving of such praise; that is, if it is correct, or true to the facts, to judge that there is a “credit” in his “ledger” [...]. Someone is blameworthy if he is deserving of such blame; that is, if it is correct, or true to the facts, to judge that there is a “debit” in his “ledger”. It is important to note that, in the context of inward moral praise and blame, worthiness of such praise or blame is a strictly nonmoral type of worthiness; it is a matter of the truth or accuracy of judgments. (M. Zimmerman, 1988, p. 38)

Joel Feinberg also talks about appraisability as responsibility, and what links him to ledger theorists is his belief that even accountability responses and responsive attitudes ultimately refer to what is in a person’s moral ledger (1970, p. 82). It is what is written in a person’s ledger that makes blame deserved, but even “modes of treatment [blame, harm, etc.] are deserved only in a derivative way, insofar perhaps as they are natural or conventional means of expressing the morally fitting attitudes” (Feinberg, 1970, p. 82). So, for Feinberg, blame is deserved because it is already fitting; it is fitting because the person committed a morally wrong action, and that action is on their moral ledger. The ledger is the ground; the reactive attitudes and modes of treatment are the appropriate responses to what it contains. The ledger, in this sense, is primary, and everything else follows from it.²²

²² It is not clear whether Feinberg believes that blameworthiness lasts forever, however. In his *Doing & Deserving*, he says: “Moral responsibility, so conceived, is liability to charges and credits on some ideal record, liability to credit or blame (in the sense of ‘blame’ that implies no action). Just as it is, as we say, ‘forever to the credit’ of a hero or saint that he performed some noble act, so a man can forever be ‘to blame’ for his faults (Feinberg, 1970, p. 30). In this passage Feinberg appears to endorse a weaker version of the Hardliner’s Claim: he treats moral responsibility as an enduring entry on each person’s moral ledger, such that one “can” always remain, in principle, blameworthy for past wrongs. Exactly how Feinberg conceives of this standing “liability” to blame, and whether it also includes cases of people who have been blamed enough is, however, not spelled out here.

Regarding the second claim, Zimmerman (2022) argues that blameworthiness for what is on the ledger lasts forever. He distinguishes between *thin* and *thick* blameworthiness and says: “There is a thin sense of ‘blame’ and ‘blameworthiness’ in which to blame someone morally simply is to engage in such a negative appraisal of him or her and one’s being blameworthy consists in one’s being worthy of such an appraisal” (M. Zimmerman, 2022, pp. 48–49). He then adds: “Moral blame certainly does involve quite a lot more than simply making some such judgment. Moral blame in the thick sense involves reacting to the person blamed in some way, a reaction that somehow is based on, incorporates, and reflects the judgment” (M. Zimmerman, 2022, p. 52). Zimmerman believes that blameworthiness in both senses lasts forever. He says:

[T]hin blameworthiness consists in the correctness of a certain judgment to the effect that *P* has incurred a debit in his hypological ledger [moral ledger] in virtue of having behaved in some way. It seems that such a judgment, if once true, will and must always be true; history can be forgotten but not erased. Yet [...] thin blameworthiness suffices for thick blameworthiness. How, then, can it happen that *P*’s thick blameworthiness diminishes over time, or is even eradicated entirely, due to considerations having to do with atonement, punishment, or some other factor? The answer is that it cannot. (M. Zimmerman, 2022, pp. 85–86)

Suppose that I deserve a certain amount of punishment and moral blame for walking through a Christmas market while extremely drunk. I am so drunk that I am unaware of how I am behaving (of what I am saying to people, and of what conduct I am displaying). According to Zimmerman, even if I receive all the punishment I deserve for this, and have been blamed enough, it will forever remain true that I deserve that degree of punishment and blame. For him, the truth of the desert claim does not disappear once the desert is satisfied. On his view, I will forever be blameworthy for my action because it will forever be true of me that I deserve a certain amount of blame for my wrongdoing. It would be wrong to inflict additional suffering or harm on me once I have endured what I deserve, but that is irrelevant to the question of what I deserve. Zimmerman says:

[I]n many if not all cases, there will be a limit to either the degree or the amount of thick blame that [a person] *P* deserves. Punishment, for

example, and other kinds of negative reactions can be excessive. If *P* has already received the punishment he deserves, then [...] he does not deserve—indeed, he deserves not—to receive *further* punishment; but this doesn't alter the fact that he *does* deserve the punishment he has already received. It is therefore a mistake to describe such a situation as one in which thick blameworthiness has diminished over time; for *P*'s desert remains as it ever was. (M. Zimmerman, 2022, p. 86)

In this quote, Zimmerman distinguishes between what “more” a wrongdoer deserves at a given time and what is true to say about the wrongdoer's desert at that time. On his view, even after I have received all the blame I deserve for walking very drunkenly through the Christmas market, it remains true that I deserve it, and this ongoing truth is what grounds my permanent blameworthiness. Blameworthiness, in other words, is not about what more a person currently deserves to receive, but is rather about what is true of their desert status: one deserves a certain amount of blame for walking very drunkenly through the Christmas market, and this description is forever true of that person even if they have already received what they deserve.

Since what people have done and what they deserve for it is written in their ledger, and since what exists in someone's moral ledger remains forever unchanged, a wrongdoer remains forever blameworthy for what their ledger contains. The ledger view can thus provide grounds for the Hardliner's Claim: everyone will forever be blameworthy for every single wrongdoing recorded in their moral ledger. Importantly for this account, this applies to every instance of moral wrongdoing, whether it involves me walking extremely drunkenly through a Christmas market or a mass murderer who commits genocide. The appeal of the ledger view lies in its simplicity and its grounding in an apparently undeniable fact: the past cannot be changed. This is a powerful line of reasoning, and it explains why the ledger view has been so influential in debates about diachronic responsibility.

However, I will now argue that the Moral Ledger Account fails. Suppose that I borrowed your bike for a quick trip, but because I was careless, I left it unlocked, and a thief stole it. What I did was morally wrong (leaving your bike unlocked while I was responsible for it), and since I am guilty of this, I am morally blameworthy for it at the time. Now, suppose that I felt an ample amount of guilt for what I did, and that you have blamed me enough (in a

punitive way) on several occasions. Just a few days later, I furthermore bought you a new bike to replace the stolen one, and again felt deep guilt for my carelessness, and apologized sincerely for what I did. After some time, you forgave me, and our relationship was restored. Am I still morally blameworthy, either in the thin sense (as an apt target of appraisal) or in the thick sense (as someone who deserves accountability responses like resentment, punishment, or harm)?

First of all, I do not think it is obvious that, from the fact that I am blameworthy in the thin sense, we can legitimately infer that I am blameworthy in the thick sense. This inference, which Zimmerman seems to make, is far from evidently correct. It is crucial to distinguish between the substantive and morally loaded claim that a wrongdoer is now and forever worthy of blame for what they have done, and the morally insignificant and somewhat trivial sense in which a wrongdoer is forever blameworthy in the way endorsed by ledger theorists like Zimmerman. The latter is simply an appraisal based on the permanence of historical facts. The former claim, by contrast, is a substantial normative claim about the ongoing fittingness or deservingness of blame and modes of treatment. It is the claim that the wrongdoer continues to merit blaming attitudes, reactive emotions, or harmful treatment forever, regardless of what they do in response to their wrongdoing or what happens to them afterward. This is not a claim about the permanence of historical facts; it is a claim about the permanence of moral desert. And these two claims are not equivalent. Zimmerman's inference from thin to thick blameworthiness is, I believe, a mistake. One can accept that a person is forever blameworthy in the thin sense, *i.e.*, forever accurately appraisable, without thereby committing oneself to the view that the person is forever blameworthy in the thick sense. The permanence of the moral ledger does not entail the permanence of desert.

On a deeper level, I do not think that the mere fact that there is a wrongdoing inscribed in my ledger makes me blameworthy even in the thin sense of responsibility as appraisability. There is a crucial distinction here that ledger theorists tend to overlook. It is one thing to say that it is forever true that I carelessly left your bike unlocked and this fact is in my ledger; it is quite another thing to say that I will forever be appraisable or appropriately judged as blameworthy for that entry in my ledger. Appraisability is not the same as

the mere truth of a historical proposition. To say that I am appraisable as blameworthy is to say that it is fitting or appropriate to assess me negatively in light of what I did, that it makes sense to hold that action against me in some evaluative sense. But why should this appraisal remain fitting forever, simply because the historical fact remains true forever? The fact that I once did something wrong does not, by itself, entail that it is forever appropriate to appraise me as blameworthy for it. This becomes more evident especially when I have since apologized, made amends, been punished, and reconciled with the person I wronged.²³

On the assumption that I have bought you a new bike, experienced sufficient guilt, been sufficiently blamed, and been forgiven by you, wouldn't it follow that new entries are added to my ledger? Shouldn't it be the case that there is "less discredit" in it? And if there is less discredit in it, then doesn't it follow that I am less blameworthy (in the thin appraisability sense)? In this scenario, while a "previously" true assessment of my blameworthiness was based on the debit from my initial wrongdoing (*i.e.*, that I am fully blameworthy for the careless act of leaving your bike unlocked), there are new entries that contribute to "currently" true assessments of my blameworthiness (*i.e.*, that I am less blameworthy due to the guilt I felt, the punitive harmful blame I have undergone, the apology I offered, the replacement bike I purchased, and the effort I made to repair our relationship). I think while these new entries do not delete or remove the past entry (what I did and the degree to which I was blameworthy for it), they change substantially our overall assessment of my blameworthiness for what I did. I am no longer blameworthy, even in the thin appraisability sense of blameworthiness, when I have redeemed myself.

Now, if Feinberg and Zimmerman accept that the new entries can change the overall assessment of a person's blameworthiness for a particular action, then I will question the very practicality and usefulness of the moral ledger metaphor and the language of credit and discredit when it comes to blameworthiness. If the ledger view cannot tell us how to weigh a person's actions, responses, what they have undergone after committing the wrongful act, and how to arrive at a judgment about the person's current

²³ Khoury and Matheson (2018, p. 208) raise a similar objection to the ledger view. See also Matheson (2025, p. 678).

blameworthiness, then it fails to do the work we need a theory of diachronic moral blameworthiness to do. Zimmerman himself seems to acknowledge that these are epistemological assessments rather than moral ones:

First, it is clear that the terms ‘desert’ and ‘worthiness’ serve a purpose in the context of *inward* praise and blame different from that which they serve in the context of *overt* praise and blame. In the former context, someone is deserving or worthy of such praise or blame just in case it is correct, or true to the facts, so to praise or blame him. And it is correct so to judge him just in case he has a credit or debit in his ledger. [...] Here desert or worthiness is *not* a moral matter; rather, it is epistemological (a matter of true belief). (M. Zimmerman, 1988, p. 152)

But a satisfying account of blameworthiness that is relevant and applicable in morality should do more than merely expose us to epistemic truths about someone’s ledger and history. It must provide a framework for integrating a person’s history (with respect to both their earlier wrongdoing and how the person has since reacted to it) into a coherent overall evaluation of that person’s current moral status with respect to a past wrongdoing. This integration is crucial because, after all, we need some criteria for assessing whether the person is still blameworthy or not. These are the questions that matter in our actual moral lives, and any theory of diachronic blameworthiness that cannot answer them is incomplete. I conclude that the Moral Ledger Account appears to lack the structure to offer a plausible account of diachronic blameworthiness. It treats moral entries as static and flat. The ledger gives us a list, but it does not give us a verdict. It shows what has been done, but not what is now owed. This limitation makes this account, I think, fundamentally inadequate as a diachronic theory of moral blameworthiness. The Moral Ledger Account thus fails to establish the Hardliner’s Claim, and we must look elsewhere for a more satisfactory account.

2.5 The Reactive Attitudes and the Hardliner’s Claim

As I mentioned in Chapter I, I am assuming in this dissertation that a person is blameworthy for an action only if they had the relevant kind of

control of it, were aware of what they were doing, and manifested poor quality of will (ill will). Now, it is commonly thought that a person is blameworthy for an action if and only if they are a fitting target of reactive attitudes for that action. Some arguments from reactive attitudes accounts proceed by establishing that we have reason to think that reactive attitudes remain fitting forever, and we therefore have reason to conclude that blameworthiness lasts forever. In other words, because a person's manifested quality of will is a fixed fact, it will forever ground fitting reactive attitudes. In other words, there can always be reactive attitudes that fittingly track or represent that manifested quality of will, regardless of how much time has passed or what has happened since (Lee, 2025, pp. 13–14). The fittingness of blame, on this view, is anchored not in what the wrongdoer currently deserves or whether it would be beneficial to punish them now, but in the unchanging fact of the ill will they displayed when they acted.

From this perspective, a driver who deliberately honks their horn in front of a hospital while knowing that the patients need quiet, disregards the patients' well-being. Because of this, the driver is forever diachronically blameworthy because their bad quality of will (their ill will) will always make blame fitting. It will always be fitting for people to be indignant at this person. Note that, according to these accounts, blame can be purely non-punitive. What matters is that the driver's "ill will manifested in their actions is something fixed in the past and cannot change over time" (Lee, 2025, p. 4). That is what makes blame fitting. No apology, no guilt, no change of character, and no harm received can alter the fact that they acted with ill will on that occasion. It is fitting for me as a patient in that hospital to resent them for what they have done for as long as I am alive; and any third-party observer can fittingly blame them and feel indignation toward them forever.

Now, one question that we may raise here concerns the relationship between a person's moral blameworthiness and the fittingness of reactive attitudes. If being blameworthy just is to be a fitting target of reactive attitudes, then the argument is straightforward: since reactive attitudes are forever fitting, blameworthiness lasts forever too. According to what is called the *fit-value biconditional*, there is a very simple relationship between fitting reactive attitudes and moral blameworthiness: a person is blameworthy for a morally wrong action to a certain degree if and only if it is fitting to blame

the person for that action to that same degree (*e.g.*, Clarke, 2022; Howard, 2018, 2018, 2019; Khoury & Matheson, 2018; Matheson, 2025). On this view, blameworthiness and the fittingness of blame are strictly correlated: where blame is fitting, blameworthiness is present, and vice versa (Callard, 2017; Feinberg, 1970; Howard, 2018).²⁴

There are at least two different ways of understanding the fit-value biconditional. Both understandings accept that facts about the past will forever make our reactive attitudes fitting, and a wrongdoer is therefore forever blameworthy, *i.e.*, a fitting target of blame (Howard, 2023, p. 95). Where they differ is in what they take this permanence to entail for the blamer. Christopher Howard (2019, 2023) thinks it is always fitting for anyone to blame the wrongdoer at any time, without qualification. On his view, blame remains fitting for all blamers forever, and there are no conditions under which it becomes unfitting to blame a blameworthy wrongdoer. Randolph Clarke (2022, 2025), by contrast, holds a more intricate position. While he argues that it may, under certain conditions, become unfitting for a particular person to continue blaming a wrongdoer (*e.g.*, because of forgiveness, or the intensity of how they felt, or the expressed blame, or the cumulative amount of blame they have already directed at the wrongdoer), it is always fitting for *someone* (a potential blamer) to blame the wrongdoer, because the wrongdoer is forever guilty of having committed a wrongful act, and is therefore forever blameworthy (Clarke, 2022). My aim in this section is to examine each view carefully, to understand what makes them initially plausible, and to identify where I think they go wrong. I start by examining Howard's view, and then turn to Clarke's more qualified account.

2.5.1 Howard's View

According to the fit-value biconditional view about the relationship between the value or worthiness of something and the fitting reactive attitude toward it, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the evaluative quality of that thing and the fittingness of some reactive response to it. For instance, a

²⁴ Note that to accept the fit-value biconditional, one need not endorse the quality of will view.

partner is lovable only when it is fitting to love them and vice versa; a joke is laughable if and only if it is fitting to laugh at it; and posting on some social media platforms is regrettable if and only if it is fitting to regret it. The same pattern holds for morally loaded reactive attitudes: remorsefulness and remorse, blameworthiness and blame, praiseworthiness and praise, etc. So, a person is blameworthy to a certain degree if and only if it is fitting to blame them to that same degree for what they did.

For Howard, the fittingness of blame and a person's blameworthiness always go hand in hand. You cannot coherently say that it has become unfitting for someone to blame the driver who deliberately honked in front of the hospital without also acknowledging that the driver has ceased to be blameworthy for it. Any changes in whether it is fitting to blame the driver for *anyone* must track a change in the driver's moral blameworthiness and vice versa. There is, on Howard's understanding of the biconditional, no room for any divergence whereby our reactive attitudes do not track changes in the evaluation of their object.

Howard argues that attitudes remain fitting forever in a range of cases because there are always fit-making facts. And by "a range of cases," he means a range of evaluative responses like surprise, amusement, admiration, disgust, etc., as well as guilt, resentment, and indignation. He writes:

[I]n a range of cases in which the fit-making facts for an attitude persist, there's no change in the fact that they're fit-making, and those facts continue to make fitting the same intensity of attitude that they initially did. Since there can't be a change in the fittingness of an attitude if there's no change in the facts that make it fitting, or in the fact that those facts make the attitude fitting, it follows that, in a range of cases, our fitting feelings are fitting forever. (Howard, 2023, p. 93)

One can conclude now that the conditions under which a person becomes blameworthy (*i.e.*, synchronically blameworthy for an action to a certain degree) are thus fit-making facts: they are the facts that make reactive attitudes fitting in the first place. These facts include things like the wrongdoer's quality of will, their awareness of what they were doing, their freedom from coercion, and the harm or wrong they caused. Once these facts obtain, they remain forever intact; the past cannot be changed. And likewise, Howard argues, the reactive attitudes that track those facts remain forever

fitting. Since the fit-making facts are permanent, the fittingness of reactive attitudes is permanent, and therefore blameworthiness lasts forever.

It is important to note that for Howard, the claim is only that reactive attitudes are forever fitting; that is, that there is always a reason grounded in the fit-making facts to have and hold these attitudes. This claim, however, is carefully distinguished from two other claims: first, it does not mean that the expressions or manifestations of such attitudes are forever appropriate. One might have a fitting reactive attitude (resentment, for instance) toward a wrongdoer, without it being appropriate to express or act on that resentment in every circumstance. Second, it does not mean that we ought, all things considered, to blame a wrongdoer in any given circumstance, even if the reactive attitude remains fitting. The fit-making facts—*e.g.*, that the wrongdoer acted with control, awareness and poor quality of will—provide a blamer with one kind of reason (*i.e.*, a reason of fit) in favor of blaming the wrongdoer. What we all-things-considered have reason to do depends on a much broader range of considerations, such as the consequences of adopting or expressing the reactive attitude, the relationship between blamer and blamee, the passage of time, considerations of forgiveness, the wrongdoer's own responses, etc. Howard argues:

[I]f resentment is eternally fitting, but would seriously undermine your projects and goals, then very often you shouldn't continue to feel it. Likewise, if intense regret about a past choice is forever fitting, but continuing to feel it for the rest of your days would interfere with your ability to care for your children, then you should at some point cease to regret the choice, or at least regret it less, so that you're able to satisfy your obligations to your loved ones. [...] Since there can be cases where an emotion is fitting forever and since, in some of those cases, you shouldn't have the emotion forever, it follows that there can be facts irrelevant to the fittingness of an emotion that can contribute to determining whether you should, or may, have the emotion. (Howard, 2023, p. 96)

Similarly, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000, p. 75) point to the difference between the fittingness of an attitude and prudential and moral considerations about it, and argue that "the most blatant way to commit the moralistic fallacy is simply to infer, from the claim that it would be morally objectionable to feel *F* toward *X*, that therefore *F* is not a fitting response to *X*." The moralistic fallacy, for D'Arms and Jacobson, is the error of

assuming that if it would be morally bad, offensive, or inappropriate to have a certain response or reactive attitude, then that response cannot be fitting, correct, or warranted. It is a fallacy because it conflates moral evaluation with standards of correctness internal to a thing (like fittingness in emotion, or truth in belief). I may, for various other reasons, not express or manifest any blame toward the driver, but according to Howard it remains fitting for me to do so, due to the persistence of fit-making facts.

Now, one objection to Howard's argument is this. Not everyone accepts that reactive attitudes remain fitting forever in light of unchanging fit-making facts. For example, Jules Coleman and Alexander Sarch (2012) argue that it is possible for the fittingness of reactive attitudes to diminish over time, even while the blameworthiness itself remains constant. People remain blameworthy, Coleman and Sarch argue, regardless of how much time has passed or what the wrongdoer has done since committing the wrong, but such factors can nonetheless affect the fittingness of the reactive attitudes directed at them. In other words, the fittingness of reactive attitudes and the permanence of blameworthiness can come apart. They write:

If one is blameworthy now for performing some morally bad action, then one will generally still be just as blameworthy for having performed that action at any later point in one's life. [...] Matters are different for the reactive attitudes, however. While it may be entirely appropriate today, say, to resent someone for a particular misdeed, it will not necessarily be appropriate to resent that person for that misdeed five, ten, or fifty years on; and even when it is still appropriate to feel some resentment or indignation, the extent or depth of the emotions is often appropriately diminished as time goes by—quite apart from the steps the wrongdoer has or has not taken to atone for his mischief. (Coleman & Sarch, 2012, pp. 6–7)

This presents a direct challenge to Howard's assumption that the fittingness of reactive attitudes never changes and only tracks unchanging fit-making facts that belong to the past. If Coleman and Sarch are right that fittingness can change over time even while such facts are unchanged, then Howard's inference from the permanence of fit-making facts to the permanence of fitting reactive attitudes is challenged. And if that inference fails, then so too does the argument that blameworthiness lasts forever.

The idea that the fittingness of reactive attitudes and emotions can fade over time is also advocated by Brišlav Marušić (2022), who thinks there is

always a “double vision” when it comes to what an object is worthy of and how our emotions can fittingly track that worthiness over time. Marušić follows Jean-Paul Sartre in saying that, as human beings, we are both rational and embodied creatures, and that is why it is very often the case that “we still have the same reasons to grieve or be angry [as we are embodied creatures]; however, in virtue of, say, completing the emotional process of detachment, they are no longer forceful” (Marušić, 2022, pp. 110–111). Note that emotional detachment does not mean ceasing to care altogether; it means only that, through a natural process of accommodation, we gradually loosen our affective grip on the object of our emotion. In that sense, while the reasons for blame and the wrongdoer’s blameworthiness may still exist, those reasons become less action-guiding, less pressing, and less forceful over time. In other words, the reasons that originally made anger or grief fitting may remain unchanged; the wrong that was done is still a wrong; the loss that was suffered is still a loss. However, our emotional relationship to those reasons can change. And it is fitting for us to feel less angry when we have experienced anger for a long time, not because the object of anger has ceased to be worthy of it, but because we, as embodied and temporally situated beings, naturally and fittingly undergo processes of emotional resolution, detachment, or healing. This double vision between what is worthy of an emotion in principle and what it is fitting for us to feel given our embodied, temporal nature helps explain why reactive attitudes like blame can fittingly diminish over time without this diminishment implying that the wrongdoer has ceased to be blameworthy.

The objections raised by Coleman, Sarch, and Marušić pose a serious threat not only to Howard’s view but also to the fit-value biconditional itself. If the fittingness of reactive attitudes can diminish over time even when the degree of blameworthiness does not change, then there is not such a simple and straightforward relationship between blameworthiness and the fittingness of reactive attitudes after all. However, there are some accounts in the literature that accept the fit-value biconditional, but also hold that the original fit-making facts at the time of wrongdoing are only necessary for reactive attitudes to remain fitting in the future, and that if there are other fit-making facts—such as the fact that the wrongdoer has apologized, that they have made amends, that they have undergone genuine moral reform,

that they have had a change of heart, the passage of time, etc.,—then one can accept the biconditional while rejecting Howard’s conclusion that reactive attitudes are forever fitting.

Several philosophers in the literature have developed accounts along these lines. Andrew C. Khoury and Benjamin Matheson, for instance, argue that reactive attitudes become unfitting when a wrongdoer undergoes genuine moral reform or redeems himself (Khoury, 2022; Khoury & Matheson, 2018; Matheson, 2025). And Hannah Tierney (2022) holds that it is the fulfillment of all reparative duties that changes the scope of what remains fitting: once the wrongdoer has made full reparation, blame is no longer fitting.²⁵ These accounts allow that the fittingness of reactive attitudes can change over time in response to what the wrongdoer does or undergoes over time, and they reject the claim that once blame becomes fitting, it always remains fitting.

2.5.2 Clarke’s View

Randolph Clarke (2022, 2025) accepts that the experience of an emotion over time, or some other relevant factors such as forgiveness, can affect whether it is fitting for a particular blamer to target a wrongdoer with reactive attitude blame. But, similarly to Coleman and Sarch, he argues that this change in the fittingness of a blamer’s blame does not imply that there is any change in the blamee’s blameworthiness. What distinguishes Clarke’s account from the others is his emphasis on what he calls a wrongdoer’s *guilty status*. He writes:

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

²⁵ That said, it is not clear whether Tierney accepts the fit-value biconditional regarding *reactive attitudes* and blameworthiness (Tierney, 2022, p. 380, fn. 1-2). Tierney accepts the biconditional regarding fitting blame and blameworthiness, but since she is neutral on whether blame involves reactive attitudes, she may not accept the biconditional regarding fitting reactive attitudes and blameworthiness.

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, p. 2582)

For Clarke, once a person becomes guilty of a moral wrongdoing, they forever remain guilty of it. This guilty status is permanent, and it is this status that makes it fitting for anyone to blame the guilty person, even when it may no longer be fitting for the wrongdoer themselves to feel guilt, or for their victims to feel resentment toward them. Since any future instance of blame would be fitting in light of this permanent guilty status, Clarke concludes that a wrongdoer is forever blameworthy.

Clarke's understanding of the fit-value biconditional seems to include what happens over time in the criteria for what counts as fitting, and yet it remains faithful to the core idea that one is blameworthy if and only if one is a fitting target of blame (meaning someone's blame). With that specification, Clarke (2022, 2025) allows for a more intricate relationship between what can be fitting for a particular blamer, what can be fitting for any potential blamer, and a wrongdoer's permanent blameworthiness. Under certain conditions, such as feeling an emotion for a long time, it might become unfitting for a particular blamer to continue adopting reactive attitudes toward the wrongdoer. This, however, does not mean that the wrongdoer has ceased to be blameworthy. Clarke's understanding of the fit-value biconditional holds that there is a relationship between fitting reactive attitudes and blameworthiness, but this relationship does not hold for all blamers; for some, it might become unfitting, but since it is still (and forever) fitting for someone to blame the guilty person, blameworthiness always lasts forever. For Clarke, a wrongdoer is always guilty, and that is why it can always be fitting for someone in the future—perhaps someone who was not previously involved, or who has just learned of the wrongdoing—to blame the person for what they have done. The possibility of fitting blame remains open forever, even if it may currently be unfitting for some people to blame the wrongdoer. Clarke says:

[I]t can be fitting for a victim to become less resentful, or for an offender to feel less guilty, not because there has been a diminishment of blameworthiness, but because the emotion has already been experienced for some period of time. Although the consideration that provides a fittingness-making reason to blame has not changed, that consideration now provides (to one who has for some time blamed the

offender for this offense) a fittingness-making reason for diminished blame. (Third-party blame, it will be said, can likewise fittingly diminish when it is held for some period of time.) (Clarke, 2022, p. 2594)

Blameworthiness is not tracked by whether it is currently fitting for a particular person or a particular group to blame the wrongdoer, but rather by whether it would be fitting for at least some hypothetical blamer. And since it is always possible that someone could fittingly blame the wrongdoer in the future, blameworthiness remains constant, even as the fittingness of blaming for particular people diminishes. In holding this view, Clarke draws on Oded Na'aman's view that "emotions are rationally self-consuming: the longer they endure the less rational they become" (Na'aman, 2021, p. 2), and argues that this rational diminishment is relevant to what is fitting. Na'aman writes:

I propose that in cases of rationally self-consuming emotions, the duration of the emotion is part of the background conditions that explain why the fact that made the emotion fitting in the past no longer makes it fitting, or no longer makes fitting the same intensity of emotion. That I resented the injustice for a long time might be part of the rational explanation of the fitting diminution of my resentment without being the reason (or the fact that constitutes the reason) for my current resentment. The fact that constitutes the reason for whatever resentment I still harbor remains the injustice done to me; it constitutes a reason for milder resentment because I have already resented the injustice intensely in the past. (Na'aman, 2021, p. 8)

Building on Na'aman's view, Clarke argues that the fittingness of reactive attitudes can diminish over time. That is, even if such emotions were fitting in the first place, they may become unfitting if maintained with the same intensity over a long period of time.

In his (2025), Clarke responds to Matheson's worry about the case of a redeemed wrongdoer. Matheson (2025, pp. 671–672) describes such a person as someone who commits a minor theft early in life under conditions that make her blameworthy, but later apologizes, compensates the victim, reforms her character, earns forgiveness, reconciles with the victim, and is treated by the victim as fully trustworthy and redeemed. Matheson challenges Clarke to explain why, and on what grounds, such a redeemed wrongdoer

would still be blameworthy, *i.e.*, a fitting target of blame. Clarke responds by saying:

In the case of Redeemed Wrongdoer, it might be unfitting for the victim, having forgiven and reconciled with her, to have the attitude that I suggest you might have. But that does not imply that it is unfitting for you to have that attitude. [...] [O]ne's worthiness of blame for a given offense does not hinge on there actually being someone in a position to respond with fitting blame. If there could be someone in such a position, then one is blameworthy for that offense. If interminability is correct, then forever there could be. (Clarke, 2025, p. 762)

According to Clarke, the fittingness of various emotions, including blame, can diminish over time. But this shift in the fittingness of blame has nothing to do with the wrongdoer's blameworthiness. After all, a wrongdoer is forever guilty, and someone's blame—perhaps that of a new observer, or a future party who was not involved in the original wrong—could still be fitting on that basis. This holds even if the victim's resentment or the wrongdoer's guilt is no longer fitting. Blameworthiness, for Clarke, is thus not tied to whether any particular person's reactive attitudes remain fitting, but rather to whether it would be fitting for someone to blame the wrongdoer. And since that possibility remains open forever, blameworthiness is interminable.

With all of this said, I think Clarke's view faces a serious challenge, as he does not adequately differentiate between remaining guilty of committing a morally wrong action and remaining morally blameworthy for it. This, I believe, is problematic. Clarke says:

To my ear, 'I was guilty of that offense, but I am no longer guilty of it', (when the offense in question is some *particular* misdeed, rather than some *kind* of offense) is off, and off because it cannot be true. If I am no longer guilty of the offense, then I am not guilty of it. And 'I was guilty of that offense, but now I am not guilty of it' cannot be true. Similarly, if I am not guilty of an offense, then I am innocent of it. And 'I was guilty of that offense, but now I am innocent of it' cannot be true (again, as long as it is some particular misdeed that is in question). (Clarke, 2025, p. 760)

Clarke is correct in stating that once a person becomes guilty of an offense, they cannot become innocent of it. The past is fixed, and the fact

that someone did something wrong is a permanent feature of their history; this is an undeniable truth. However, he appears to be mistaken in equating this permanent guilt with ongoing moral blameworthiness. I will never be innocent of my past actions, in the sense that I cannot change what I did, but it does not follow that I will always be blameworthy for all of them. This is similar to my criticism of Zimmerman's view: the connection between one's past wrongdoing and one's status as guilty on the one hand, and one's current status as blameworthy on the other, is far from obvious on these accounts. The inference from "forever guilty" to "forever blameworthy" is not evident in Clarke's view (see also Carlsson, 2024, p. 682; Matheson, 2025, p. 678). To draw on my previous discussion of Zimmerman, I do not think that remaining guilty means that the person necessarily remains blameworthy in the thick sense that Zimmerman discusses, nor even in the thin, appraisability sense. A person may be forever guilty of what they did, but they need not be forever appraisability-blameworthy for it. These concepts are distinct.

I think we can plausibly argue that for at least some of our actions, particularly minor wrongs for which we have apologized, made amends, suffered and been harmed enough, we are no longer blameworthy. What happens over time matters morally. What we say (through apology, confession, expressions of regret) and what we do (through reparation, compensation) and what we undergo (through suffering, harm, punishment) in response to and in virtue of what we did in the past can change our moral status. It is true that someone in the future may, upon learning about what the driver did in front of the hospital, feel indignation. Their feeling may even be appropriate in a certain sense. But as Khoury and Matheson (2018, p. 215) point out, that appropriateness is merely epistemic. It is appropriate relative to the limited evidence the future person has at hand. They do not know the complete story about the driver: that the driver has since apologized, felt deep guilt, made reparations, reformed their character, and been forgiven. The future person's indignation corresponds to the evidence they possess, and that is why it is only epistemically appropriate, and not substantively or morally appropriate.

This is one of the points where, unlike Clarke, I do not think that a person's permanent status as guilty and their blameworthy status go hand in

hand. Although, as William Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*, “what is done, cannot be undone” (Act 3, Scene 2), and one’s status of being guilty of what one has done cannot be changed, one’s worthiness of reactive attitudes (and one’s blameworthy status) for that action can certainly change.²⁶ Although honking in front of the hospital makes the driver guilty of committing a morally wrong action, there are other facts such as the driver’s sincere apology, their guilt, their reparations, etc., that contribute to a change in their status from morally blameworthy to morally blameless. Guilty status may be permanent, but blameworthy status need not be.

2.6 Conclusion

I started this chapter with the Hardliner’s Claim: the claim that blameworthiness always (in all cases, without exception) lasts forever. I said that this claim has significant implications for how we think about moral responsibility, punishment, forgiveness, redemption, etc. To evaluate whether the Hardliner’s Claim is defensible, I presented two accounts and two arguments (inspired by the reactive attitudes view) that could be and, in some cases, have been offered in its support, and I examined each of them in detail to see whether they could successfully establish that blameworthiness always lasts forever. The first two accounts were the Ultimate Responsibility Account, which grounds blameworthiness in the claim that wrongdoers deserve eternal blame because their desert is inexhaustible, and the Moral Ledger Account, which ties blameworthiness to the permanent inscription of wrongdoings in a person’s moral ledger. Third, I considered two arguments according to which a wrongdoer’s blameworthiness is tied to reactive attitudes that forever remain fitting.

²⁶ Aside from the implausibility of the claim that since people will always remain guilty, they will always remain worthy of blame, I think that viewing blameworthiness in this way is not productive for moral life. We all make mistakes, but we also hope that we can make things right again, at least for our smaller mistakes. However, if we come to realize that no matter what we say or do to correct our mistakes and compensate for our wrongdoings, no matter how hard we try to engage with and reintegrate ourselves into our moral community after what we have done, we will always be blameworthy, then we may lose all motivation to redeem ourselves in any meaningful way. I do not believe that this way of looking at blameworthiness encourages people to lead moral lives. On the contrary, I think it is discouraging: it deters us from pursuing moral lives.

Each of these accounts, I argued, fails to convincingly establish the Hardliner's Claim. Against the Ultimate Responsibility Account, I argued that it is very often possible to give people what they deserve for their wrongdoing, and that when people have received what they deserve, especially in the case of minor wrongdoings, they no longer deserve further punitive blame. Desert for suffering and harm, in other words, has bounds, and once those bounds are met, blameworthiness can cease. Against the Moral Ledger Account, I questioned the significance of moral ledgers in determining the overall moral evaluation of a wrongdoer for a specific wrongdoing. I argued that it is not clear why our evaluation of a person's current moral blameworthiness for an action should be grounded solely on part of what is recorded in their ledger, without also taking into account the other entries and what has since occurred over time. Finally, I showed that Howard's version of the fit-value biconditional has its opponents in the literature, and that it is not obvious that only past fit-making facts make reactive attitudes fitting. There could be other fit-making facts at work. In discussing Clarke, I argued that it is far from evident that being guilty equates to being blameworthy.

Now, it seems that only for those wrongdoings for which we do not (or cannot) receive the punitive blame we deserve, and for which we are unable to redeem ourselves, make amends, or apologize before our death, might we remain a fitting target of blame forever. This suggests that a more plausible claim would be a revised version of the Hardliner's Claim: a claim asserting that while blameworthiness is not forever in all cases, there may nevertheless be *some* cases—perhaps cases of grave wrongdoing, cases where the wrongdoer has made no efforts to atone, and/or cases where the harm is so severe that no amount of guilt or reparation could fully discharge the debt—where wrongdoers can remain blameworthy forever. But if that is the case, then proponents of even this revised version of the Hardliner's Claim face a further challenge. They must show that blameworthiness can persist not only throughout a person's life, but also beyond their death. In other words, a revised version of the Hardliner's Claim needs to demonstrate how blameworthiness, understood in terms of fitting reactive attitudes, can extend beyond death. How can non-existent entities merit fitting reactive attitudes? What and who is the target of these fitting attitudes once the person has died?

Shouldn't it be the case that in order for an attitude to be a fitting response to a person, that person must exist in some meaningful sense? This is a serious complication for any version of the Hardliner's Claim that entails that blameworthiness can be literally forever. This revised version of the Hardliner's Claim, alongside the question of the very possibility of posthumous blameworthiness, will be central to the next chapter. There, I turn to two key questions: first, how and under what conditions diachronic blameworthiness can diminish or cease; and second, whether it is even possible for the existing views in the literature to assess the dead as blameworthy.

Chapter III

The Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the Hardliner's Claim and the idea that blameworthiness is static, and that once acquired, it persists forever. After examining the accounts and arguments offered in support of the Hardliner's Claim, I concluded that we must reject it and seek an alternative account of diachronic blameworthiness, one that allows for the possibility that blameworthiness can diminish or cease over time in response to what the wrongdoer does and what happens to them over time.

Blameworthiness is something that can diminish and cease over time if wrongdoers meet certain conditions, such as having sincerely apologized, performed reparations, undergone moral reform, felt enough guilt, and so on. Blameworthiness is also something that can extend beyond death in certain cases. First, there are cases where guilty persons cannot, in principle, do enough to atone before death due to the severity or irreparability of their actions. Consider, for instance, those responsible for genocide, mass atrocities, or other grave moral wrongs. The scale and nature of such wrongdoing may be so immense that no amount of guilt, reparation, or reform could fully discharge the moral debt incurred. In such cases, it seems implausible to say that these wrongdoers could ever become blameless.²⁷ Second, there are cases where, while it is in principle possible for a wrongdoer to atone and redeem themselves for a moral fault before death, the person fails to do so, whether due to insufficient effort, moral complacency, misfortune, or even premature death. A person might intend to apologize and make amends but die unexpectedly before they had the chance to do so, or they might simply neglect to do what is required and die with their moral debts unpaid. In both kinds of cases, we may contend that moral blameworthiness does not simply disappear at death; it persists beyond the grave. In other

²⁷ Hannah Arendt argues that punishing certain wrongdoers and criminals is basically impossible. According to her, when people commit what, following Immanuel Kant, she calls "radical evil," "we can neither punish [them enough] nor forgive [them for committing] such offenses" (Arendt, 1998, p. 241). This is because radical evil lies beyond the realm of human affairs, so no matter how long a person lives, they could never be punished enough (nor can they be forgiven, no matter what they do). If responsibility is desert for punishment, one can conclude that, according to Arendt, responsibility for radical evil is forever.

words, blameworthiness can diminish and be extinguished during life, but some wrongdoers die before that process is complete.²⁸

We are thus seeking an account of diachronic blameworthiness that can satisfy two crucial conditions. First, it must allow for the claim that blameworthiness can sometimes diminish and even cease entirely before death (the conclusion of the previous chapter). Second, it must allow for the possibility of cases where, if blameworthiness does not cease before death, due to either of the scenarios I just mentioned, then it extends beyond death.

In the contemporary responsibility literature, there are several influential views that at first glance seem well-positioned to fulfill both of these conditions. Each of them allows for the diminishment and potential cessation of blameworthiness during life, but each of them seems, at least initially, to also leave open the possibility that blameworthiness could persist after death in cases where the wrongdoer dies unreformed, unrepentant, or unredeemed. However, as I will show in this chapter, these views face an important challenge when it comes to explaining how the dead can be blameworthy. I will call this the *Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge*. If diachronic blameworthiness depends on the wrongdoer's current psychological or agentive features, such as possessing a flawed character, being capable of feeling deserved guilt, or having the capacity to fulfill reparative duties, then it appears that the dead cannot be blameworthy. The dead, after all, no longer exist as conscious agents; they possess no psychology, no capacity for emotion, no ability for action, and no features that could ground blameworthiness. I will show that none of the existing views in the diachronic blameworthiness literature can provide a coherent account of posthumous blameworthiness.

The chapter is structured as follows. In § 3.2, I discuss the first view of this kind, according to which blameworthiness diminishes and ceases when

²⁸ This highlights the importance of the length of a wrongdoer's lifetime in determining their blameworthiness when they die. In principle, according to views I discuss in this chapter, it is possible even for those who commit grave moral wrongs to become completely blameless during their lifetime (if they were to live, say, for a thousand years). If someone dies early, they cannot redeem themselves or feel enough guilt, though. The idea that blameworthiness is terminable seems most intuitive in cases of minor moral offenses, where, within a human lifespan, we can atone, make amends, and experience deserved guilt in a way that plausibly exhausts our blameworthiness.

a wrongdoer undergoes sufficient moral reform. On this view, genuine transformation of character, that is, becoming the kind of person who would no longer commit such wrongs, can reduce or eliminate blameworthiness. I then explain how the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge poses a problem for this view, how one of its proponents has tried to respond to it, and how, in my view, the challenge is still forceful. In § 3.3, I explain the second account, according to which one's blameworthiness diminishes and ceases when one has felt all the guilt that one deserves for one's wrongdoing. On this view, the suffering involved in feeling guilt is what the wrongdoer owes, and once they have suffered enough, they are no longer blameworthy. I follow the same pattern here and show why, despite the efforts of at least one of its proponents, the view still falls prey to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. In § 3.4, I turn to a third account, according to which blameworthiness diminishes and ceases when the wrongdoer fulfills all their reparative duties. This view ties blameworthiness to what the wrongdoer owes to their victims and to the moral community, and holds that once those debts are paid, blameworthiness is extinguished. While the main (and to the best of my knowledge, so far the only) proponent of this view, Hannah Tierney, has not yet addressed the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge, I explain how it poses a problem for her view as well. I then attempt to respond to the challenge on her behalf and conclude that the challenge still holds.

Note that in my discussion of these views, I will not object to their treatment of diachronic blameworthiness during the wrongdoer's lifetime. My concern and focus in this dissertation is rather with what they have to say (or fail to say) regarding the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. In § 3.5, I conclude the chapter by restating that we should look elsewhere for a satisfying account of diachronic blameworthiness, which can allow both for the diminishment and cessation of blameworthiness, and for posthumous blameworthiness. In the next chapter, I present my own favored account of blameworthiness, which I will argue fulfills that aim.

3.2 The Moral Reform Account

Moral reform, *i.e.*, positive changes in one's behavior and character, becoming a better person over time, and undergoing a genuine change of heart, plays a central role in our moral lives. When we see that someone who used to be a thief and a gang member has transformed and become a decent citizen living a morally upright life, we appreciate their transformation and reassess our moral judgments about them. We no longer see them in the same harsh light; we recognize that they are no longer the person who committed those various wrongs, and this recognition can shift how we think they should be treated.

This phenomenon is not limited to morality. In law, many jurisdictions recognize what (in the U.S., at least) is known as “good time” or “good conduct time,” *i.e.*, policies under which prisoners can have their sentences shortened if they demonstrate good behavior. Although a person can theoretically exhibit good behavior without undergoing any significant change in character (*i.e.*, they might simply be strategic or compliant), sustained good behavior over time often suggests deeper, more lasting changes in character and disposition. We value both the outward exhibition of good behavior and the inward turning toward the better, the genuine transformation of the person's character. Such change may also signal that a wrongdoer is no longer a threat to us, to the moral community, or to society at large. There is also significant emphasis on character reform in religious thought, and on how such reform affects responsibility for past actions. In Buddhism, the transformation of one's mind and the cultivation of virtue are seen as pathways to liberation from the consequences of past karma. Saint Augustine similarly understood moral reform as a transformation that occurs within a person: it is not simply a matter of altering one's actions or habits, but rather a reorientation of the will and a reshaping of what one desires (*Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter 5, No. 10).

In the contemporary responsibility literature, Derek Parfit, David Shoemaker, Andrew C. Khoury, Benjamin Matheson, and others have argued that moral reform directly affects whether blame remains fitting or appropriate over time (Glannon, 1998; Khoury & Matheson, 2018; Matheson, 2025; Parfit, 1971, [1984] 1986; D. Shoemaker, 2012).

Although these philosophers have each developed their own view of how one's changes in character shift the scope of one's responsibility, on Khoury and Matheson's (2018) account, what grounds diachronic blameworthiness is not simply the fact that a wrongdoer committed a wrong in the past, but also the retention of the character flaw that led to that wrong. As long as the wrongdoer retains that character flaw, as long as they remain the kind of person who would commit such wrongs, they remain responsible and blameworthy for what they did. Khoury and Matheson thus write:

It seems that whether blame is appropriately directed at a person at a time t must depend in some way on what that person is like at t . [...] [B]lameworthiness seems to involve a particular kind of criticizability—that is, a blameworthy individual is criticizable in light of a particular kind of flaw. A moral saint, however, is not so criticizable because she, by definition, lacks any such flaws. (Khoury & Matheson, 2018, p. 214)

When a wrongdoer undergoes genuine moral reform and no longer possesses the character flaw that grounded their past wrongdoing, they cease to be blameworthy, because the feature of their character that made blame fitting in the first place has been eliminated. Let us call this:

The Moral Reform Account: Once a person becomes blameworthy to a degree d for an action, omission, or outcome, their blameworthiness diminishes or ceases if and only if their psychology is less or no longer flawed.

Khoury and Matheson (2018) accept the so-called fit-value biconditional (*i.e.*, one is blameworthy if and only if one is a fitting target of reactive attitudes or blame appraisals), but argue that the fittingness of reactive attitudes and blame appraisals is contingent on what they call “distinctive psychology.” Distinctive psychology refers to a person's specific character traits and psychological features, such as intention, belief, desire, etc., which may result in their committing a morally wrong action. According to Khoury and Matheson, a person's blameworthiness, at the time of blame, hinges on that person possessing the same distinctive psychology that led them to commit the moral wrongdoing in the first place. This is because “blaming involves thinking or representing the subject to have a flaw. And a necessary condition of the subject being a worthy target of blame is the truth of this

thought or accuracy of this representation” (Khoury & Matheson, 2018, p. 222).

Khoury and Matheson draw upon the accounts of fitting blame in Rosen (2015) and Graham (2014). These accounts of fittingness share the view that reactive attitudes involve a thought, representation, or implicit judgment that makes the reactive attitude fitting or unfitting. In what is called the *Alethic view* of fittingness, resentment is fitting if and only if its constitutive thoughts and judgments are true. Rosen says:

Like all emotions, the reactive emotions involve belief-like mental states or thoughts. Fear involves the thought that one is in danger, misery the thought that things are going badly, and so on. These emotions are appropriate in the intended sense only when the relevant thoughts are true, and this suggests an analysis: for an emotion to be appropriate just is for its ingredient thoughts to be true. In particular, for it to be appropriate to resent X for A just is for the thoughts implicit in resentment to be true of X and A. (Rosen, 2015, p. 6)

According to the Alethic view, reactive attitude blame is fitting if and only if constitutive thoughts regarding a person’s moral responsibility are true.²⁹ Khoury and Matheson understand these constitutive thoughts to be about a flaw that led the blamee to perform a morally wrong action, and which the blamee still has. If the flaw no longer exists, the constitutive thought is no longer true, and that is why blame is not fitting anymore. And if one understands blame as a reactive emotion, it is fitting when it represents its object accurately.³⁰ For Khoury and Matheson,

blame involves a constituent thought or representation and blame is worthy just when that thought is true or that representation is accurate. For example, on some cognitivist accounts (e.g. the ledger theory), to blame is simply to make a particular kind of appraisal. Blame is worthy just when that appraisal is accurate. On some accounts in the Strawsonian tradition, blame is identified with a reactive emotion such

²⁹ This may seem too restrictive. For some of the obstacles such a view faces, see (Pál-Wallin, 2026)

³⁰ One can also interpret Khoury and Matheson as holding that blaming emotions or reactive attitudes (when expressed) do involve a “demand” directed at the wrongdoer: a demand for moral reform and for a change in character. On this reading, blame becomes unfitting when it no longer makes sense to demand such reform, namely when the person has already undergone genuine moral transformation and has eliminated the character flaw that grounded their blameworthiness in the first place.

as resentment. Emotions, in general, represent their objects to be a certain way and the object is a worthy target of the emotion just when that representation is accurate. Resentment, qua emotion, then, is worthy just when its constituent representation is accurate. (Khoury & Matheson, 2018, p. 222)

To illustrate, suppose that I was blameworthy for cheating on some tests I took during my early school years. Since then, however, I have worked to improve my character, have addressed the moral flaw that once led me to cheat, and am no longer the kind of person who would engage in such conduct. Back then, your blame was fitting because your implicit thought about my distinctive psychology was then true; it accurately represented the flaw in my character. But since I no longer possess that flaw, blaming me now would no longer be fitting. And if blame would no longer be fitting, then I am no longer blameworthy for what I did. It is important to note that, according to Khoury and Matheson, the retention of a flaw at the time of blame only matters when that flaw is relevant to the person's blameworthiness in the first place. Suppose that I lied to you a few years ago and, at the same time, I was a reckless person. Over time, I undergo some changes in character and lose my recklessness. According to Khoury and Matheson, I would still be considered blameworthy for the lying, as it stems from a different part of my psychology. As long as I retain the flaw that is relevant to my blameworthiness, I can be fittingly blamed.

One might now wonder if there are any ways to determine whether a wrongdoer still possesses the same flaw at the time of blame. This matters significantly if what makes blame fitting is the retention of the flaw. We can examine whether a person is still the same person (*i.e.*, with the same flawed character), according to an influential view, by checking if that person can still “relate to,” or “identify with,” the person they were in the past (the one who committed the wrongful act in the first place) (Parfit, 1971, [1984] 1986; D. Shoemaker, 2012). Of course, this is not the only way to determine whether a person has genuinely experienced moral reform, but one can take a “lack of identification” as a sign of genuine moral reform.

David Shoemaker argues that a wrongdoer is blameworthy for a past action only if they still identify with their wrongdoing, their past will and agency. He writes:

Identification with actions centrally requires a dependence relation running from action to will. [...] [I]dentification with wills centrally requires the expression of an agent's self via some shaping or dependence relation between a privileged subset of elements in the agent's volitional web (the real self) and the agent's will. [...] [I]dentification between a present agent and some past agent centrally requires a *similarity* relation between the privileged subsets of the current and past agents' volitional webs, a similarity relation that obtains in virtue of a causal dependence relation running from the present agent's real self to the past agent's real self. (D. Shoemaker, 2012, p. 125)

When these relations hold and the wrongdoer still identifies with their past self's action, will, and agency, Shoemaker (2012, p. 125) argues that "*that* [the past] agent's accountability may be transferred to the *current* agent in virtue of the current agent's identification." But if the wrongdoer undergoes sufficient moral reform, then they can no longer identify with their past actions, will, and agency, and therefore, are no longer accountable or blameworthy. Again, among many other signs, this may be counted as a sign of genuine moral reform.³¹

The Moral Reform Account thus holds that a wrongdoer's blameworthiness at the time of blame depends on whether they still possess the character flaw that contributed to their past wrongdoing. If the flaw is still present, they remain blameworthy; if it is not, they are no longer blameworthy.

³¹ Shoemaker does not explicitly talk about the notion of the fittingness of blame or the fit-value biconditional. Instead he refers to the appropriateness of blame, and says responsibility as accountability (*i.e.*, blameworthiness) is fundamentally a matter of identification. On his view, one cannot be an appropriate target of blame if one can no longer identify with what one did and who one was at the time of the wrongdoing. When a wrongdoer has undergone such profound moral change that they no longer see themselves in the person who committed the wrong, blame is no longer appropriate, because there is a meaningful sense in which they are no longer the same moral agent.

3.2.1 The Moral Reform Account and the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

Randolph Clarke (2022, 2025) raises a challenge for the Moral Reform Account: the challenge I introduced as the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge at the beginning of this chapter. He begins by noting that if Khoury and Matheson are correct in claiming that a person is blameworthy for a past wrongdoing only if that person still possesses the flaw that made them blameworthy in the first place, then death will terminate blameworthiness (Clarke, 2022, p. 2585). Khoury and Matheson (2018, p. 208) say explicitly in their paper that “the property of being a fast swimmer is a property that can diminish and is ultimately lost across time (at death, if not before). The property of being blameworthy, we argue, is as well.” So, they think the property of being blameworthy is lost at death. Clarke argues that we need strong reasons to accept such a conclusion, as it would render the dead blameless; a result that strikes him as counterintuitive. He writes:

[Khoury and Matheson’s view] has an incredible consequence. Death, if it is annihilation, extinguishes all of one’s psychological attitudes. The claim in question then implies that death likewise extinguishes blameworthiness. But in blaming the villains of the past, we do not represent them as now having bad attitudes—we are not so confused—and we do not always misrepresent them. Our blame of them is not always unfitting. They have not ceased to be worthy of blame. (Clarke, 2022, pp. 2585–2586)

For Clarke, whether the dead are blameworthy or not is not just a linguistic dispute. It is about whether our judgements about their blameworthiness are true and whether it can be fitting to blame them. It is also about judgements about praiseworthiness and whether admiring the dead can be fitting. According to Clarke (2025, p. 755): “Frederick Douglas [who] is greatly admired these days [...] need not exist now for that to be so. Further, if our admiration of him is fitting—and I submit that it is—then he is admirable.” Clarke believes that our ordinary way of blaming the dead reaffirms that they can be blameworthy. I agree. However, when we blame infamous historical figures like Adolf Hitler, we do not implicitly attribute objectionable flaws to their characters; the dead have no character whatsoever. We nevertheless find them blameworthy now, and our

judgments about their blameworthiness are true. This way of understanding posthumous blameworthiness contrasts with the odd consequence of Khoury's and Matheson's view that Hitler was blameworthy only until his death. Clarke writes:

The question, then, is what can be truly predicated of him. One thing that we can truly say is that he is dead. We can truly say, as well, that he is the subject of numerous biographies and the object of many of our attitudes. Some of our attitudes toward him are fitting; our true beliefs about him are. If our blame of him can be fitting, he is blameworthy. He need not exist now for any of this to be so. (Clarke, 2022, p. 2586)

As I explained in the previous chapter, Clarke argues that blameworthiness is forever. Hence, the dead remain (and must remain) blameworthy for their wrongdoings. According to Clarke, a person's blameworthiness for a wrongdoing is grounded not in their current character, but in the permanent fact that they were and are guilty of the wrongdoing. This status remains forever.

3.2.2 Matheson's Response to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

To my knowledge, Khoury has not addressed the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge, but Matheson (2025) responds to the challenge by drawing a distinction between the blameworthiness of the dead and the fittingness of blaming the dead. While the dead cannot be blameworthy, he argues, blaming the dead can nevertheless remain fitting. This is because, Matheson contends, posthumous blame pertains to the individual's psychological state when they were a moral agent, not to whether they are an agent now. In blaming the dead, we are not attributing a character flaw to their current psychology. Instead, in blaming the dead, we are blaming the past individual, a once-living person who possessed a character flaw, who was blameworthy at the time of their death, and whose actions and character warrant our blame now (Matheson, 2025, p. 681).

What I take from Matheson's response is that it is fitting to blame a living guilty person only while they possess the relevant character flaw. In the case of the dead, however, the situation is different. It remains fitting to blame

the dead if they had the flaw at the time of death, even though they no longer possess it (or any other properties) now. As Matheson puts it,

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. (Matheson, 2025, p. 681)

One could resist Matheson's further claim that, when we blame Hitler, we are merely expressing the belief that he *was* blameworthy (Clarke 2025). A more natural interpretation, it seems to me, is that in blaming him we express the judgment that he *is* blameworthy. Our ordinary practices of blame do not typically distinguish between *was* blameworthy and *is* blameworthy in the way that Matheson's account requires. Rather, they seem to involve the ascription of blameworthiness in a way that presents it as presently attributable, even if grounded in past actions. Matheson, however, treats this disagreement as "terminological," writing:

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. (Matheson, 2025, p. 681)

Matheson maintains that even if we sometimes speak as though Hitler is blameworthy, what we in fact mean is that he *was* blameworthy. On his view, ordinary language here is somewhat loose; our present-tense attributions do not commit us to the claim that Hitler currently bears blameworthiness. For that reason, Matheson argues that blaming Hitler does not require treating him as presently blameworthy.

3.2.3 Why Matheson's Response Fails

Suppose that we accept what Matheson says about blaming the dead: that it remains fitting to blame the dead because the deceased person was once blameworthy, namely, prior to their death. A serious problem with this view is that, by the same logic, one could argue that it remains fitting to blame all

morally reformed wrongdoers (*i.e.*, wrongdoers who no longer retain the character flaw that led to their past wrongdoing). After all, it remains permanently and unchangeably true that all such wrongdoers were blameworthy at some point in their past. If blame can be made fitting by a past flawed distinctive psychology in the case of the dead, then why can't it do the same in the case of the living reformed wrongdoer? Unless Matheson shows why we should treat the fittingness of blame in the case of the living and the dead differently, the claim that we can fittingly blame the dead in virtue of their past blameworthiness seems problematic. It threatens the Moral Reform Account with collapse: it becomes unclear why reformed wrongdoers cannot be fittingly blamed just because they no longer possess the relevant flaw, since the dead can be fittingly blamed even though they no longer possess anything at all.

Matheson does suggest that there is a relevant difference between the case of the living and the case of the dead. He writes that "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" (Matheson, 2025, p. 681). In other words, the living reformed wrongdoer has removed the relevant flaw from their character, and so our evaluation of them should track these new properties rather than their past blameworthiness. The dead, by contrast, have no current evaluative properties at all, and so the only thing our evaluation can be about is their past. This is not convincing, I think. It is not clear why the presence of new evaluative properties in the reformed wrongdoer should make it unfitting to blame them for their past, while the absence of any evaluative properties in the dead should make it fitting to blame them for what they did in the past. If anything, one might think the situation is reversed: if blame represents evaluative properties, and the dead have none, then blame should be unfitting toward them. Matheson's response does not adequately explain why past blameworthiness grounds fitting blame in one case but not in the other, and it leaves the view vulnerable to the charge of inconsistency.

If I am right in my criticism, Matheson faces a dilemma. One horn of the dilemma is this: if facts about the past can, in principle, forever ground the fittingness of blame for the dead, then why should we treat the living any differently? In that case, any living wrongdoer will forever remain

blameworthy. The other horn of the dilemma is that, if what determines whether blaming a person is fitting is the wrongdoer's current distinctive psychology, then Matheson cannot coherently talk about it being fitting to blame the dead: if a living person is a fitting target of blame at a given moment only insofar as they possess the relevant flaw, then once they die—or even prior to their death, while in their death throes—they cease to be a fitting target of blame, since they lose their moral agency, lack any psychological states or capacities for a moral response, and ultimately there is no longer any moral being to whom we can fittingly attribute blame.³² Neither option seems plausible. That is why, I think, he fails to adequately respond to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge.

3.3 The Moral Guilt Account

Apart from the role played by moral reform, important roles in our moral lives are played by guilty feelings, regret, remorse, and other self-directed forms of blame. This has roots in theology. For Aquinas, for instance, feeling guilty for sinning starts with conscience, and conscience is an act of practical reason applying moral knowledge to a concrete action. This is why conscience can accuse and even torment us after we have done something wrong. On Aquinas's account, the sting we feel is not supposed to be mere self-loathing. Ideally, it becomes contrition: a voluntary sorrow for sin that leads to repentance and amendment. Contrition, for Aquinas, belongs to the virtue of penance (*Summa Theologiae*, supplementum, Q. 1, Art. 1–3).

In the contemporary literature on moral responsibility, Douglas Portmore (2019) and Andreas Brekke Carlsson (2017, 2022, 2024) argue that moral blameworthiness is all about the *guilt* a person deserves to feel. For Carlsson (2022, p. 190), “an agent is blameworthy [...] because she deserves to feel guilt. Deserving guilt is both a necessary and sufficient condition on being blameworthy.” And according to Portmore (2019, p. 14), “a subject can be accountable for having ϕ -ed only if she deserves to

³² This may also apply to other dispositions or attitudes toward the dead. A departed romantic partner no longer has the qualities that made them lovable; they no longer exist. That, however, does not seem to make loving one's deceased partner unfitting.

experience the relevant feeling (pride or guilt) for having ϕ -ed.” Let us call this:

The Moral Guilt Account: Once a person becomes blameworthy to a degree d for an action, omission, or outcome, their blameworthiness diminishes or ceases if and only if they deserve less or no guilt for it.

On this account, the primary mode of blame relevant to blameworthiness is self-directed blame (guilt). Importantly, this kind of blame is not communicative; no one (neither the victim nor a third-party blamer) addresses the wrongdoer; Rather, blame is an internal, affective response that the wrongdoer experiences as a form of suffering. Guilt, on this account, has a retributive function, it is painful, and that pain is what the wrongdoer deserves.

As far as I am aware, Portmore has not discussed the diachronic dimension of guilt and how feeling guilt over time influences accountability on this view. But for Carlsson, feeling deserved guilt corresponds to the diminishment and cessation of diachronic blameworthiness over time. Carlsson writes:

A blameworthy agent deserves to feel a certain amount of guilt. When she has experienced the right amount of guilt, she has gotten what she deserves. It is no longer just and non-instrumentally good that she suffers the pain of guilt. Since being blameworthy on DG [deserved guilt view] is to deserve feeling guilt, this means that the agent is no longer blameworthy. Moreover, the fact that she already has experienced some but not all of the guilt she deserves makes her less blameworthy than she otherwise would have been. (Carlsson, 2022, p. 193)

To illustrate the contrast between the Moral Guilt Account and the Moral Reform Account, suppose that I am blameworthy for failing to fulfill my promise to take care of your cat while you were away on a short trip. A few months ago, I recognized that I have a character flaw, *e.g.*, a tendency toward carelessness and lack of commitment, and I went to a therapist to work on this flaw. After a lot of sessions, I have now managed to remove this flaw from my character. I am no longer the careless person I once was, yet I still feel no guilt for failing to fulfill my promise to you. According to the Moral Reform Account, it is no longer fitting for you to blame me in the

second case because I no longer possess the character flaw that made me fail to fulfill my promise to you (Khoury & Matheson, 2018, p. 215). My moral reform has extinguished my blameworthiness, even though I never felt guilt. On the Moral Guilt Account, in contrast, I still deserve to feel guilt and therefore remain blameworthy. On Carlsson's view, I remain blameworthy until I have felt the guilt I deserve, regardless of whether I have reformed my character.³³ Carlsson says:

[O]ne can cease to be blameworthy without the disappearance of a flaw being either sufficient or necessary: agents can remain blameworthy even though they no longer have the flaw. A person who simply loses a flaw by accident or takes a pill in order to remove the flaw so that they can avoid appropriate blame in the future will remain blameworthy because they still deserve to feel guilty. On the other hand, an agent may cease being blameworthy even though he still has the same flaw so long as he has experienced the right amount of guilt. (Carlsson, 2022, p. 193)

The core idea behind the Moral Guilt Account is thus that blameworthiness is fundamentally tied to the suffering involved in feeling guilt, that is, to the guilt one deserves to experience. A guilty person remains blameworthy for an action, omission, or outcome until they have endured this deserved guilt, and once they have felt all the guilt they deserve for it, they are no longer blameworthy for it.³⁴

³³ Although we might interpret genuine remorse as evidence of moral reform, I contend that one can experience remorse or guilt without undergoing any moral transformation. This becomes especially evident in cases where wrongdoers recognize the harm of their actions, and even express a willingness to change, yet remain unable to do so. Their remorse may be sincere, but it does not necessarily reflect a deep shift in moral character or values. In such cases, the person may feel profound guilt yet still retain the same underlying psychology and moral disposition as before. Thus, remorse alone is not a reliable indicator of moral reform.

³⁴ Feeling guilt over time has similar implications in criminal law. Many studies affirm that if a criminal expresses remorse and guilt, this can potentially influence the sentence they receive (Bandes, 2016; Bennett, 2016; Maslen, 2017). Defense attorneys often present evidence of mitigating factors to humanize the defendant. Showing that the defendant feels genuine remorse and guilt can be interpreted providing such evidence. Moreover, Robert D. Hare (2003) argues that the fact that a criminal can feel guilt and remorse for what they have committed shows that they are liable and have the mental capacity for being legally held responsible for it.

3.3.1 The Moral Guilt Account and the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

Clarke argues that the Moral Guilt Account faces a problem with respect to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge, similar to that faced by the Moral Reform Account. He points out that if blameworthiness is understood as a matter of deserving to feel guilt, then it must cease entirely after death. This is because the dead cannot feel guilt; they lack the consciousness and sentience required for any kind of suffering.

Recall that in § 2.3, I said that there are conditions for interminable desert for suffering. I said that if there is no afterlife, then one cannot deserve suffering after death because one cannot suffer after one's death. In a similar vein, Clarke's objection is that if blameworthiness is only a matter of deserved guilt, then the dead will fall outside the scope of blameworthiness altogether. The Moral Guilt Account would thus lead to the same counterintuitive consequence as Khoury and Matheson's, *i.e.*, that even the most heinous wrongdoers like Hitler cease to be blameworthy the moment they die. As Clarke puts it:

If the dead no longer exist, they are no longer capable of feeling guilt or experiencing any form of suffering. They then no longer deserve to undergo those experiences. One who deserves to feel guilt has a reason to feel guilty; one who deserves to experience suffering has a reason to experience—or a reason to bring it about that she experience, or a reason to permit it to be brought about that she experience—that suffering. But the no-longer-existing dead have no such reasons. Hence, they no longer deserve to suffer. Then, given the view that one is blameworthy only if one deserves to experience some form of suffering for what one has done (and our assumption about death), it would follow that the dead are not blameworthy for anything. Our blame of them would in every case be unfitting. Evidently it is not. Many of the dead are blameworthy for many things. Our blaming attitudes toward them are sometimes fitting; and that suffices for their being blameworthy. (Clarke, 2022, p. 2591)

I agree with Clarke that this implication conflicts sharply with our common moral judgments and practices. We often take many of the dead, particularly those who committed grave wrongs and died unrepentant, to still be blameworthy. We continue to condemn historical figures like Stalin and Pol Pot, and we do not think that they were blameworthy only until their

deaths. If the Moral Guilt Account entails that the dead cannot be blameworthy, then it fails to capture an important part of our blaming practices.

3.3.2 Carlsson's Response to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

Carlsson (2024) offers a response to Clarke. Carlsson addresses the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge on two fronts: first, by explaining how his account can make sense of posthumous blame, and second, by considering how posthumous blameworthiness might, in principle, be incorporated into his view. He explains:

It is not obvious that the dead are blameworthy, given that they no longer exist. It seems plausible that when we blame the dead, we're blaming the person who once was. Compare our fond feelings for the dead. It's not that we have fond feelings for something that no longer exists; it's that we have fond feelings for that person who once was. If this is right, we might say that many of the dead were blameworthy because they didn't experience in life the suffering they deserved, and it is fitting to blame them now in virtue of their past blameworthiness. [...] [T]he dead who were blameworthy also deserved to feel guilty while they were alive. (Carlsson, 2024, pp. 682–683)

This is similar to Matheson's response to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge; the strategy here is to reconcile the claim that the dead cannot be blameworthy with the intuition that it can nevertheless remain fitting to blame them. Carlsson then adds that his view could accommodate the claim that the dead can also be blameworthy. He writes:

A living person is blameworthy for an action to the extent that she deserves to feel guilty for that action. A dead person, I suggest, is blameworthy for an action to the extent she deserved to feel guilty for that action when she died. A dead person can be blameworthy now and forever in virtue of the possession of a particular past property, namely the property of being deserving of guilt at the moment of death. This would explain how the dead can be blameworthy and why it is appropriate to blame (some of) the dead (to some degree). (Carlsson, 2024, p. 683)

According to Carlsson, Hitler could thus still be blameworthy today because he never experienced the guilt he deserved prior to his death. In other words, Hitler's continued blameworthiness is tied to the fact that his death prevented him from fully experiencing the deserved guilt that his atrocious actions warranted. Our moral assessment and blame, on Carlsson's view, reach back to the period when Hitler was alive and deserved guilt; they represent the fact that he deserved to feel guilt and died without having felt all of it. On this view, it would be fitting to blame Hitler now because of what he deserved then.

3.3.3 Why Carlsson's Response Fails

Similarly to the Moral Reform Account, according to the Moral Guilt Account, the dead are supposed to be fitting targets of blame if they deserved to feel guilt to some degree when they died. But unlike the Moral Reform Account, the Moral Guilt Account situates blameworthiness within a temporal process. This process begins with the commission of a morally wrong action and the incurring of a debt of guilt; it then extends through the person's life as they either do or do not pay that debt by feeling the guilt they deserve; then it finally ends at death. Blameworthiness, on this view, is tied to what the person has experienced "over time," not merely to what they are like at any particular time.

Due to its focus on the process that the wrongdoer has undergone since becoming blameworthy, Carlsson's view avoids the first horn of the dilemma faced by Matheson's view. If, as Carlsson contends, the diminishment of blameworthiness occurs gradually over time, then what matters is not only the historical fact that they deserved guilt to a certain degree, but also the amount of guilt they have actually experienced over time, until now. Blameworthiness is diminished and eventually ceases as the wrongdoer feels the guilt they owe, and it persists only insofar as there remains a gap between what was deserved and what has been felt. Ultimately, a person's blameworthiness at later moments, or at the time of their death, is determined by the *remaining* deserved guilt, rather than by their initial status as blameworthy and deserving of guilt. It is precisely because of the process-oriented character of Carlsson's view that he avoids the first horn of the dilemma. We cannot simply infer that because it is fitting to blame a deceased

person to degree d (on the grounds that they deserved guilt to degree d at the moment of their death), it is also fitting to blame a living person to degree d , simply because they deserved guilt to degree d at some particular point in the past. For Carlsson, what matters is not just whether the person deserved guilt at some moment, but whether they have since felt some of the guilt they deserved. If they have, their blameworthiness diminishes accordingly. If they have not, it persists.

However, Carlsson's view still cannot overcome the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. If blameworthiness is grounded in remaining deserved guilt, then it becomes unclear how the dead could be blameworthy. After all, once a person has died, no more guilt can be experienced. The dead no longer exist as conscious, sentient beings, and they therefore cannot deserve to feel guilt. The dead, quite obviously, can no longer feel guilt. They are no longer agents with capacities as such. If, as Carlsson contends, remaining desert of guilt is necessary for blameworthiness, then the dead cannot be blameworthy.³⁵ To deserve guilt, one must exist. Only the living can deserve guilt; the dead cannot. In addition to what we may call the *existence requirement* for deserving guilt, one might add the *experience condition*: to deserve guilt, one must have the capacity to experience it. When my friend dies, they cannot experience guilt. If they no longer have the capacity to experience guilt, they cannot deserve it.³⁶ We can also incorporate the *rationality condition* into this. Clarke (2022, p. 2591) believes that to deserve any form of suffering like guilt, one must have a *reason* to feel or

³⁵ This holds true unless one believes in an afterlife. In Abrahamic religions, death does not entail annihilation, and the dead may continue to deserve suffering and guilt. In fact, not only do they deserve suffering, but also the amount of suffering they deserve can diminish or cease in accordance with the degree to which they have suffered posthumously. At some point, they might no longer deserve it.

³⁶ This argument extends to other self-directed emotions such as remorse and regret: for a self-directed emotion to be fitting and deserved, a person must have the capacity for firsthand experiences of it. One might contend, for example, that a certain person still deserves praise or admiration, even if they cannot relish the pleasure of receiving it. Some of the dead deserve praise. Yet, I maintain that emotions like pride and guilt inherently require a conscious experience for them to be fitting and deserved. The dead cannot deserve pride. Similarly, we cannot attribute deserved pride to someone in a deep coma, nor can we fittingly attribute deserved guilt to them. Only when that person emerges from their vegetative state and regains the ability to experience do they become truly capable of, and thus deserving of, such self-directed emotions.

experience that suffering. However, my deceased friend neither has nor can have a reason to feel guilt. If they do not and cannot have a reason to feel guilt, then they do not (nor can they) deserve it.

Consequently, Carlsson cannot adequately respond to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. He cannot explain how Hitler or any deceased wrongdoer can be currently blameworthy, because for Carlsson, (a) the reference of the dead's blameworthiness is tied to a desert that exists only in the past (they deserved to feel guilt while alive, and died before feeling all of it), and (b) the content of that desert is limited to guilt: a form of suffering that requires conscious experience and which the dead are incapable of undergoing. The explanation of posthumous blameworthiness within Carlsson's framework is an unsuccessful *ad hoc* addition to his view. His account, along with Portmore's, was not originally intended to cover cases of the dead, and that is precisely why, I think, it fails when extended in this direction.

3.4 The Reparative Duties Account

Apart from moral reform and feeling guilt, it seems plausible that redemption, reparation, compensation, and making amends also play significant roles in our moral lives. These responses to wrongdoing are not merely peripheral or optional; they are central to how we understand moral recovery, the restoration of relationships, and the reintegration of wrongdoers into the moral community. There are also clear traces of such importance in both religious and legal contexts. In religious traditions, the idea that wrongdoers must make reparations is pervasive. In Christian theology, Thomas Aquinas argues that restitution is required by commutative justice and necessary for the forgiveness of sins.³⁷ He states that one cannot be absolved of sin without making restitution (or at least forming a genuine intention to do so) when it is possible to repair the harm caused (*Summa Theologiae*, II–III, Q. 62, Art. 1–8). For Aquinas, repentance alone is insufficient if the wrongdoer has the means to restore what was taken or repair what was damaged. The obligation to make restitution arises from the

³⁷ Communitive justice is a form of justice that governs fair exchanges and the rectification of wrongs between individuals.

nature of justice itself, and if one has wrongfully deprived another of their goods or has harmed them, one owes them reparation, and this debt must be paid before one can be reconciled with God.

In law, too, the United Nations' "Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power" (1985), recognizes that offenders have obligations to compensate, repay, and make amends for the harm they have caused to others. When they fulfill these obligations, they demonstrate accountability and contribute to the restoration of justice, not only for the victims who have been wronged but also for the broader community that has been affected by the crime. In almost all legal systems around the world, fulfilling reparative duties, such as paying compensation, performing community service, or engaging in restorative justice processes, can lead to reduced sentences, eligibility for parole, or other forms of leniency.

In the moral responsibility literature, Hannah Tierney (2022) has argued that it is only the tangible and concrete actions of reparation that diminish or cease one's blameworthiness for a past morally wrong action. Wrongdoers must undertake certain actions to rectify their past, to redeem themselves from what they have done. For Tierney, reparation is not primarily a matter of psychological transformation or feelings of guilt (though these may be morally relevant), but rather a matter of what the wrongdoer actually does to repair the harm they have caused. I shall call this:

The Reparative Duties Account: Once a person becomes blameworthy to a degree d for an action, omission, or outcome, their blameworthiness diminishes or ceases if and only if they have less or no reparative duties left.

When a person commits a morally wrong action, they incur moral duties toward their victims: duties or obligations to repair the harm, to compensate for losses, to acknowledge the wrong, and to take steps to restore what has been damaged. Tierney (2022, p. 395) maintains that what matters for diachronic blameworthiness is to what extent the wrongdoer fulfills these obligations, how they redeem themselves, and how they repair the damage they have caused. We demand and expect that a wrongdoer takes concrete actions to make amends. And importantly, blame for Tierney (2022, p. 391) is a demand to fulfill such duties and repair what has been damaged. Although

reparative actions often stem from the moral reform that wrongdoers undergo, the central claim of the Reparative Duties Account is that once wrongdoers redeem themselves and fulfill all the reparative duties owed in virtue of their wrongdoing, their degree of blameworthiness changes. They may even cease to be blameworthy for their past actions entirely, if they no longer owe anything to their victims. In such a scenario, there is no point in further demanding the fulfillment of duties, as blame is not fitting anymore: the wrongdoer's moral debt has been already paid, the obligations discharged, and there is nothing left to hold against them.

Drawing on Linda Radzik's *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (2009), Tierney writes:

[A]gents who are blameworthy for performing wrong actions must fulfil a set of reparative obligations in virtue of their culpable wrongdoing and agents who must fulfil reparative obligations in virtue of culpably doing wrong are blameworthy for this wrong. So, if an agent is blameworthy for a past wrong, then they will continue to be blameworthy at future times if it continues to be true that they must fulfil their reparative obligations. [...] However, once an agent fulfils these reparative obligations, it will be false that they must continue to fulfil them, and they will cease to be blameworthy and the fitting target of blame. So, the degree to which blameworthy agents fulfil their reparative obligations will impact the degree to which they are blameworthy, such that the more one does to fulfil these obligations, the less blameworthy they become. (Tierney, 2022, pp. 394–395)

To illustrate her point, Tierney prompts us to consider “the gardener case.” This case is presented in various versions in her paper, but the version I quote below encapsulates all the previously outlined essential elements. Tierney writes:

[*The Gardener Case*.] Edie asks her friend Jackie to care for her houseplants while she's travelling for work. Edie loves her houseplants very much and writes up detailed instructions for Jackie on how to care for them. But Jackie never reads the instructions, exhibiting a culpable degree of carelessness. Jackie waters the plants twice a day, which she would have known is far too often if she had read Edie's instructions. As the plants start to die from overwatering, Jackie realizes the error in her ways and feels incredibly guilty for being so careless with her friend's plants. She disavows her careless ways and takes immediate action towards becoming a more attentive friend. By the time Edie returns home, Jackie has experienced precisely the right amount of guilt she

deserved to feel in virtue of her carelessness and has evolved into an attentive and caring person. As soon as Edie walks in the door, Jackie tells Edie that she's overwatered the plants because she carelessly didn't read Edie's instructions and that she feels incredibly guilty for doing so. She also tells her how much more attentive and caring she's become since Edie left town. Upon hearing Jackie's confession, Edie blames Jackie for being so careless. In response, Jackie apologizes profusely, offers to buy her new houseplants, and promises to be a more attentive plant sitter in the future. (Tierney, 2022, p. 390)

In this scenario, Jackie has already undergone genuine moral reform and has experienced the appropriate amount of guilt for her wrongdoing. She is no longer the person she was when she committed the wrong, and she has suffered emotionally in recognition of what she did. Yet, according to Tierney, Jackie remains blameworthy. The reason is that her blameworthiness is not exhausted by reform or guilt alone; it is sustained by the reparative obligations she still owes to her victim, Edie. Until these duties are fully met, and until Jackie has actually done what she owes to repair the harm, compensate Edie, and restore what was lost or damaged, her moral record remains unsettled. On Tierney's view, then, reparation is incomplete without the performance of reparative actions that acknowledge and address the harm done. Blameworthiness is tied not only to who the wrongdoer is or what they feel, but also to what they have done to make things right; and as long as those obligations remain unfulfilled, the wrongdoer remains blameworthy. Tierney adds:

We often continue to blame those who wrong us, even when we know they have changed significantly and feel guilty for what they've done; this is particularly true when we first learn that someone has wronged us through their expression of reform and remorse. [...] [I]t would also be bizarre if Jackie objected to being blamed in the expressively reformed and remorseful gardener case. Often, moral reform prompts us to confess to those we've wronged, and express guilt for what we've done, in order to give them the opportunity to blame us, not to shield ourselves from their blame. Presumably, this is because we think it is fitting for our victims to blame us. (Tierney, 2022, pp. 390–391)

Matheson (2025) embraces a similar approach to defining diachronic blameworthiness. He develops his view on moral reform (the one presented in his coauthored paper with Khoury) and argues that a "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” (Matheson, 2025, p. 684). While, for Matheson, the underlying foundation of all this remains moral reform, he emphasizes “the process of redemption” in these passages, and outlines it in the following way:

Suppose a person commits a minor wrong—such as a theft—early in her life. In committing this theft, [...] [let us suppose that] 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. [...] In short, the wrong has been rectified and the wrongdoer has been redeemed. (Matheson, 2025, pp. 671–672)

What Tierney, Radzik, and certain passages from Matheson suggest arguably points to a central insight that is highlighted by the Reparative Duties Account: when a person has genuinely redeemed themselves and fulfilled all their reparative duties, they no longer owe anything to their victims. Further demands are obsolete and blame is not fitting. In this state, things are settled, the moral debt has been paid, the harm has been addressed to the greatest extent possible, and the wrongdoer has done what morality requires. As a result, the person is no longer blameworthy for their past actions; there is nothing left to hold against them; no outstanding obligation remains unfulfilled.

3.4.1 The Reparative Duties Account and the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

Tierney’s position on posthumous blameworthiness is not entirely clear. On the one hand, she appears to endorse a version of the claim that unredeemed wrongdoers can remain blameworthy forever, or “in perpetuity.” She writes:

Consider Lee, the plant sitter who never acknowledges that she was wrong to treat Edie’s plants carelessly, never feels guilty or remorseful,

and never apologizes or attempts to make amends. It strikes me as entirely fitting for Edie to blame Lee in perpetuity. (Tierney, 2022, p. 397)

Tierney also considers cases where the victim's death makes it impossible for the wrongdoer to make proper amends. In such cases, she once again appears to claim that it is possible for an unredeemed wrongdoer to remain blameworthy forever:

One might also wonder about cases in which a wrongdoer is unable to fulfil their reparative obligations because their victim is dead or otherwise unreachable. There is much to say about these kinds of cases, and much will depend on the details of the case. But briefly, many reparative obligations don't require one to engage in any way with one's victims (i.e. expressing remorse to the moral community, morally improving, etc.), so even wrongdoers who are unable to interact with their victims can become less blameworthy over time by fulfilling at least some of their reparative duties. But even in these cases, such agents will remain at least somewhat blameworthy, since it will always be true of them that they were unable to make reparations to their victim. I take this to be an unfortunate, but not counter intuitive, implication of RPA [her account]. (Tierney, 2022, p. 397)

These passages suggest that blameworthiness persists forever for those who die without fulfilling their reparative duties, and this seems compatible with the claim that some of the dead remain blameworthy.

But Tierney also explicitly states that "it is possible for agents to remain diachronically blameworthy, and the fitting target of blame, *for as long as they exist*" on her account (Tierney, 2022, p. 397 emphasis mine). This formulation suggests that blameworthiness is tied to existence, and that once a person ceases to exist, they cease to be blameworthy. The qualifier "for as long as they exist" sets a temporal boundary on blameworthiness at death. It is thus unclear whether Tierney believes the dead can remain blameworthy, or whether blameworthiness necessarily terminates at death.

If Tierney claims that blameworthiness is forever, she must show how the dead can bear duties. If, on the other hand, she claims that once a person ceases to exist, they are no longer blameworthy, then the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge constitutes a challenge also for Tierney's Reparative Duties Account. Since the dead no longer exist, they cannot owe anything to anyone, neither to their victims nor to society. They cannot

perform reparative duties or redeem themselves, nor can anyone meaningfully demand or expect them to do so. The very notion of moral redemption and reparation seems to presuppose “an existing morally responsible agent,” an agent who is capable of acknowledging their past wrongdoing, undertaking acts of repair, and orienting themselves toward the restored moral status to which they aspire. Death, however, strips away that possibility; there is no longer a subject who could meaningfully engage in the redemption process, no one who could perform the acts required to discharge them. If moral reparation requires, at the very least, some form of moral agency standing behind the reparative act, then duties to repair cannot remain after the agent’s death. The dead are beyond the reach of duties and obligation, beyond the possibility of action, and therefore beyond the scope of redemption and reparation. And if blameworthiness, on Tierney’s view, depends on the wrongdoer still owing reparative duties that have not yet been fulfilled, then it appears that the dead cannot be blameworthy, because they can no longer owe anything. All of this suggests that, like the Moral Reform Account and the Moral Guilt Account, the Reparative Duties Account also struggles to account for posthumous blameworthiness. In this respect, the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge applies here as well.

3.4.2 Tierney’s (Hypothetical) Response to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge

While Tierney has not explicitly responded to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge, it is possible, I believe, to imagine how her view might be developed to respond to it. On one interpretation of the Reparative Duties Account, the dead could remain blameworthy, and it could remain fitting to blame them, because—Tierney might argue—death does not automatically extinguish unmet reparative duties. Just as debts, in a financial or legal sense, can survive a person’s death and be passed on to their estate or their heirs, so too might moral debts and obligations to repair harm, to compensate victims, and to make amends persist beyond the wrongdoer’s biological death. Under this interpretation, as long as the reparative duties owed by the deceased have not been fulfilled (because, for instance, the wrongdoer made no effort to fulfill them or could not fulfill them while

alive), the dead remain blameworthy. Once all reparative duties are actually fulfilled, through the actions of others acting on behalf of the deceased but in accordance with the deceased's will, or once the debts to victims or society have been addressed in some meaningful way, the dead would no longer be blameworthy. They would owe nothing further. In this way, one might think that Tierney's view could both preserve its integrity and account for posthumous blameworthiness.

3.4.3 Why the Reparative Duties Account Still Fails

Unfortunately, this proposed hypothetical response on Tierney's behalf cannot quite do the job of overcoming the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. To see why, it is important to recall that for Tierney, blame is essentially a demand for reparation, a call for the fulfillment of reparative duties. However, one is worthy of a demand only when one can be demanded to carry it out. Blame as a demand presupposes that the wrongdoer is capable of understanding the demand and capable of responding appropriately to it. If we understand blame in this way, then the dead cannot be fittingly blamed, because they can be neither demanded nor expected to answer our demand or do anything at all, let alone carry out duties. If they cannot be fittingly blamed, then they cannot be blameworthy either. This means that, just like the Moral Reform Account and the Moral Guilt Account, the Reparative Duties Account fails to respond to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge: to speak of posthumous blame as if it involved genuine demands for reparation seems incoherent.

It is true that there could be a posthumous process of reparation, perhaps anchored in the dead's prior intention and will,³⁸ but this does not seem to directly translate to posthumous blameworthiness. No one could demand or expect anything from a wrongdoer after their death, which on the Reparative Duties Account means that blaming them would then no longer be fitting.

³⁸ There is a similar case in the history of philosophy. In the final passages of Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates, who has peacefully ingested the hemlock, looks to Crito and speaks of a debt owed to Asclepius (the god of healing). For Socrates, this is a gesture of thanks for a cure already granted, *i.e.*, his death: "And these were his last words: Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it" (*Phaedo*, translated by Harold North Fowler, Chapter 5, Scene 15, 118a).

For example, suppose that I invite my friend to my apartment and, while I am in the kitchen, they recklessly break my favorite antique vase. They tell me nothing about it, so I assume it was knocked over by the wind. However, years later, after my friend has died, their partner finds a letter my friend left behind. In the letter, they confess to what happened as a result of their recklessness and ask their partner to convey their sincere apology for having remained silent. They also instruct their partner to compensate me for the value of the vase and to convey their regret to me. The partner acts on my friend's wishes, delivers the apology, provides the compensation, and I, moved by my friend's effort to make things right after their death, forgive them. In this case, my friend wrongs me, fails to make amends while alive, and dies with their moral debt unpaid.³⁹ They are therefore blameworthy at the time of their death. It is true that they had reparative duties prior to their death, and began the process of reparation by writing the letter and arranging for reparations to be made on their behalf, but they cease to bear such duties upon death. The dead are not subjects anymore, and so it is unclear in what sense they can still bear duties or incur obligations. Moreover, my friend ceased to be an appropriate target of my demands (and therefore a fitting target of my blame), the very moment they died. I cannot demand anything from my friend after their death, and I do not (and cannot) expect anything from them now. This, I believe, is the same core problem that afflicts all three of the views that I have mentioned so far in this chapter: they all tie blameworthiness and fitting blame to properties or states of an existing, living, conscious, agential subject. And when that subject ceases to exist, the foundations of blameworthiness and fitting blame seem to collapse along with it.

³⁹ There is a similar established practice in Shia jurisprudence, wherein the living are asked to perform certain acts of worship or charity on behalf of the dead. The *Istijari* prayer, for instance, is a form of worship performed on behalf of a deceased person in exchange for payment, to make up missed obligatory prayers (*qada'*), or to carry out recommended acts such as supplications. It is common for a Shia Muslim, in their will, to request that a specific person perform *Istijari* prayers on their behalf after their death. Such a request is treated as a testamentary bequest (*wasiyyah*), and it allows the deceased to allocate up to one third of their estate for acts of worship. These acts are believed to release the deceased person from their unfulfilled duties and bring ongoing spiritual benefit to them. The executor of the will is responsible for ensuring the request is fulfilled, provided this does not infringe on the fixed inheritance shares of the heirs.

Tierney's view faces the same problem as the Moral Reform Account and the Moral Guilt Account: it cannot coherently accommodate posthumous blameworthiness without abandoning the core commitments that define the view.

3.5 Conclusion

I began this chapter by stating the two conditions that, in my view, a satisfying account of diachronic blameworthiness must satisfy. My aim was to determine whether blameworthiness can not only diminish or cease over time, but also plausibly extend beyond death. I presented three views of diachronic blameworthiness in the literature, each of which acknowledges that blameworthiness can diminish or cease.

I then introduced a challenge raised by Clarke (the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge) against all three views: the Moral Reform Account, the Moral Guilt Account, and the Reparative Duties Account. The first two, according to Clarke, are unable to account for the idea of posthumous blameworthiness. The Moral Reform Account grounds blameworthiness in a person's current state, while the Moral Guilt Account ties it to remaining deserved guilt. Yet the dead do not have a distinctive psychology, nor can they feel anything, let alone guilt. For Clarke, this renders both views incapable of explaining how the dead can remain blameworthy. After explaining each view, I traced the resultant dialectic and presented Matheson's and Carlsson's respective responses to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. Matheson bites the bullet by claiming that the dead are not blameworthy, yet he maintains that it can still be fitting to blame them. Carlsson similarly argues that blaming the dead can be fitting, but also suggests that it may even make sense to speak of posthumous blameworthiness, provided we understand it as referring to the deceased person's status at their time of death.

I have argued that the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge poses a problem for the Reparative Duties Account too, and I showed that the Moral Reform Account, the Moral Guilt Account, and the Reparative Duties Account all fail to adequately respond to the Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge. The Moral Reform Account either reaffirms the implausible claim

that moral blameworthiness is always forever (the Hardliner's Claim), or leads to the equally implausible conclusion that the fittingness of blaming people cannot extend beyond their death. Since neither of these conclusions aligns with our intuitive practices, the Moral Reform Account appears inadequate. The Moral Guilt Account survives the first horn of the dilemma, as I argued. However, it seems to fail to explain how some of the dead can be considered currently blameworthy. The Reparative Duties Account cannot respond to this challenge because, as Tierney puts it, wrongdoers remain blameworthy only "as long as they exist." The dead cannot bear any duties, and it is impossible to demand anything of them.

In this chapter, I have shown that those existing views of diachronic blameworthiness that allow for the diminishment and cessation of moral blameworthiness cannot coherently explain posthumous blameworthiness. I have not yet shown, however, how the dead can really be blameworthy. If it is possible for the dead to be blameworthy, then blameworthiness can indeed extend beyond death, and it can therefore sometimes be forever. That is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter IV

Death, Desert, and the Boundaries of Blameworthiness

4.1 Introduction

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, my aim is to find a plausible account of diachronic blameworthiness that can explain how a guilty person's blameworthiness can diminish or cease over time, and how it can extend beyond the moment of their death. I set myself these goals from the beginning because I think our ordinary moral judgments support both possibilities, though in different contexts and for different reasons.

Consider, first, the diminishment of blameworthiness over time. In cases of minor moral wrongdoings, such as failing to water a friend's plants after promising to do so while they are away, sincere apologies or making amends can affect the wrongdoer's blameworthiness while they are alive. If a person lies about a trivial matter, they can acknowledge what they have done, express genuine remorse, and take steps to repair any damage caused. In such scenarios, we tend to think their blameworthiness decreases. This suggests that a person's degree of blameworthiness does not attach to them forever. Rather, it appears to be something that can decrease, and perhaps even cease altogether, through the wrongdoer's efforts and responses.

Now consider cases at the opposite end of the moral spectrum. In cases of grave moral wrongdoings like genocide, blameworthiness does not seem to cease with the wrongdoer's death. We continue to regard the architects of mass atrocities as blameworthy long after they have died. We judge historical figures like Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot as still deserving of blame, even though they are no longer alive to receive our condemnation. This suggests that blameworthiness, at least in some cases, transcends the limits of the person's biological lifetime. Death does not automatically erase people's blameworthiness.

I believe that any adequate theory of diachronic blameworthiness must be able to accommodate both of these phenomena and explain when and why each applies. As we have seen, the accounts that I discussed in Chapter II lacked an explanation for how blameworthiness sometimes diminishes or ceases, even in cases of minor moral wrongdoings. Meanwhile, the accounts that I discussed in Chapter III could not plausibly explain how posthumous blameworthiness is possible.

In this chapter, I will present my own account of blameworthiness, which I call the *Moral Harm Account*, and I will show how we can plausibly argue that a person's degree of blameworthiness can diminish and that the dead can be blameworthy. This chapter is therefore devoted to arguing that, in some cases, a guilty person can become less blameworthy or cease to be blameworthy for a wrongful action, omission, or harmful outcome prior to their death. In cases where such blameworthiness does not (or cannot) diminish or cease during a guilty person's lifetime, it persists beyond their death. However, I will argue that, even posthumously, it is possible for a person's blameworthiness to diminish or come to an end. In some cases where a wrongdoer remains blameworthy when they die, their blameworthiness can diminish as well as cease after their death.

The chapter is organized as follows. In § 4.2, I first explain the details of the Moral Harm Account, discuss what I mean by harm, explain how harm can qualify as an instance of blame, and explain the difference between the Moral Harm Account and the Moral Guilt Account. In this section, I also explain how, according to the Moral Harm Account, a person's blameworthiness can diminish or cease when the person receives some (morally relevant) harm.

In § 4.3, I show how my account can accommodate the claim that people can deserve harm and thereby be blameworthy after their death. This is the more controversial part of my thesis, as it challenges the assumption that moral desert necessarily terminates with one's biological death. I also show how posthumous blameworthiness can diminish or cease even after death. Just as blameworthiness can change over time during one's life, I argue that it can undergo changes after one's death as well. In the same section, before concluding the chapter, I discuss why Clarke, Matheson, Carlsson, and Tierney cannot agree with my preferred view on posthumous blameworthiness and how it can diminish after a person's death.

4.2 The Moral Harm Account

Moral blame and moral blameworthiness are distinct notions, and keeping them separate is essential to the argument I will develop here. Moral blame is something we do; it is an activity, a response, a form of engagement with

wrongdoers and/or the moral community. Moral blameworthiness, on the other hand, is a status or a property that a person possesses. It concerns whether it would be deserved and fitting to blame a wrongdoer for what they did, quite apart from whether anyone actually does any blaming. With this short summary of blameworthiness and blame, I aim to argue for the following:

The Moral Harm Account: A wrongdoer is blameworthy for a morally wrong action if and only if the wrongdoer deserves moral harm (in virtue of having committed the morally wrong action).

Harm has many types,⁴⁰ but by “moral harm” I mean the type of harm that is inflicted with the following *retributive intention*: the wrongdoer receives this harm because they deserve it in virtue of having committed a wrongful act; they receive what they morally deserve. This retributive intention is, in other words, what distinguishes moral harm from mere harm, and it is moral harm in this specific sense that is doing the work throughout my account.⁴¹ Later, I will talk about this in more detail.

That a wrongdoer is blameworthy, and that moral blame is deserved, means that the wrongdoer deserves moral harm. So, on my view, deserving moral harm is both necessary and sufficient for blameworthiness. In § 4.2.1, I talk about harm and its relation to blame.

⁴⁰ Harm, on one prominent view in the literature, is what is involved in an event such that we would have been better off had it not occurred (Boonin, 2014; Feit, 2002, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2023; Parfit, [1984] 1986; Timmerman, 2019). On another prominent view, harm is all about being in a bad state, regardless of any counterfactual comparisons (De Villiers-Botha, 2020; J. Gardner, 2021; M. Gardner, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020; Hanser, 2009, 2019). On this view, something can harm us just because it is bad for us, even if we are no worse off than we otherwise would have been. There are also hybrid accounts that combine elements of these two prominent views. Some have argued that harm is simply something that negatively affects or threatens our well-being (Bellotti, 2011; Carlson et al., 2021; Johansson & Risberg, 2023).

⁴¹ I mostly use “harm” and “moral harm” interchangeably in this work. But it is worth clarifying that when I speak of harm in this context, I always mean moral harm, that is, harm that is inflicted with a retributive intention, harm that is directed at a wrongdoer in recognition of their desert status.

4.2.1 From Harm to Blame

I follow Michael McKenna's intuitive definition of the harm of blame: "blaming is taken to have a characteristic force, a sting that is liable to harm the one blamed" (2019, p. 266), and in defining that harm, I think McKenna is right that "a harm is something that adversely affects a person's interests" (2012, p. 135). When our interests are set back, we are thus harmed. McKenna frames his understanding of blame within a conversational model that is, in paradigmatic cases, inherently tied to a moral exchange between the blamer and the blamee. This leads him to say that blame harms in certain ways, and that it is paradigmatically a form of communication between these two parties. In "Basically Deserved Blame and Its Value," he says:

Drawing upon Joel Feinberg's notion of welfare interests, and assuming that we can understand harms as setbacks to interests, I find three distinctive harms that blaming is liable to cause [...]. First, it impedes a blamed person's ability to exercise her capacities to engage in normal social intercourse. Why? Part of the expressive and communicative elements invoked in "conversing" by blaming involve our inclination to withdraw from or instead revise otherwise normal social relations with the one blamed. Second, a person's freedom to live her personal life as she wishes is impeded. Demands that one respond to another's charge of wrongdoing, that she apologize or account for herself, are liable to interfere with living her personal life as she pleases. Third, these sorts of demands and revisions to the expected interpersonal relations among others are emotionally taxing; they affect, or at least are liable to affect, one's emotional stability. (McKenna, 2019, p. 266)

According to McKenna, there are several distinctive ways in which blame harms. First, blame impedes a person's ability to engage in normal social relations. When I blame you, I withdraw from you or alter the terms of our interaction: I become more distant, more guarded, less willing to engage with you on the same footing as before. This withdrawal is part of what blame expresses, and it constitutes a real setback to the wrongdoer's interest in participating freely and fully in social life.

Second, blame restricts a person's freedom to live as they choose; it interferes with their ability to go about their life as they please. They must now attend to the moral claims being made against them, and this takes time, effort, and energy. Third, blame is emotionally taxing. The experience of being blamed affects a person's emotional stability. It generates feelings of

shame, guilt, anxiety, or defensiveness, and these emotional burdens are themselves a form of harm. According to McKenna, these three elements, *i.e.*, social withdrawal, restricted freedom, and emotional distress, constitute the primary harms that blame inflicts on wrongdoers. I second all that.

I also agree with McKenna that communication plays a crucial role in blaming (though, as we shall see, not quite in the sense that McKenna has in mind). One of the central assumptions of McKenna's *conversational theory of responsibility* is that the harm of blame must be understood within the communicative framework of our blaming practices. The harm, in other words, is fundamentally tied to the interpersonal exchange between the blamer and the blamee, to the back-and-forth structure of moral address and response. As he writes,

the blameworthy agent deserves the harm that attends the practices of being blamed, those practices are expressions of evaluation of the moral quality of the blameworthy person's actions (and the quality of her will); they are expressions of moral demands. (McKenna 2012, p. 146).

For McKenna, blame is paradigmatically a second-personal move that requires the blamee to "recognize" what is being communicated and "answer" within the moral exchange. Blame, on this view, is inherently dialogical. It addresses the wrongdoer directly, calling upon them to acknowledge what they have done and to respond in morally appropriate ways. For McKenna, to blame is to hold a wrongdoer to account by treating them as a participant in a moral conversation, as someone who can "register" the blame directed at them and "respond" through apology, making amends, offering justifications or excuses, or engaging in other forms of moral acknowledgment. This conversational structure is central to McKenna's account. A blamee is engaged in this conversation as an active participant who has the capacity to understand the moral significance of what is being communicated to them and to reply in kind. The harm of blame, then, emerges within this exchange.⁴²

⁴² David Brink and Dana Nelkin (2022, p. 191) argue that, in addition to being a fitting target of reactive attitudes, moral blameworthiness is a matter of desert, in the sense that "one who is blameworthy is also, and for the same reasons, deserving of a setback of interests or a harmful response."

Now that I have described where I agree with McKenna, let me point out some additions that I should like to make to his view. I agree with McKenna that blame harms by restricting a wrongdoer's participation in the moral community, limiting their freedom, and leaving them emotionally unsettled. That said, I think McKenna's view of what harm can be is too restrictive. In particular, I want to add the *frustration of desires*. According to the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, what makes a person's life go well is the satisfaction of their desires, and what makes it go badly is the frustration of their desires. On this theory, a person benefits when their desires are fulfilled and is harmed when their desires are thwarted, regardless of whether they experience any pleasure or pain, and regardless of whether they know about the fulfillment or frustration of these desires. For instance, if I desire that my children flourish, and this desire is frustrated because my children suffer, then I am harmed.

Now, when it comes to moral harm, desire frustration is the kind of harm that a blameworthy person can deserve in virtue of what they have done. Suppose I post an unethical tweet and desire that you retweet it. You can frustrate this desire simply by refusing to retweet it, or by reporting it as spam. This desire frustration constitutes moral harm because you intended to perform a retributive act based on what I deserve: you give me what I deserve. This is blame, and I am worthy of it. Importantly, when this desire of mine is frustrated, part of my interest has been set back. This is where I think McKenna's understanding of the setback of interests is too narrow. Desire frustrations are themselves a kind of setback to one's interests, and they should be recognized as such by any adequate account of the harm that blame can inflict.⁴³

⁴³ A further question is whether the frustration of *any* desire constitutes a setback to the wrongdoer's interests, and thereby harms them, or only the frustration of certain desires (the wrongdoer's most cherished desires, or only those that are morally acceptable, or some other subset altogether). For example, I may desire to drink sixty cups of coffee a day, or to conquer a few countries neighboring Iran and recreate the Persian Empire. Would you be setting back my interests and harming me if you simply stopped me and frustrated those desires? I should admit that it is difficult to determine which desires should count as part of our interests, but it is worth noting that alongside hedonism and the objective list theory, the Desire-Fulfillment Theory offers an answer to the question of what constitutes our interests. For my purposes, I need not resolve this debate here,

Although one might charitably interpret McKenna's account in a way that already includes desire frustration within his broader notion of a setback to interests, I have not found any specific passage in his work that explicitly supports this reading. The inclusion of desire frustration matters because it extends the scope of harm beyond what social withdrawal, restricted freedom, and emotional distress can capture on their own. There are ways in which a person can be harmed that leave none of these three dimensions touched, and yet the person's desires are frustrated and their interests set back in morally significant ways.

This brings me to the second way in which I take McKenna's view to be too restrictive. I do not think that recognition, communication, and moral exchange are necessarily limited to the blamer and the blamee, as he suggests. Blame, on my view, is indeed communicative, but it need not be communicated directly to the wrongdoer. It can instead be communicated to a third party (by the victim or a relevant other), and through this communication, it can harm the blamee. Blame can harm (and does indeed harm) even when the wrongdoer cannot register its point, is unaware of it, or can no longer recognize the reasons why they are its target.

There are times when a direct moral exchange between the blamer and blamee is simply not possible, and there are times when it is not desirable. A wrongdoer may be absent or unreachable, and we might be unwilling to engage with them. They may have died. And yet we continue to blame them, we express our blame to others, we communicate it within our moral community, and through this communication, the blamee's interests are set back and their desires are frustrated. The harm is real, even if the wrongdoer never comes to know about it.

As mentioned earlier, not every harmful act directed at a wrongdoer constitutes blame. By "blaming," I mean imposing some harm on the wrongdoer with the right retributive intention. As I said, the content of that retributive intention is that the wrongdoer deserves harm in virtue of what they have done. That is what turns harm into moral harm. So, to blame a wrongdoer is to harm them with a retributive intention; it is to make them worse off in some morally relevant way. This might take the form of verbal

but it is worth acknowledging that not all frustrations of desires need carry equal moral weight when it comes to the harm that grounds blameworthiness.

condemnation, setting back their interests, frustrating their desires, social exclusion, or other responses and reactions that constitute a burden for the blamee.

The retributive intention thus plays a central role in my account. If I harm you accidentally, or out of spite, or without any awareness of your wrongdoing or what you deserve, I am not blaming you, even if you happen to deserve harm. Genuine moral blame, according to the Moral Harm Account, requires your desert status to be involved in my intention to harm you. I must respond to your being deserving of moral harm, and treat this as the reason for my harmful response. It is this intentional connection between the harm I impose and the harm you deserve that transforms a merely harmful act into an instance of moral blame.

Since I take blaming to be an intentional action, there is a *success condition* on blaming. If the wrongdoer is not actually harmed, then no blaming has been done. Suppose you belong to a book club, and you have a strong desire to maintain a good reputation within that small community. I start by criticizing you behind your back at the club, as I intend to harm your reputation because you have not returned my book after a year (suppose you deserve a certain amount of moral harm for this). Now, imagine that none of the other club members takes my criticisms seriously; they dismiss what I say, perhaps laugh it off, and carry on as before. In this scenario, my actions did not actually harm you at all, and therefore no blame has occurred. I merely *tried* to blame you.

However, if the club members do take my words seriously and your reputation is harmed as a result, then the situation changes. Your desire has been frustrated, and an important interest of yours has been set back. Since I successfully acted with the retributive intention of giving you what you deserve (*i.e.*, your desert status enters into my intention), the harm counts as moral harm. I have not merely tried to blame you; I have actually blamed you.

You might never hear what I said about you, and yet you have still been blamed. It is enough that my blame is expressed *openly* or *publicly* enough for it to be communicated to others in a way that harms you (by damaging your reputation, by altering how others treat you, by frustrating your desire to be well-regarded in the community). The publicity condition matters because it

is important that others recognize my intention. They should understand that I am responding to moral reasons, specifically to what you morally deserve, and that it is part of my intention to give you what you deserve. This, in fact, distinguishes moral blame (in the sense I am defending here) from revenge, spite, and personal animosity. That said, the publicity condition varies depending on the context. Sometimes it is unnecessary to explicitly state my intention because others already understand what I am doing and why. In other cases, it may be important to articulate it clearly, or at least to manifest it through my actions in a way that makes it plain that I am giving you what you deserve. The key is that the retributive character of the harm is recognizable to the relevant other (or community).

At this point, it may be helpful to talk also about what I take to be the relation between “worthiness” and “ought.” There are two ideas at work here: a wrongdoer is worthy of harm (they deserve it), and there is a reason to harm them (we ought to morally harm them). On my view, worthiness affects what we ought to do. If I deserve some harm because I broke my promise to you, then you ought to (morally) harm me, but this only means that you have a *pro tanto* moral reason to harm me (a reason that counts in favor of harm, but which can be outweighed). So, I think desert itself generates a *pro tanto* reason, even if it can be defeated by stronger considerations such as proportionality, standing, etc.⁴⁴

4.2.2 Deserved Moral Harm vs. Deserved Suffering

To see how my account of deserved harm works, it might help to contrast it with another desert-based view that I discussed in Chapter III, *i.e.*, the Moral Guilt Account. Although the harm of blame can include certain forms of suffering, blameworthiness as deserved harm is, I believe, a broader notion than deserved suffering. Understanding this distinction is crucial because it

⁴⁴ To see the contrast, imagine someone saying that worthiness can only explain why harming is “not forbidden,” and does not by itself generate any moral reason. On this approach, any *pro tanto* reason to harm must come from elsewhere (*e.g.*, defense, protection, deterrence, social justice, etc.), and worthiness mainly affects whether those reasons are blocked by the person’s rights. I mention this alternative position only to flag that there are views which run contrary to what I believe, and which would deny the tight connection I have drawn between desert and reasons for harm.

allows my account to capture cases of blameworthiness that the Moral Guilt Account cannot adequately explain.

As we saw in Chapter III, § 3.3, for Portmore and Carlsson, a wrongdoer is blameworthy if and only if they still deserve to suffer from feeling guilt (Carlsson, 2022, p. 190; Portmore, 2019, p. 8). Their view thus ties blameworthiness tightly to a specific psychological state, the painful experience of guilt, and holds that when a wrongdoer no longer deserves to feel this particular form of suffering, they are no longer blameworthy.

At least according to one of the definitions of harm, which involves a setback to the wrongdoer's welfare, I think Portmore and Carlsson are right: feeling guilty is indeed a kind of harm. Feeling guilty is painful, and pain and suffering are typically welfare-reducing. Herbert Morris (1971, p. 101) writes that "when feeling guilty [...] we feel badly. Feeling guilty is partly defined by its being a painful condition." In this sense, the Moral Guilt Account captures something important: guilt is harmful, and when wrongdoers deserve to feel guilt, they deserve a particular kind of harm. So far, my view is compatible with theirs.

But harm is a broader notion than pain and suffering: it may involve violations of our rights, or setbacks to our interests even when we do not know about them, cannot feel them, or do not suffer from them. For example, if one is unaware that one is being observed by a foreign spy, one does not suffer; nevertheless, one is harmed by that act because one's interest in privacy has been set back, and one's desire not to be surveilled has been frustrated. The harm exists independently of one's awareness of or emotional response to it. As McKenna (2012, pp. 134–135) puts it, "one can be harmed but not know it, whereas a person cannot suffer unknowingly." This distinction is critical: suffering requires conscious experience, but harm does not.

This is where the Moral Guilt Account encounters difficulty. Portmore's and Carlsson's view seems to fall short of explaining how a wrongdoer deserves blame (is blameworthy) when the wrongdoer cannot suffer from what they have done. Consider, for instance, wrongdoers who are psychologically incapable of feeling guilt, perhaps due to certain personality disorders or psychological conditions. According to the Moral Guilt Account, such individuals cannot be blameworthy, because they cannot

deserve to feel guilt if they are incapable of feeling it at all: ought implies can. It is worth noting that, just as I said about my own account and the relation between worthiness and ought, deserving to feel guilt implies that there is a moral reason to feel guilt. This reason is a *pro tanto* reason, and it is weighty enough to support the claim that the person “ought” to feel guilt. Now, this in turn requires (at least on my understanding) that the person has the ability to feel guilt. One does not have a moral reason to ϕ if one cannot ϕ .

The Moral Guilt Account, on my understanding, therefore implies that if one is unable to feel guilt, then one does not deserve it, and I think this is problematic. I do not believe that a psychopath’s inability to feel guilt automatically exempts them from blameworthiness for their wrongdoing. Suppose that I cannot feel any guilt for keeping you waiting for an hour at the airport, after I had promised you that I would be on time. I am simply incapable of feeling it, so I feel no guilt and experience no painful psychological state. According to the Moral Harm Account, I am still worthy of blame; I deserve the harm of a setback to my interests: you could, for example, simply end our relationship. This harm can be inflicted on me, and I am worthy of it, whether I am able to feel guilt about what I did or not. Portmore and Carlsson do not seem to be able to say that, because on their view, if I cannot feel guilt, I do not deserve to suffer from it; and if I do not deserve to suffer from guilt, I am not blameworthy at all. The Moral Harm Account, on the contrary, can accommodate these cases straightforwardly. Blameworthiness does not require that the wrongdoer can actually suffer or be capable of suffering in any particular way. It requires only that they deserve harm in the broader sense: that it would be appropriate for their interests to be set back and their desires frustrated, in response to their wrongdoing. This makes the Moral Harm Account more flexible and, I think, more faithful to our actual blaming practices.

4.2.3 Moral Harm and Diachronic Blameworthiness

I have so far explained the Moral Harm Account as an account of moral blameworthiness. I now turn to discussing how it can provide an answer to the question of whether wrongdoers can become less blameworthy (or no longer blameworthy at all) when certain conditions are met. Remember that one of the two goals I set for this dissertation from the beginning was to accommodate the idea that blameworthiness can diminish and/or cease over time.

Suppose that I advised you badly about an investment you wanted to make about a year ago, and you lost a large portion of your savings as a result. I did not feel any guilt about this, I still possess the same flawed character, and still advise people badly from time to time. I have not apologized to you, and have done nothing to repair the damage I did to your life. Nevertheless, I have a strong interest in my reputation as a good financial advisor, and it has been a few months since you realized that. You have recently started telling people about the unreliability of my advice, and have thus harmed my reputation.

For Portmore, Carlsson, Matheson, and Tierney, I am still as blameworthy as I was before; According to the Moral Harm Account, however, I have become less blameworthy, precisely because one of my strongest interests has been set back. The authors I just mentioned might find it counterintuitive to say that I have become less blameworthy merely by being harmed as a result of you damaging my reputation. The force of this objection, of course, lies in the fact that, in such a scenario, I have not myself done anything toward becoming less blameworthy; I have made no repair, felt no guilt, and had no change of heart. I believe we can plausibly argue, however, that even if wrongdoers perhaps cannot fully cease to be blameworthy simply by being harmed through a setback to their interests, they can become less blameworthy. To see why one's degree of blameworthiness diminishes in such scenarios, compare the scenario I just described with a scenario in which no interest of mine was set back, none of my desires were frustrated, and my reputation as a "reliable advisor" remained entirely intact. It would be counterintuitive to say, I think, that there is no difference in the degree to which I am blameworthy for advising you badly across these two scenarios.

Having said that, the Moral Harm Account is (and can be) committed to a stronger claim about diachronic blameworthiness. That is, not only am I less blameworthy when my interest in maintaining a good reputation is set back, but if I have received all the harm I deserve, I can cease to be blameworthy for how I advised you altogether. Again, this holds even if I have done nothing to repair what I have damaged and have not undergone any moral reform. This is because, according to the Moral Harm Account, blameworthiness is all about deserved harm; and it is not obvious, at least on the surface, that undergoing moral reform or fulfilling reparative duties can count as harms. On my view, it is *only* (morally relevant) harm that diminishes a wrongdoer's blameworthiness.

On this reading, however, Portmore and Carlsson's view can be accommodated within the Moral Harm Account, albeit only partially. Since feeling guilty is a kind of harm (as it is a harm to the person's well-being) it can, on my account, count as one way in which a wrongdoer receives the harm they deserve, and thereby diminish their blameworthiness. In this respect, the Moral Guilt Account and the Moral Harm Account overlap: both agree that when a wrongdoer suffers guilt, something morally significant has occurred that bears on their blameworthiness.

That said, the relationship between these two views runs in only one direction. It is the feeling of guilt that can diminish the harm one deserves, not the other way around. That is, guilt is one possible vehicle through which deserved harm can be received, but it is not the only one. If a wrongdoer receives all the harm they deserve by some other means, say, through the frustration of their desires or the setback of their interests in ways that do not involve any felt suffering, they become blameless just the same. They no longer deserve any further harm, and this includes the harm of feeling guilty.

On my account, once the deserved harm has been fully inflicted, regardless of what form it took, blameworthiness is extinguished. Portmore and Carlsson, by contrast, cannot say this. This is because their account ties blameworthiness exclusively to deserved guilt, and they have no resources to explain how a wrongdoer's blameworthiness could be diminished or ceased by forms of harm that involve no suffering at all.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ At this point, Carlsson might reply that if a wrongdoer has been harmed enough through other means, this in fact reduces the degree of guilt they deserve to feel. On this reading,

This can be said, I believe, about other reactive attitudes as well, so long as they set back one's interests in morally relevant ways. Resentment, for instance, can be harmful when it does precisely that. When you resent me for what I did, you may thereby not only make me suffer (as blame tends to sting), but also set back my interest in being thought of well in terms of morality. Even if I do not feel the sting of your resentment, my interests may have been set back. The same can be said of being the target of others' indignation, contempt, and other negative reactive attitudes. Without endorsing it, Clarke entertains this possibility when he writes:

"Being blamed, it might be said, is contrary to an objective interest that each of us has in being thought well of in respect of morality. (To say that the interest is objective is, in this instance, to say that a person has it independently of whether she cares about being thought of in this way.) Being blamed thus sets back one's interests, whether one learns of the blame or not, and indeed even if it is in some way also beneficial. (Being thought blameworthy, even if one is not also blamed, would do so as well.) Even the dead, one might say, can suffer such reputational harm" (Clarke, 2025, pp. 66-67)

Reactive attitude blame can, therefore, harm by setting back objective interests, not merely by causing subjective distress or experiential suffering. This expands what counts as harmful blame beyond just actions; it includes emotions as well.

Now, if I receive all the harm I deserve and I become blameless, then one might object that there is no room for you to forgive me. To forgive someone, they must be blameworthy. But if I am already blameless, it makes no sense for you to forgive me. How can the Moral Harm Account accommodate forgiveness? I believe this is also a challenge for Portmore's, Carlsson's, Matheson's, and Tierney's accounts of diachronic blameworthiness.⁴⁶

he might accept my point that actually feeling guilty is not the only mechanism through which a person's degree of blameworthiness can diminish (other forms of harm can do the same work, at least indirectly, by reducing the amount of guilt the wrongdoer still deserves to suffer). This would bring his view closer to mine than it might initially appear. However, since Carlsson has not explicitly said anything to this effect, and since this is only my suggestion of a possible reply he might give, I will not press the point further here and will leave it as an open question.

⁴⁶ Note that on Tierney's account, "asking" for forgiveness, or an "apology," is part of a wrongdoer's duties that must be fulfilled. Whether or not a wrongdoer is forgiven by

Roughly, the paradox could be stated as follows: if a wrongdoer has felt all the guilt they deserved, undergone the required moral reform, and fulfilled all their reparative duties, then the victim's act of forgiveness becomes redundant or pointless. How can one be forgiven if, on these accounts, one has already ceased to be blameworthy by changing one's flawed psychology and feeling enough guilt? I see the challenge, but one possible response to it is to accept that when a wrongdoer has already received all the harm they deserved, there is nothing left to forgive, while denying that an act of forgiveness is pointless. In such a case, when you say "I forgive you for advising me badly," you are in fact *acknowledging* that I am no longer blameworthy; you are *expressing* that you no longer hold any blaming attitudes toward me. Your words may look like forgiveness, but your act is rather a kind of declaration: you are publicly marking the end of my liability to be blamed.

4.3 Blameworthiness and Death

Recall my main two aims: to provide support for the thesis that blameworthiness can diminish and cease over time (which I did in § 4.2.3), and to argue that if a person's blameworthiness has not ceased during their lifetime, then it persists beyond their death. It is to the latter claim that I now turn.

Suppose that Martin Heidegger was blameworthy for writing the *Black Notebooks*, and also that he did not receive the harm he deserved for this when he was alive. He died unredeemed, and this means that he was blameworthy, at least to some degree, at the time of his death. Does his death change anything about his status as a blameworthy person who publicly supported the Nazi regime and wrote some philosophical essays about this? My answer is negative. Death does not erase blameworthiness, *i.e.*, deserved harm. This status persists beyond a person's lifetime. In this section, I will argue that people can deserve harm even after their death, and that is why Heidegger is still blameworthy.

their victim is a separate issue, and that is why, I think, all accounts of diachronic blameworthiness equally face the paradox of forgiveness.

Many people in the philosophy of harm literature allow for posthumous harm (Bellotti, 2011, p. 140; Boonin, 2019, p. 113; Brandt, [1979] 1998, p. 330; Feinberg, 1990, p. 87; Griffin, 2000, p. 23; Kavka, 1986, p. 41; Parfit, [1984] 1986, p. 495; Pitcher, 1993, p. 187). What these accounts have in common is the idea that people's interests can be set back even after their death, and their desires can be frustrated posthumously; people can be harmed in these ways even when dead. What divides these philosophers in the literature is, however, whether the *subject* of harm in posthumous harm is the person who once lived, or a posthumous entity that continues to exist after the person's death: a kind of non-bodily continuation of the person. In other words, there are two main camps in the literature about posthumous harms: those who argue that while the harmful event—say, damaging my friend's reputation—is *post-mortem*, the subject of that harm is *ante-mortem*; and those who argue that both the harmful event and the subject of harm can exist posthumously (or *post-mortem*).

In what follows, I will explain each of these views and then discuss what each may imply for my discussion of posthumous blameworthiness. (Importantly, none of the authors I cite here have discussed the possibility of posthumous blameworthiness; their discussion is instead centered on posthumous harm.) I will show that, depending on the view one adopts regarding posthumous harm, one may arrive at a different conclusion about posthumous blameworthiness. This is because the two views understand the timing and location of harm in fundamentally different ways, and these differences have direct implications for whether and how a wrongdoer can be blameworthy after their death.

After rejecting the implications of the *Ante-Mortem Harm* view, that is, the view that all harms attributed to posthumous events are in fact harms to the person before their death, I will show that the only viable path to defending posthumous blameworthiness is to accept the *Post-Mortem Harm* view. This is the view that a person can be genuinely harmed after their death, in the sense that events occurring after they die can set back their interests while they are dead. Only if we accept that harm can occur to a posthumous

subject can we make sense of the claim that blameworthiness can extend beyond the person's death.⁴⁷

4.3.1 The Ante-Mortem Harm View

According to one view in the literature on posthumous harm, any harm to a person's reputation after their death is a harm to the person who once lived. To illustrate this, consider the musical album *A Dawning* (Mercury Classics, 2025). This album is a collaboration between the late Irish musician Talos (Eoin French) and the Icelandic composer and producer Ólafur Arnalds. The record was released in June 2025, and it reflects what blossomed between the two artists before Talos's death in August 2024. In the months leading up to his passing, Talos and Arnalds held frequent sessions, and after Talos's death, Arnalds took it upon himself to finish the album using the material he and Talos had already created together. In important respects, the album was a project that mattered deeply to Talos, and he had considered releasing it posthumously.

Now, suppose that Arnalds had not released the album, and completely dismissed the idea of releasing it. This would plausibly constitute a setback to Talos's interest of releasing the album posthumously, and it would arguably frustrate his desire to have the record out in the hands of his fans. Recall that an action harms someone when it sets back one or more of their interests, so if it were the case that Arnalds did not release the album, Talos would be harmed. What is important in the Ante-Mortem Harm view is that, although the setback to Talos's interest in releasing the album (the harmful

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that Clarke at one point gestures toward the kind of view I am defending in this work, though he does not develop it himself. In a footnote, he acknowledges that Brink and Nelkin's account could in principle accommodate posthumous blameworthiness, if we accept that the dead can be harmed through non-experiential setbacks to their interests. He writes: "Brink and Nelkin (2022) escape this criticism if (as many think) there are non-experiential harms of setbacks of interests. For then the no-longer-existing dead might remain susceptible to harm or setbacks to their interests. They can then deserve such things and, given Brink and Nelkin's view of blameworthiness, be worthy of blame" (Clarke, 2022, p. 2591, fn. 20). However, Clarke seems to assume what I will later call the *Ante-Mortem Harm view*: the view that all posthumous harms somehow affect the person while they are still alive. As I will argue, this view faces serious difficulties, and a more plausible account requires accepting the *Post-Mortem Harm view*.

event) happens after his death, the subject of the harm is ante-mortem: it is the living Talos who is harmed in virtue of the later event.

Many people in the literature have (either implicitly or explicitly) endorsed the Ante-Mortem Harm view. Immanuel Kant, for instance, argues that a person's "dignity" and "right to retain a good reputation" go beyond their "sensible life," and when it is damaged and violated, a right of a person who once lived is compromised. In *Metaphysics of Morals*, he says:

For someone to be able to acquire such a right is, I say, a phenomenon as strange as it is undeniable, a phenomenon of reason giving law *a priori* which extends its commands and prohibitions beyond the limits of life. (MM 6:295)

He then adds:

If anyone spreads it about that someone who has died committed a crime which in his lifetime would have made him dishonorable or only contemptible, whoever can produce proof that this charge is an intentional untruth and a lie can then publicly declare the one who spread the evil gossip a calumniator and so take away his honor. He could not do this unless he could rightly assume that the dead man was wronged by it, even though he is dead, and that this defense brings him satisfactions even though he no longer exists. (MM 6:295–296)

Note that according to Kant's metaphysics, there are two worlds: the sensible and the intelligible, and human subjects inhabit both worlds. We are sensible beings as long as we can experience the world, but we are, at the same time, intelligible beings, as we exist beyond the conditions of time. Since we have intelligible existence, we can stand in moral relations with each other even after our death. Kant says:

But one is not to draw from this any visionary conclusions about presentiments of a future life or about unseen relations to disembodied souls. For what is under discussion here does not go beyond the purely moral and rightful relations to be found among human beings during life as well. These are relations in which human beings stand as intelligible beings, insofar as one logically puts aside, that is, abstracts from, everything physical (i.e., everything belonging to their existence in space and time) [...]. Someone who, a hundred years from now, falsely repeats something evil about me injures me right now, for in a relation purely of rights [...] abstraction is made from any physical conditions (of time). (MM 6:296)

For Kant, whatever happens in the future can harm my intelligible being, and therefore I am harmed in a morally significant sense. I should admit that his view on this matter is complicated, and it is not entirely clear what he means. This specific paragraph is open to more than one interpretation. But on one interpretation, Kant holds that if someone harms me a hundred years from now, that harm injures me right now. The harm, on this reading, is not located in the future event itself but in the violation of my right: I am the holder of such a right, at this very moment, while alive.

Derek Parfit also argues that we can be in a bad state and harmed because of what happens after our death, but again, it is our living identity that is the subject of harm. He says:

Consider next the desires that some people have about what happens after they are dead. For a Preference-Hedonist, once I am dead, nothing bad can happen to me. A Success Theorist should deny this. Return to the case where all my children have wretched lives, because of the mistakes I made as their parent. Suppose that my children's lives all go badly only after I am dead. My life turns out to have been a failure, in one of the ways I cared about most. A Success Theorist should claim that, here too, this makes it true that I *had* a worse life. (Parfit, [1984] 1986, p. 495, *emphasis mine*)

In "The Misfortunes of the Dead," George Pitcher (1993, p. 184) similarly talks about the misfortunes that may happen to a person after their death, and defines misfortune as something that "is contrary to one or more of his more important desires or interests." If Arnalds had not released the album, Talos would have been harmed because his strong desire for the album to be released would have been frustrated. Pitcher writes:

On my view, the sense in which an ante-mortem person is harmed by an unfortunate event after his death is this: the occurrence of the event makes it true that during the time before the person's death, he was harmed—harmed in that the unfortunate event was going to happen. If the event should not occur, the ante-mortem person would not have been so harmed. So the occurrence of the post-mortem event is responsible for the ante-mortem harm. The sense of "make true" and "responsible," here, is non-mysterious. If the world should be blasted to smithereens during the next presidency after Ronald Reagan's, this would make it true (be responsible for the fact) that even now, during Reagan's term, he is the penultimate president of the United States. Only if one bears this straightforward sense of "make true" and "responsible" in mind can one properly understand the thesis that an

ante-mortem person can be harmed by events that happen after his death. (Pitcher, 1993, pp. 187–188)

And Joel Feinberg (1990, p. 83) argues in his later work that “we can think of some of a person’s interests as surviving his death, just as some of the debts and claims of his estate do, and that in virtue of the defeat of these interests, either by death itself or by subsequent events, we can think of the person who was, as harmed.” So, for Feinberg, any setback to the interests of the dead constitutes a setback to the interests of the now dead person who was previously alive.

More recently, David Boonin (2019, p. 2) has developed Feinberg’s view about posthumous harms, and he argues that although it is impossible to determine when exactly a living person is harmed by a posthumous event, “it is possible for an act to make things worse for a person, or to make that person’s life go less well for them [...] [and also] it is possible for an act to harm a person even if the act takes place after the person is dead.” So for Boonin, although the life of the person is overall worse off if their interests are set back, as it is for others who endorse the Ante-Mortem Harm view, the subject of harm is the living person who had the desire, and the later event only *makes it the case* that the person’s earlier desire is not satisfied (Boonin, 2019, pp. 127–128).

There are differences among these accounts if one examines them closely, but my aim here is not to give a full treatment of what ante-mortem harm is, when exactly the harm occurs, what the most plausible version of the view is, and what objections each variant might face. These are important questions in their own right, but they fall outside the scope of my discussion. The crucial point for my purposes here is that all the authors I have cited agree on the central claim that the harm resulting from the frustration of a desire affects the person while they are still alive. Whatever disagreements there may be about the precise timing or mechanism of the harm, these authors all locate it within the lifetime of the person who held the desire. That, on my reading, is the core commitment of the Ante-Mortem Harm view, and it is this commitment that matters.

4.3.2 The Ante Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis

If the Moral Harm Account is coupled with the Ante-Mortem Harm view, we get what I will call:

The Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis: People can be harmed posthumously, but they can only deserve harm while alive.

For several reasons, I do not think that this is a plausible thesis. First and foremost, as its name suggests, it is a thesis about ante-mortem blameworthiness. I, however, am looking for a post-mortem or posthumous blameworthiness thesis. According to this thesis, however, Hitler is not blameworthy right now, and to me this seems implausible. In fact, Matheson, Carlsson, and others have accepted other versions of this view. For them, we are only blameworthy while we are alive; what they cannot accept in the Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis is its diachronic aspect: the claim that what happens after death can retroactively change the degree to which the person *was* blameworthy.

Another issue with the Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis is its diachronic aspect. If the thesis is true, it would imply that since people can be harmed after their death, but they can only deserve harm while alive, the amount of harm they get posthumously (the harmful events) can only diminish what they deserved in life. Posthumous harms must therefore diminish a person's blameworthiness while alive. There are, however, several problems with this view of diachronic blameworthiness. If we follow this reasoning consistently, we arrive at the deeply implausible conclusion that a person's degree of synchronic blameworthiness (*i.e.*, their blameworthiness at the time of the wrongful act itself) is determined, at least in part, by the blame they will receive at some point in the future. This does not sound right to me. It implies that whether, and to what degree, a person was blameworthy when they acted depends not only on what they did and the circumstances in which they did it, but also on facts about the future that were entirely unknown and unavailable at the time. This is a strange and troubling implication.

On this view, events that occur after a person's death can determine, retroactively, the degree to which a wrongdoer *was* blameworthy while they were still alive. But this immediately invites the following question about the

living: if posthumous events can retroactively determine the degree to which one was blameworthy during one's lifetime, then why should later events during one's lifetime not equally determine the degree to which one was blameworthy at the very moment one committed the wrongful act? There seems to be no principled reason to draw the line at death.

Another problem with this view is that we can never know how blameworthy a person is at the time we blame them. Since a person's degree of blameworthiness is determined, at least in part, by future harmful events, and since those events have not yet occurred, we are always in a position of fundamental uncertainty about whether the person actually deserves our blame right now. It is always possible that some later harmful event will retroactively determine that the person was more or less blameworthy than we took them to be at the time of blame. We would have to wait, in principle indefinitely, before we could say with any confidence what a person deserved. If we can never know whether someone deserves our blame at the moment we direct it at them, then our blaming practices are worthless. This seems implausible though. When I blame my friend who cheated on their partner, my blame is fitting because of the facts that *now* make my friend blameworthy. Even if I had complete knowledge of everything that has happened up to this moment—the full history of my friend, the harm they have received, and every other morally relevant fact about their life—I would still not know whether they are blameworthy, or to what degree, unless I also know what will happen to my friend in the future. Whether someone deserves blame now turns out to depend on facts that have not yet obtained. This is a deeply counterintuitive result.

Perhaps the strangest implication of all concerns what I might call the Hell Scenario. If a person's *current* blameworthiness is diminished or extinguished by the harm they will receive in the future, then a wrongdoer who is condemned to eternal blame—say, in a hell where they are harmed for their wrongdoings without end—will not now be blameworthy. In other words, if every wrongdoer were eventually subjected to eternal harm in hell, it would follow that no one is blameworthy anymore, and any blame would exceed what they deserve right now. This is implausible too.

I conclude that the Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis must be rejected. As I have shown, it has deeply counterintuitive implications about

diachronic blameworthiness: implications about retroactive determination, permanent epistemic uncertainty, and the strange dependence of present blameworthiness on future events. And even setting these difficulties aside, the thesis is at best a view about the blameworthiness of the living. It does not, and cannot, extend to those who have already died, since it locates all deserved harm (all blameworthiness) within the wrongdoer's lifetime. It is, in other words, precisely the kind of view that a posthumous blameworthiness thesis is designed to go beyond.

I submit that we must instead embrace the opposite view in the posthumous harm literature: the Post-Mortem Harm view. This is the view that genuinely takes seriously the possibility that a person can be harmed after their death, and it is only by accepting this possibility that we can make room for a credible account of posthumous blameworthiness. As I will show in what follows, when the Post-Mortem Harm view is combined with the Moral Harm Account, it yields a plausible and coherent thesis about how people can remain blameworthy after their death; one that avoids the problems that plagued the Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis.

4.3.3 The Post-Mortem Harm View

Those in the other camp in the posthumous harm literature share an important assumption with the first camp: that it is possible to harm people after their death. Where they part ways, however, is on the question of when and where the subject of harm is present. On the Ante-Mortem Harm view, as we saw in the previous section, the harm ultimately affects the person while they are still alive. On the Post-Mortem Harm view, by contrast, the subject of harm is present at the time the harm actually occurs, that is, after their death. The one who is harmed is not the living person; the harm genuinely befalls them at the time of the posthumous event. This is what makes the Post-Mortem Harm view distinctive, and as I will argue, it is this feature that makes it the more promising basis for a plausible account of posthumous blameworthiness.

To illustrate this view of posthumous harm, let's reconsider Talos's and Arnalds's collaboration on *A Dawning*. As I said, in important respects, the album was a project that mattered deeply to Talos, and he had considered releasing it posthumously. This was an interest of his that extended beyond

his lifetime. When it was released, it redefined Talos as an artist, cast him in a new light, gave a new dimension to his reputation, and formed part of how we recognize him as an artist now. The album is now part of Talos's artistic portfolio. Now, suppose again that Arnalds did not care about the album after Talos's death and dismissed the idea of releasing it. People in the Post-Mortem Harm camp believe that, in such a scenario, Arnalds harms Talos right now; this would be a harm to Talos's reputation, name, and biography; moreover, the subject of harm exists right now.

In his early works, Feinberg believed that people's interests can be set back after their death, and it is such interests that are the subject of posthumous harm. In "Harm and Self-Interest," Feinberg says:

Events after death can thwart or promote those interests of a person which may have 'survived' his death. These include his publicly oriented and other-regarding interests, and also his 'self-centred' interests in being thought of in certain ways by others. Posthumous harm occurs when the deceased's interest is thwarted at a time subsequent to his death. The awareness of the subject is no more necessary than it is for harm to occur to certain of his interests at or before death. (Feinberg, 1977, p. 308)

For "early" Feinberg,⁴⁸ it is Talos's interest in releasing the album that is the subject of harm. Those interests that survive a person's death, like Talos's interest here, are, as Feinberg (1977, p. 308) puts it, "the true subjects of [posthumous] harms." Just as people's interests can be promoted after their death, Feinberg believes that they can be thwarted, and in doing so the harm happens at a time subsequent to the person's death, with the subject of harm being that interest itself.

Along similar lines, in rejecting the view that something can negatively affect a person *only if* the person exists at the time the negative effect occurs, Anthony Serafini argues that in harming people after their death, we harm certain properties of that person. Since, for Serafini, one's personhood is constituted by one's properties and the degree to which these properties

⁴⁸ As we saw in § 4.3.1, in his *Harms to Others*, "later" Feinberg (1990, p. 83) dismisses the view that interests can be subjects of harms and writes: "I no longer wish to say that these interests themselves are the 'true subjects of harm,' because that suggests a bizarre ontological reification, as if each interest were a little person in its own right."

remain over time, when some of these properties survive a person's death, any harm to those properties counts as harm to that person. Serafini says:

In agreement with Parfit, I argue that the existence of a person has degrees. I suggest that *properties* of a subject, such as "reputations" and claims, can persist after death, although the subject as such does not, and that these can be harmed. A promise, e.g., can be frustrated merely by being ignored; in that sense a dead person can be wronged, and if wronged, s/he can be harmed. (Serafini, 1990, p. 329)

For Serafini, as for Kant, a person's right to a good reputation survives their death, so we can harm people by damaging their reputation after their death. The crucial difference, however, is that for Kant, damaging someone's reputation is a violation of the rights of the person who once lived; whereas for Serafini (1990, p. 330), the property itself "can be a subject of harm," and that is why the subject of harm exists at the time of the harmful event.

Although both early Feinberg's and Serafini's views have interesting dimensions when it comes to posthumous harm, I do not think that either of them can help a thesis about posthumous blameworthiness. The reason for this is that interests and subjects cannot deserve harm; only people can! We blame people, not the interests or properties that are attached to them. An account that locates the subject of posthumous harm in a person's surviving interests or their abstract properties falls short of what a theory of posthumous blameworthiness requires. Blameworthiness is a property of persons; and so the subject of posthumous harm, if it is to bear on blameworthiness, must itself be a person in the relevant sense.

Like those I cited in the first camp, the thinkers in this second camp also differ among themselves about what exactly the posthumous subject of harm is. While Feinberg and Serafini locate this subject in interests and properties respectively, others have advanced more ambitious views about a kind of existence that extends beyond a person's lifetime; a form of continued presence that consists of all their interests, desires, and properties, taken together as a unified whole. It is this view, I argue, that is most promising for a plausible account of posthumous blameworthiness. By positing a subject (a pseudo-person), even if it is no longer alive in the biological sense, it enables the kind of desert claims that a theory of posthumous blameworthiness needs to make.

It is important to note that these views are entirely non-theological and do not depend on any supernatural claims about posthumous spiritual life, afterlife, the immortality of the soul, resurrection, or reincarnation. They make no appeal to any religion or metaphysics of that kind. What differentiates them from the views of the first camp is that they operate with a broader notion of existence; they do not limit a person's life to the person's biological, sensible, or material existence. On these views, a person's existence is not exhausted by the boundaries of their embodied life; it extends, in a meaningful and non-mysterious sense, into *something else* after their biological death.

In *Posthumous Interests*, for instance, Daniel Sperling talks about the notion of "the Human Subject." He argues that the Human Subject exceeds one's biological life, and describes it as follows:

I would like to suggest a new way to conceptualize the human existence. This is the existence as a subject holding interests, which, due to its uniqueness and membership in the human moral community, will be termed the 'Human Subject'. This subject, I will argue, has a persistent existence in time. To be precise, this subject always exists and its existence is temporal. Like other existing subjects, the 'Human Subject' (HS) does not exist in a physical or material way. Instead, its existence is logical or non-material. (Sperling, 2008, p. 36)

For Sperling, the subject of posthumous harms is the Human Subject: an entity that survives the person's biological death. In arguing for this, he says:

The existence of the Human Subject after the death of the person enables it to continue to hold certain human interests important to that person. The defeat of these interests after the death of the person may constitute legal harm occurring at the moment of the harmful event. In such a scenario, posthumous harm is possible through the thwarting or setting back of these interests. The harmful condition occurs simultaneously with the harmful act, and the subject harmed is the Human Subject and not the ante-mortem person who no longer exists after death. (Sperling, 2008, p. 40)

Although Sperling's main interest in his book lies in legal issues concerning the dead and their non-material belongings, I think the point he makes about harming the Human Subject can help illuminate the kind of existence that matters for some proponents of the second camp on posthumous harm.

From this broader perspective, who we are as human subjects is not and cannot be confined to the limits of our bodily and biological lives. Sometimes, the very moment of death can also define or redefine us. Death is part of our Human Subject, as it can reconfigure who we are and how we are remembered. The death of Jesus, for instance, defined who he was in his entirety. The Human Subject of Jesus, as we know it today, depends heavily on his death and how he was crucified. The way something ends plays a role in defining who or what it is.⁴⁹ Similarly, as we saw in Talos's case, who we are as human subjects is also defined by our transcendent interests, projects, commitments, etc. that extend beyond our lifetime. These are all parts of the Human Subject.

Sperling is not the only one who argues for the existence of a kind of posthumous entity. In a similar vein, in *Posthumous Harm: Why the Dead Are Still Vulnerable*, Raymond Belliotti distinguishes between biological life and what he calls "biographical life." He argues that biological and biographical lives are different dimensions of a person's life, and that a deceased person's life can still be affected and harmed through damage to that person's biography. Like Sperling, Belliotti also believes that something remains after our biological death, and says:

To various degrees, then, individuals are defined largely through their most intensely-held projects, interests, purposes, values, relationships, and convictions. Such factors are not merely objects and concerns held at a distance. A person cannot be a self independently of and severed from her interests, purposes, and ends. Moreover, such constituents of the self endure beyond the end of our biological life. (Belliotti, 2011, p. 165)

⁴⁹ In the French psychoanalytic tradition, and especially in Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*, the way a sentence or chain of signifiers is punctuated can fix or transform the meaning of the sentence (Lacan et al., 2006). In Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, too, we find a concern with how ends and closures (whether the end of a book, or the ends of man) can reconfigure interpretation and meaning (Derrida et al., 1997). I do not want to go into these traditions here; my point is simply that, although what we do during our lifetime largely constitutes the meaning of our lives, it is also important to attend to how our lives end, especially when it comes to defining the Human Subject. Endings can, in some cases, provide a kind of coherence to who the person is, or even give a whole new meaning to it.

For Belliotti, since posthumous harms can shape a person's biography as a post-mortem entity, they harm the person at that time. So, when a deceased person's legacy is harmed, or their memory is dishonored, or their achievements are undermined, the person is harmed right at that moment. Belliotti says:

Posthumous events affect a person's biographical life by enhancing or deflating the value of that life. Posthumous events thus harm or benefit the postmortem entity, which is no longer considered mere material remains, and both immediately and retroactively influence how well the person's life went. (Belliotti, 2011, p. 166)

The list could go on,⁵⁰ but my aim here is not to provide a complete survey of the literature. It is rather to show that in order to make plausible sense of posthumous blameworthiness, a version of the Post-Mortem Harm view along the lines of Sperling's and Belliotti's suggestions must be endorsed. That is, I need to argue that in setting back a person's interests after their death, we are harming a genuine subject: the posthumous entity or Human Subject that remains after the person's biological lifetime. This subject is not a ghost or a soul; it is the continuation of that person in the only sense that matters for my purposes: a bearer of interests, desires, and properties that can still be set back, frustrated, and harmed by events that occur after their biological death. It is only by accepting the existence of such a subject that we can make sense of the claim that a wrongdoer remains blameworthy after their death. For, without a subject that can be harmed,

⁵⁰ Dominic Scott (2000) attributes a similar idea to Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes: "The good or bad fortunes of friends, then, seem to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy unhappy nor to produce any other change of the kind" (Book I, Chapter 11, 1101b, translation by W. D. Ross). Aristotle also talks about our friends, products, etc. as our "other selves," and Scott believes that "if we couple this point [misfortunes of the dead] with the notion of the product as 'another self', we can see how there is a place in Aristotle's theory for post-mortem existence. The producer achieves his highest level of actuality qua producer beyond the grave in the activities of his product. The beneficiary is separate from the benefactor, but he is still, according to Aristotle, another self: in this case, a post-mortem self" (Scott, 2000, p. 228). Taking a different approach, Floris Tomasini (2017, p. 32) argues that posthumous harm "can be thought of as harms to memory and biography." Tomasini develops a broader notion of posthumous harm that not only includes harming the deceased person symbolically, but also includes intrinsically harming their close friends and families by misremembering or dishonoring the dead.

there can be no desert of harm, and without desert of harm, there can be no blameworthiness.

4.3.4 The Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis

If we couple the Post-Mortem Harm view with the Moral Harm Account, we can get what I shall call:

The Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis: People can be harmed posthumously, and they can deserve harm posthumously.

According to this thesis, people's blameworthiness is not extinguished at the time of their death, because the harm they deserve is not extinguished by their death. It is possible to harm the Human Subject, which remains after their biological death as a posthumous entity.

If Arnalds had not released the album, Talos would have thereby been harmed. In this counterfactual scenario, the harm did not happen before Arnalds's decision, and the subject of harm is indeed Talos's Human Subject as a whole. Similarly, if Heidegger is now blameworthy for writing the *Black Notebooks*, this is because he still deserves blame, a setback to his interests, or a frustration of his desires, even now. Importantly for the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis, while it is no longer possible to harm the biological Heidegger who died on May 26, 1976, it is still possible to harm his Human Subject. His living biography is part of what makes Heidegger the person we know today.

We should endorse the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis. This thesis has several advantages over its rival, the Ante-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis. It can explain certain of our practices concerning the dead that remain unexplained if one adopts the rival thesis. Here I will mention three: posthumous honoring, posthumous pardoning, and posthumous punishment. If one agrees that a person's desert for harm is not extinguished at the moment of their death, one can also make sense of how people may deserve honors after their death, how they can still be pardoned, and how they can be the subjects of certain forms of posthumous punishment. Let me explain.

Many of the dead are posthumously blessed, celebrated, and held in high esteem. They are spoken of with gratitude and remembered with sincere

respect. Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Schweitzer, Václav Havel, and many of the dead are praiseworthy. Although Mahatma Gandhi is dead, his biographical life still exists and remains relevant, and his name can *currently* be elevated or demoted.

Consider the case of a philosopher who spends their entire career defending an unpopular interpretation of Aristotle's *ousia* (substance). During their lifetime, this philosopher receives little recognition. Years after their death, however, a philosophical community revisits this philosopher's works and gradually forms a new branch in Aristotle studies. As a result, new Aristotle scholars emerge, fresh interpretations are put forward, and further fruitful discussions take place. At each stage, the dead philosopher receives new honors and awards, and their standing in the discipline is elevated.

The most natural way to understand what is happening in this case is, I believe, that these honors are being given to the philosopher at each subsequent time; not to the living person they once were, but to the posthumous entity, the Human Subject, whose biography is being revised and elevated. The philosopher's reputation, their standing in the community they devoted their life to, their biographical legacy, all of these are transformed in ways that attach directly to that philosopher as a person. Their name is enhanced each time, their life is reappraised, and their posthumous entity is the subject of each new honor as it is conferred. Something is added to their biography at each step. This supports the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis's verdict that people can still deserve things even when they are dead.⁵¹

⁵¹ There are many such examples in religious contexts, particularly in the Catholic Church. A pope's reputation, for instance, can be refined and elevated through different stages after his death. Importantly, after each step, the pope acquires a new title: from "Servant of God," when his life is first examined, to "Venerable," when heroic virtue is officially recognized; then to "Blessed," after one confirmed miracle, and finally to "Saint," after a second miracle and universal recognition. The deceased pope acquires each title at a later time; no pope deserved such an honor when he was still alive. At each level, the honor is only given when the pope becomes deserving of it; the honor then contributes to the pope's biographical life. The pope's reputation is enhanced at each level in a way that makes it hard to argue that at each step it is the living man who benefits. All this happens to the pope's reputation and biography; all these titles attach to his posthumous entity. I am aware that this specific example comes from a theological context and that in the Abrahamic traditions, people are presumed to remain (somehow) alive in some trans-physical sense after their physical death. However, I believe this example still helps

Apart from honoring, if the subject of harm exists posthumously (as part of what makes a person survive their death), then I think we can also explain how people are pardoned after their death. A person who was not pardoned while they were alive can be pardoned posthumously, and their biography can be revised. It is the biographical life of the person that is revised and cleared, and it is their Human Subject that has undergone serious changes. Nothing changes the fact that the person who lived and died was not pardoned back then; they still deserved the harm when they died. However, their posthumous pardon affects the harm they deserve right now. Again, this is a change in one's desert status that occurs after one's death.

My view can also make sense of posthumous punishment. Consider, for instance, the case of the Cadaver Synod of 897 AD, when Pope Formosus's corpse was exhumed and put on trial by his successor, Pope Stephen VI. Formosus was found guilty of perjury and violating church canons, and his body was desecrated. Although this episode was likely part of the power struggles within the Church at the time, on my view, the punishment that is associated with Formosus's exhumation occurred exactly when his body was desecrated. Formosus was not punished before that specific posthumous event. So, in this case, the punishment happened posthumously, and the resulting harm of defamation occurred when the desecration took place, not before.⁵²

These are some of the advantages of the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis. It can explain people's moral status after their death. Now, if one does not accept this thesis, it seems one must either accept that (a) people are not blameworthy after their death and blameworthiness is extinguished at death, or say that (b) even if certain dead people are considered blameworthy now, it is because they were blameworthy at the time of their death. I have previously rejected both of these claims. I think we should reject (a) because

illustrate the metaphysics of the issue at hand: something is added to the person's biography, which elevates their reputation.

⁵² In political philosophy, Pierre Bourdieu discusses the notion of "symbolic power" (Bourdieu et al., 2009; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), where states and authorities hold power over the deceased, may exercise that power, and may punish the person even when the person is dead. Tomasini (2017, p. 35), too, argues that "posthumous punishment is a form of retributive justice and involves a further punishment through dismemberment in addition to capital punishment."

it is counterintuitive to say that Hitler is not worthy of any blame right now, and we should reject (b) because blameworthiness does not apply to time slices; we do not say that Hitler *was* blameworthy; we say he *is* blameworthy. This is not merely a terminological issue. Rather, it manifests, I believe, something important about our practices concerning the dead's blameworthiness.

At this point, someone might object that there is a deep metaphysical problem with this view, namely, that it is unclear what the posthumous entity, the Human Subject, is supposed to be and how it survives. If, following the Greek philosopher Epicurus ([306 BC] 2020, p. 67), for instance, nothing remains of us after our death and nothing can harm us, and if Ernest Partridge (1981, p. 253) is right in saying that "after death, with the removal of a subject of harms and bearer of interests, it would seem that there can be neither 'harm to' nor 'interests of the descendent,'" then clearly no posthumous entity can survive death. How does the Human Subject remain over time when we are no longer there? This is a pressing objection to my account of posthumous blameworthiness. Nevertheless, I think this worry can be addressed without committing to any controversial claim about posthumous identity.

First of all, there is nothing particularly puzzling about the idea that something can exist even when its original bearer or holder is gone. Consider the aroma that lingers in a room after one has finished a cup of coffee. The cup is empty, the coffee is gone, and yet the aroma remains; it exists independently of the thing that originally produced it. Similarly, there is nothing puzzling about the existence of linguistic concepts or thoughts, as some have put it (Serafini, 1990, p. 332; Sperling, 2008, p. 36). When I think of the concept of justice, there is no material holder of that concept that exists in the world in any tangible sense, and yet the concept exists and can be discussed, refined, and applied. The same is true of mathematical truths, cultural meanings, and a wide range of other things we readily accept as existing without requiring a material bearer.

The point of these examples is to loosen the grip of a certain assumption, namely, that existence must always be tied to a material holder. Once we accept that aromas, concepts, and thoughts can exist without such holders, the idea that a person's interests, desires, and biographical properties can

persist after their biological death begins to seem far less strange. If we are comfortable with these everyday cases, we should be equally comfortable with the idea that a person's posthumous entity, the Human Subject, *i.e.*, the holder of interests, desires, and properties that defined them while alive, can continue to exist and be affected by events in the world after their biological death.

When we die, we leave behind material estates: things like our personal items, our children, etc. We also leave behind, I submit, non-material estates: our projects, interests, desires, etc. that extend beyond our lifetime; these are the exact things that still make us vulnerable to others. Now, part of someone's non-material estate is their moral estate:⁵³ what they deserve, be this the harm of blame or the benefit of praise, their blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. These estates can exist, just like our material estates, without our biological, bodily, or material presence. This is another way of imagining how someone's Human Subject holds all their estates after their death.

We must, therefore, rethink what we mean by annihilation. If certain parts of what makes us the persons we are, *i.e.*, our interests, important projects, desert for honors, harm, etc., survive our biological death, then we are not entirely annihilated at death. Our bodies vanish, and our psychological states cease, but there still remains what we cared for most deeply: our commitments, projects, relationships, reputation, and—importantly for my discussion—the moral estates we left behind. This revision of the notion of annihilation thus allows me to respond directly to the metaphysical objection: what survives after our death, the Human Subject, the posthumous entity, is part of us; and that is why any harm to what remains after our death is still a harm to us.

⁵³ I have borrowed the term "moral estate" from Feinberg (1990, p. 86). He describes it as consisting of future-oriented interests that survive a person's biological death and do not require their subjective experiences to exist.

4.3.5 Diminishment of Posthumous Blameworthiness

What mattered for my purpose was to construct a thesis about posthumous blameworthiness that explains how people can remain blameworthy after their death. I did that in the previous section. Now, I want to make a further move and argue that, just like blameworthiness in the case of the living, posthumous blameworthiness can also diminish and cease:

The Post-Mortem Diminished Blameworthiness Thesis: Since people can deserve moral harm (be blameworthy) after their death, the amount of moral harm they receive posthumously (the harmful events) can diminish what they deserve at that time. Their blameworthiness can thus diminish or even cease while they are dead.

According to the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis, blameworthiness can extend beyond a wrongdoer's death because they may still deserve the harms of setbacks to their interests and frustrations of their desires. Now, according to this new principle, the more harm a deceased person's legacy or reputation undergoes, the less blameworthy that person becomes. Importantly, when the harm happens, it affects the dead person's *current* blameworthiness, rather than changing the degree of blameworthiness they had while they were still alive.

If my deceased grandfather still deserves some harm, then just as his degree of deserved moral harm could have potentially diminished while he was still alive, it can also diminish now, after his death. Suppose that he was blameworthy for not returning what he owed to me and instead spent his money on some highly expensive plants. Now that he has passed away, I frustrate his desires concerning his favorite plants. Rather than keeping them in his yard as he wished, I simply sell them. Note that in selling those plants, it is part of my retributive intention that he gets what he deserves,⁵⁴ and my

⁵⁴ It might be objected that in this case, I sound like someone who holds a grudge. But as I said, what matters for the Moral Harm Account is not whether I actually choose to blame (and thus harm) my grandfather after his death, but whether there is a *pro tanto* moral reason to do so. I may well have such a reason and yet decide, all things considered, not to act on it, out of compassion and love, or simply because enough time has passed and

parents are already informed about this and understand why I am doing it. In this scenario, my deceased grandfather is arguably less blameworthy than he would be in a scenario where his strong desire to keep his favorite plants in his yard is not frustrated. His blameworthiness has diminished in the first scenario because he now deserves less harm; he has, in effect, received some of the blame he deserved, and what remains is reduced.

As should be evident, for me, moral blameworthiness is a property that can diminish and cease as the relevant harm occurs; and in this respect, there is no difference between the living and the dead. The more a living or dead person undergoes the harms they deserve, the less blameworthy they become. This is one of the advantages of the Moral Harm Account: it provides a uniform and coherent structure for thinking about how blameworthiness can diminish over time, and it does so without drawing any sharp boundary between the case of the living and the case of the dead.

4.3.6 Why Can't Others Endorse the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis?

Khoury and Matheson do not seem able to endorse the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis, as they understand blameworthiness to rest on the presence of a distinctively flawed psychology. The dead, of course, have no psychology. In fact, for many people, psychological continuity may cease even before their death. The key point here is that Khoury and Matheson not only reject my claim that blameworthiness can extend beyond death; they also cannot account for how a living person's blameworthiness might diminish when that person is not a moral agent. They will struggle to explain how people who suffer severe brain damage—say, from an accident—can remain morally blameworthy. Again, this is because their framework begins with the assumption that blameworthiness depends on a flawed psychology.

Portmore and Carlsson cannot accept the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis either. They can neither plausibly show how Hitler is blameworthy *right now* on their account, nor how a comatose person remains blameworthy. The deceased cannot experience guilt, and that is enough to

it no longer feels important to me. But the reason remains, and with it, so does my grandfather's desert of harm.

show why the Moral Guilt Account cannot accommodate the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis. Guilt requires a living moral agent: an agent who exists, experiences the guilt, and recognizes the moral reason for why they deserve it. None of this can apply to the dead or the comatose. Similarly, Tierney cannot accept the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis either, since only moral agents can bear duties and thereby redeem themselves for their past wrongdoings. The posthumous entity I have described, however, lacks the capacity to act, and therefore cannot fulfill any duties.

Among the proponents of the Hardliner's Claim that I discussed in Chapter 2, Randolph Clarke explicitly argues for posthumous blameworthiness.⁵⁵ Since for Clarke, blameworthiness always lasts forever, it always extends beyond death. In that respect, Clark seems to agree with what I say here. According to him, not only is it fitting to blame the dead, but also people are blameworthy at any subsequent time after their death, forever. That said, I have serious doubts as to whether Clarke can accept the Post-Mortem Diminished Blameworthiness Thesis. As discussed in Chapter II, § 2.5.2, Clarke maintains that once a person becomes blameworthy, their blameworthiness lasts forever. For once a person is guilty, they remain so forever. By contrast, my view allows for the possibility that blameworthiness can diminish (or even cease entirely) posthumously. This is because I take blameworthiness to be a matter of deserved moral harm, and when people get what they deserve, they no longer deserve further moral harm.

Note that Clarke has a different understanding of blameworthiness: for him, it is a matter of the fittingness of reactive attitude blame, and that is why he thinks that blameworthiness is fixed once and for all when a wrongful action enters the ledger. I wonder whether our disagreement would persist if he understood moral blameworthiness the way I do (as having to do with desert for moral harm). Perhaps Clarke would agree with me that blameworthiness in this sense is not forever, since one can receive the harm that one deserves over time, and in this way blameworthiness can be reduced or extinguished.

⁵⁵ Although the other proponents of the Hardliner's Claim have not explicitly said anything about posthumous blameworthiness, I can imagine that they would be comfortable saying that people remain blameworthy after their death, because on their view, blameworthiness always lasts forever.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented my own account of blameworthiness: the *Moral Harm Account*. As I stated, this account emphasizes the desert status of wrongdoers, instead of any other feature of blameworthiness. When it comes to diachronic blameworthiness, there are different ways in which one's blameworthiness can diminish over time, but on my view, what matters is deserved harm. When a person receives all the harm they deserve, they cease to be blameworthy.

I then used the Moral Harm Account to argue that people can remain blameworthy after their death. With the help of the Post-Mortem Harm view, I constructed the Post-Mortem Blameworthiness Thesis and argued that people can be harmed posthumously, and can deserve it posthumously too. I also engaged with some issues in metaphysics concerning which of a person's properties can persist beyond their death, and what relationship holds between a person's existence and their moral estate.

In the next and final chapter, I will conclude this dissertation and propose several avenues for developing my argument: avenues that may guide future work on both diachronic and posthumous blameworthiness.

Chapter V

Concluding Remarks

My inquiry in this dissertation was motivated by two intuitions that seem to pull in different directions. On the one hand, at least for minor moral wrongs, if we meet certain conditions, our blameworthiness for what we have done can diminish and even cease entirely during the course of our lives. On the other hand, those who commit very serious moral wrongs can remain blameworthy long after their deaths. I claimed in Chapter I that any adequate theory of diachronic blameworthiness should be able to accommodate both possibilities: the diminishment and cessation of blameworthiness over time, and its persistence beyond the grave.

My argument proceeded via several stages. I began in Chapter II by examining what I called the *Hardliner's Claim*, i.e., the claim that blameworthiness is *always* forever. Once a person becomes blameworthy for a morally wrong action, they remain blameworthy interminably, regardless of what they do or what happens to them afterward. I considered two accounts and two arguments that have (or could have) been offered in defense of the Hardliner's Claim. The first was the *Ultimate Responsibility Account*, according to which wrongdoers deserve eternal blame because their desert is inexhaustible. The second was the *Moral Ledger Account*, which ties blameworthiness to the permanent inscription of wrongdoings in a person's moral ledger. These two arguments, in turn, were both based on the reactive attitude approach, which grounds blameworthiness in the unchanging fittingness of reactive attitudes like guilt, resentment, and indignation.

I argued that all these accounts and arguments fail to establish the Hardliner's Claim convincingly. Against the Ultimate Responsibility Account, I argued that desert has limits and that wrongdoers, at least in many cases, can receive the punishment they deserve for what they have done. And if that desert is indeed fully satisfied, then their blameworthiness has been extinguished. Against the Moral Ledger Account, I argued that the permanence of historical facts and the fixity of the past do not entail the permanence of blameworthiness. A wrongdoer's past actions remain forever in their moral ledger, but this does not mean that they forever deserve blame for the wrongs they have done. If they are sufficiently punished or have suffered enough for their morally wrong actions (if that punishment or suffering is added to the ledger), then they are not plausibly blameworthy for those actions anymore. Against the arguments from reactive attitudes, I

contended that the fittingness of blame is not contingent only on historical facts and on what was the case at the time the morally wrong action was committed. As many have argued, the fittingness of blame can involve a wide range of facts obtaining in the period between the moment of the action and the moment of blame.

Having rejected the Hardliner's Claim, I then turned to a more moderate claim in Chapter III, according to which blameworthiness is not always forever, although it might be in some cases. The accounts considered in this chapter all accept that blameworthiness can diminish or cease during a person's lifetime if certain conditions are met, but they differ in their views about what the relevant conditions are. According to the *Moral Reform Account*, defended by Khoury and Matheson, blameworthiness diminishes and ceases when the wrongdoer undergoes genuine moral reform and eliminates the character flaw that led to their wrongdoing. According to the *Moral Guilt Account*, defended by Carlsson, blameworthiness instead diminishes and ceases when the wrongdoer has felt all the guilt they deserve. And according to the *Reparative Duties Account*, defended by Tierney, blameworthiness diminishes and ceases when the wrongdoer has fulfilled all their reparative duties and made full amends to their victims.

Each of these accounts may seem plausible as an account of how our blameworthiness can change while we are alive, but I argued that they all face a serious problem when it comes to posthumous blameworthiness. I called this the *Posthumous Blameworthiness Challenge*. The challenge was, if blameworthiness depends on possessing a character flaw, being capable of feeling guilt, or being able to fulfill reparative duties, then the dead cannot be blameworthy, because they possess no character, cannot feel anything, and cannot act. The dead are not moral agents in any ordinary sense, and so the grounds for blameworthiness that apply to the living seem to evaporate at death. I argued that neither the Moral Reform Account, nor the Moral Guilt Account, nor the Reparative Duties Account has the resources to respond convincingly to this challenge.

My own positive proposal, the *Moral Harm Account*, put forward in Chapter IV, offered a way forward. On my account, moral blameworthiness is fundamentally a matter of desert for harm. To be blameworthy is to deserve moral harm: the harm that is inflicted with retributive intent, in recognition

of what the wrongdoer deserves. This harm can be involved in the frustration of desires or the setback of interests. What unifies these forms of harm is that they are inflicted with the recognition that the wrongdoer deserves the harm in virtue of their wrongdoing, and with the intent that the wrongdoer is harmed because of this desert.

The Moral Harm Account, as I formulated it, can accommodate both the diminishment and cessation of moral blameworthiness while we are alive, and the persistence, in some cases, of blameworthiness after death. Blameworthiness diminishes when the wrongdoer receives the moral harm they deserve (whether through feeling guilty, being punished, suffering social consequences, or having their desires and interests frustrated and set back in ways that respond to their wrongdoing). Once all the deserved harm has been inflicted, the wrongdoer's blameworthiness is extinguished. For very serious wrongdoings, however, the harm deserved may vastly exceed what the wrongdoer could ever receive in their lifetime, and so they may die before that desert is satisfied. In such cases, blameworthiness persists.

The key to making sense of posthumous blameworthiness within the framework of the Moral Harm Account, I argued, is to accept a version of the Post-Mortem Harm view: *i.e.*, the view that people can be harmed even after their demise. This requires endorsing a broader notion of existence that does not limit a person's existence to their biological life. Following theorists like Sperling and Belliotti, I argued that a person can continue to exist after their death as a posthumous entity or biographical subject: a bearer of interests, desires, and properties that can still be affected by events in the world. When we frustrate the desires of the dead, damage their reputation, or betray their memory, we set back their interests and thereby harm them, even though they no longer exist in the biological sense.

This metaphysical commitment enables the Moral Harm Account to account for posthumous blameworthiness while allowing it to diminish over time. The dead can remain blameworthy because they can still deserve harm, and they can deserve harm because they can still be harmed. The subject of this harm is not a living conscious being but a posthumous entity, the Human Subject, whose moral standing and status is shaped by the ongoing effects of their actions, the persistence of their desires, and the way their life is remembered and evaluated by others. Blameworthiness after death is thus

grounded in the same thing that grounds it during life: desert for harm. The only difference is that the subject who deserves and receives the harm is no longer biologically alive.

One interesting implication of my account is that blameworthiness can also diminish or cease after death. Just as blameworthiness during one's lifetime can be reduced by receiving deserved harm, so too can blameworthiness be reduced when the dead receive the harm they deserve. If we condemn a dead wrongdoer, frustrate their posthumous desires, damage their reputation, or ensure that their memory is tainted by their crimes, then we are inflicting harm on them, and if that harm matches what they deserve, their blameworthiness diminishes accordingly. In principle, posthumous blameworthiness could even be extinguished entirely if all the deserved harm were somehow delivered, although for the worst wrongdoers, this may be practically impossible.

Let me close by saying that I think that several avenues for future research may emerge from the Moral Harm Account. First, I believe the parallel question of diachronic praiseworthiness deserves sustained attention. If blameworthiness can diminish over time and persist beyond death, can the same be said about praiseworthiness? Can a person become less praiseworthy over time, perhaps because they eventually receive all the *moral benefit* they deserve for their good deeds? Can praiseworthiness extend beyond death, and if so, are the conditions of posthumous praiseworthiness the same as what I have argued with respect to posthumous blameworthiness? The symmetry between blame and praise suggests that many of the same structural questions will arise.

Second, the ethics of blaming the dead deserves more careful treatment. Even if the dead can be blameworthy, it does not automatically follow that we *should* blame them. There are important differences between what is fitting or deserved and what is ethically appropriate or productive. Blaming the dead may be fitting in that it tracks their desert, but it may also be cruel, pointless, or harmful to the living people who loved them. Many people think we should leave the dead alone. After all, a person who has passed away cannot respond or defend themselves. In many cultures, blaming the dead is considered cruel. An old saying warns: "Don't speak ill of the dead; they can no longer defend themselves." But how does the inability of the dead to

defend themselves generate special epistemic or moral risks that count against blaming them? Under what conditions, if any, do we have a moral obligation to blame the dead? To what extent should the interests of the living (*e.g.*, the deceased's loved ones) constrain our practices of posthumous blame?

Third, the question of collective and institutional blameworthiness over time calls for attention. Can groups, organizations, or nations be blameworthy in the same way individuals are, and if so, can their blameworthiness persist beyond the lifetimes of the individuals who compose them? Can a nation remain blameworthy for historical injustices like slavery or genocide, and if so, what does it owe to the descendants of the victims? The Moral Harm Account's focus on harm and desert may provide a framework for thinking about these questions, but they raise distinctive challenges about collective agency, collective desert, and intergenerational responsibility.

Last but not least, the role of forgiveness in diachronic blameworthiness requires a more nuanced treatment. If blameworthiness is grounded in desert for harm, does forgiveness reduce blameworthiness by canceling or reducing that desert, or does it merely involve the victim choosing not to inflict a harm that is still deserved? How about forgiving the dead? Some have argued that it is possible to forgive people after their death (Bell, 2019; Szigeti, 2017), but if that is the case, how does forgiveness change the scope of deserved harm, and how does it shape the Human Subject? These questions touch on deep issues about the nature of forgiveness, the authority of victims, and the relationship between desert and people's moral standing, including after their demise.

I believe some of the practical implications of the Moral Harm Account extend beyond questions of diachronic and posthumous blameworthiness. For instance, they bear on pressing issues in practical philosophy: How should we treat philosophers like David Hume, whose eponymous tower at the University of Edinburgh was renamed in 2020 due to his expressions of racist views in essays and footnotes, despite his monumental contributions to philosophy? Should we continue to celebrate Immanuel Kant's philosophical legacy while acknowledging his deeply troubling racist anthropological writings? There are numerous philosophers whose work we still teach and admire, but whose personal views and actions we now recognize as gravely

wrong. I do not take these to be symbolic questions; rather, they concern how we understand morality. In this sense, the approach to blameworthiness I have developed in this dissertation can perhaps offer useful resources for thinking differently about historical justice, collective memory, and the moral status of deceased persons who were blameworthy for their actions during their lifetime, in a way that neither fully absolves them nor renders them interminably blameworthy for what they did. At least, that is what I hope for.



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Swedish Abstract

Denna avhandling behandlar två frågor: Hur förändras en förövares moraliska klandervärdhet över tid? Och kan denne vara moraliskt klandervärd efter sin död? Jag försvarar tre teser. För det första kan graden av klandervärdhet minska och upphöra helt under en förövares livstid när denne får den skada den förtjänar. För det andra, om så inte sker, kan förövaren fortsätta vara klandervärd även efter sin död. För det tredje kan förövarens klandervärdhet fortsätta att avta även efter döden.

Jag hävdar att befintliga teorier om hur klandervärdhet kan förändras över tid är otillfredsställande. Enligt vissa är en förövare klandervärd för evigt eftersom klandervärdheten är grundad i oföränderliga fakta om det förflutna. Dessa teorier kan inte förklara hur klandervärdhet någonsin kan avta eller upphöra. Andra teorier tillåter att klandervärdhet kan minska och upphöra under förövarens livstid men dessa kan å andra sidan inte förklara hur en förövare kan vara klandervärd efter sin död. De kan inte förklara detta eftersom de knyter klandervärdhet till egenskaper som kräver att förövaren fortfarande är en levande och medveten aktör.

I avhandlingen presenterar och försvarar jag en alternativ teori, the *Moral Harm Account*, enligt vilken klandervärdhet ska förstås som förtjänst av moraliskt relevant skada. Enligt denna teori är en person klandervärd när denne förtjänar att skadas. En persons grad av klandervärdhet avtar i takt med att personen erhåller förtjänad skada. För att redogöra för att en förövare kan vara klandervärd efter döden argumenterar jag för att en person kan skadas efter sin biologiska död och fortsätta existera som ett mänskligt subjekt. Ett mänskligt subjekt är bärare av intressen och biografiska egenskaper som kan behålla även efter en persons biologiska död. Detta möjliggör att det mänskliga subjektet kan förbli klandervärdt då det alltså kan förtjäna skada efter döden, samt att dess grad av klandervärdhet även då kan avta allteftersom skador tillfogas det postumt. Denna teori bekräftar intuitionen att vissa döda kan förbli klandervärda medan andra kan upphöra att vara det.

[...]

Bidding farewell,
I gaze back upon the narrow corridor I have traversed:

Brief was the time, and bitter the journey,
yet it was singular, and lacked nothing at all.

With all my soul, I accept the grace and I pay what is owed!
(Thus spoke the weary Bamdad.)

Ahmad Shamloo, *On the Verge*

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Can we ever outrun our past wrongs? And what happens when death gets in the way? *The Boundaries of Blameworthiness* takes up these very questions. Offering a novel account of blameworthiness, this dissertation argues that as we receive the moral harm we deserve, our blameworthiness diminishes and may eventually cease altogether, whether we are alive or long dead. In doing so, this work challenges received wisdom about deserved guilt, moral reform, and what we owe the wronged.

