

History and Blameworthiness: His-Story Matters for Diminished Blameworthiness

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1. Introduction

We do a lot of blaming. In doing so, it is imperative to make sure we are doing it right. By this, I mean it is important that we blame people to the extent to which they deserve it. Imagine someone cuts in front of me in traffic without looking, forcing me to slam on my breaks. I might yell at them, honk, flick them off, etc. Whatever my reaction, it is a response to the driver as a moral agent on the basis of their morally wrong act. What, if anything, might diminish their blameworthiness? Nomy Arpaly formulates a conception of blameworthiness according to which the driver's blameworthiness might be diminished if and only if it was not done purely out of ill-will, or a lack of goodwill. I disagree; I argue that if a moral agent does not have a reasonable chance to shape the quality of their will, then, in performing a morally wrong act, their blameworthiness for that act is diminished.

Arpaly focuses on praiseworthiness, and from this she reaches a view about blameworthiness, which I summarize in the second section of this essay. In the third section, I argue for a proportionality principle. An agent's worthiness of blame for an act—whatever blame is—depends on their role in the act, how much or the extent to which they participated in it, made it happen. Their role potentially includes their participation in generating the will that gave rise to the act. So, the degree of blameworthiness for an act depends on how their will came to be. In section four, I provide three objections that Arpaly might raise in response to my view. The first objection argues that we can distinguish between blameworthiness for an act and blameworthiness for upbringing, but that does not affect how much blame an agent deserves for their acts. The second objection claims that blame does not involve taking a stand on how one's will came to be that way. The third objection argues that my type of view leads to absurdity, the impossibility of blameworthiness or of moral responsibility. In the fifth section I reply to these

objections. I conclude by proposing an addition to Arpaly's view, a proportionality principle, that better reflects what diminishes blameworthiness.

2. Blameworthiness as Non-Responsiveness to Moral Reasons

In this section, I summarize Arpaly's position on blameworthiness and personal history. She focuses on praiseworthiness and reaches a view about blameworthiness as a result of her view about praiseworthiness. She holds that for an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for them to have done the right thing for the relevant moral reason – that is, for the reasons for which the action is right (the right reasons clause); and an agent is more praiseworthy, other things being equal, the deeper the moral concern that has led to their action (the concern clause). In turn, Arpaly thinks that for an agent to be morally blameworthy for having done a wrong action is for them to not have been responsive to moral reasons or having been motivated by ill-will (the wrong reasons clause); all else being equal, an agent is less blameworthy if the reasons for their actions are not purely motivated by ill-will or responsiveness to ill-moral reasons (the un-concern clause). Given these claims, Arpaly holds that our blameworthiness for an act is less if and only if we are less responsive to ill-moral reasons, or we have comparatively shallow ill-concern. Generally, for Arpaly, facts about how you came to be responsive to ill-moral reasons or came to have ill-concern are not relevant to whether you are blameworthy; such facts also cannot mitigate how blameworthy you are; they cannot excuse you. With my summary of Arpaly's view in hand, in the next section, I explain why I disagree with her about excusing conditions connected to one's personal history.

Praiseworthiness

To understand Arpaly's conception of blameworthiness, we need first to understand her conception of praiseworthiness. To do that, we need to understand how she thinks about three things (a) the moral worth of an action, (b) an agent's responsiveness to moral reasons, and (c) the depth of an agent's moral concern. I take each of these topics in turn, bringing them together in Arpaly's summary statement of what praiseworthiness is.

Moral Worth

According to Arpaly, the moral worth of an action is the extent to which the agent deserves moral praise or blame for performing the action, the extent to which the action speaks well of – or poorly of – the agent.¹ The extent to which an agent deserves praise or blame for their action depends in part on the action's moral desirability. This includes whether something is morally right or wrong or the degree to which that something is wrong or whether it is the morally best possible action. To donate to Project Share is morally desirable; to speed through Carlisle intoxicated is not, and so on. Two actions that are equal in moral desirability might not be equal in moral worth. For example, imagine that two people donate an equal amount of time or money to Project Share, but one of them does it because they genuinely care for people in need, while the other does it because it is a requirement for their community service. Even if the two charitable actions are equally morally desirable – both agents are doing the right thing – it is not true (or, at least, not obviously true) that these agents deserve the same amount of praise. Similarly, a person who is rude to their colleagues due to the stress of some grave news may merit less blame than someone who is rude to their colleagues because they believe their status

¹ Arpaly, Nomy, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Oxford University Press, 2003. Pg. 69

as head of the philosophy department allows them to dismiss the feelings of run-of-the-mill faculty.

Importantly, when Arpaly says that an agent is praiseworthy or blameworthy for an action, she does not mean that an agent should necessarily be praised or blamed for that action: “what people deserve is not always what they should be given.”² For example, imagine Emma is roaming the State Hermitage Museum and she bypasses a red guard rope and touches a Vermeer.³ The oils on her fingers destroy this priceless piece of art. Now also imagine that Emma is a particularly vindictive child who, if severely punished, will shred the rest of the Vermeers in the gallery when given the chance. Some might say that Emma deserves to pay for the destroyed masterpiece or should face prison time or that she deserves some other severe punishment, but she ought to be given a less severe punishment, if any punishment at all, to ensure that the rest of the gallery is protected from her wrath. The moral worth of an action is the extent to which the agent deserves praise or blame for the action, not the extent to which the agent should be morally praised or blamed. Why the same action prompts us to morally praise or condemn some agents more or less than others is what Arpaly calls “the question of moral worth.”⁴

Responsiveness to Moral Reasons

Let us consider for a moment Arpaly’s discussion of Kant’s prudent grocer example.⁵ The grocer is motivated only by a desire for profits, which causes the grocer to set their prices fairly. Although setting fair prices is the morally right thing to do, the grocer is not particularly

² *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 71

³ When I was visiting the Hermitage there were no climate protections or glass surrounding most of the art because “they had survived hundreds of years without it,” so it is very possible this could happen

⁴ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 69

⁵ Kant, I. 1964. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. H. Patton (trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

praiseworthy for setting them that way. Though he did the right thing, his primary motivation for doing it was not the “right” motivation. Arpaly proposes that the grocer's morally right action does not stem from any responsiveness on his part to moral reasons. In pricing fairly, the grocer acts for a reason that has nothing to do with morality or with the features of his action that makes it morally right. The reason he acts is concern for his own welfare, and whatever it is that makes his action morally right, the fact that his action increases his welfare is certainly not what makes it morally right. His reasons for action do not correspond to the actions right-making features.⁶

Arpaly distinguishes between responsiveness *de re* and *de dicto*.⁷ Responsiveness to moral reasons *de dicto* is responsiveness to what one believes or takes to be morally right. Return to the grocer. Suppose he thinks doing what benefits him is morally right and he acts on that thought. Then, he displays responsiveness to moral reasons *de dicto*, i.e., to what he takes to be moral reasons. In the example as I initially described it, the grocer has no thought about morality or the moral rightness of what he is doing, and so he cannot be responding to moral reasons *de dicto*—i.e., to what he takes to be moral reasons. Responsiveness to moral reasons *de re* is responsiveness to whatever it is that makes an action morally right. For example, if the grocer had set fair prices for whatever reason makes that the morally right thing to do, then he would have been responsive to moral reasons *de re*. The distinction between responsiveness to moral reasons *de dicto* and moral reasons *de re* is the distinction between responding to what one believes or takes to be morally right and responding to what is, in fact, morally right.

Arpaly holds that responsiveness to moral reasons *de dicto* is neither necessary nor sufficient for being praiseworthy. Suppose that the grocer thinks increasing his personal profit is

⁶ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 72

⁷ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. *De Dicto*, pg. 73, *De Re*, pg. 77

morally right, and he acts on his desire to increase his profit, setting prices a certain way. The grocer thinks his action is morally right. Arpaly holds that this fact does not make the act praiseworthy. It is not sufficient. Now, instead, suppose that the grocer sets fair prices, and does so because doing so is morally right (for whatever reason that might be), but he has no thought about whether doing so is morally right—perhaps he just has not entertained the issue. Arpaly thinks he is nevertheless praiseworthy. He responds to or “detects” what is morally right and deserves praise for that.

Arpaly holds that praiseworthiness depends primarily on responsiveness to moral reasons *de re*. She says for an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for her to have done the right thing for the relevant moral reasons – that is, the reasons for which she acts, the reasons that actually precipitate her action, are identical to the reasons for which the action is right. To put it plainly, what we praise in the morally praiseworthy agent is their responsiveness to moral reasons *de re*. Going forward when I say, “responsiveness to moral reasons,” I will mean it in the *de re* sense, since this is what Arpaly is primarily concerned with, unless otherwise noted.

Some people do the right thing by some sort of lucky accident⁸, like the grocer, while others do the right thing in response to moral reasons. Something similar is true for people who do the wrong thing. Sometimes, the fact that someone did something wrong appears to be an accident, like the stressed colleague, while at other times, it seems to stem from ill will⁹ or a deficiency of good will, like the head of the philosophy department. Arpaly takes a person to be

⁸ Here, “lucky accident” is taken to mean that the right action was not done on purpose, and it is not a detector of what is morally right, nor does it relate to the later topic of moral luck, to prevent possible confusion

⁹ Arpaly is using “ill-will” in a distinct way here. She means that when someone does an action out of ill-will, they did it exactly because of the action’s wrong making features (79).

responsive to moral reasons to the extent that they want non-instrumentally to take courses of action that have the right-making features that are in fact right-making and not in fact wrong-making— whether or not the person describes or thinks of them in this way.

Depth of Concern

In addition to holding that praiseworthiness depends on responsiveness to moral reasons, Arpaly holds that praiseworthiness also depends on the depth of one's moral concern, the extent to which they have concern for moral reasons. The rough idea is that a person can be motivated more strongly or weakly by moral reasons. Suppose an agent performs an action for the right moral reasons. The extent to which they are more praiseworthy than another person who performs an identical action and who responds to moral reasons depends on the depth of their concern. Let me expand on how Arpaly thinks about this.

Moral concern is concern for what is morally relevant *de re*, not *de dicto*—that is, concern for what is in fact morally relevant, not concern for what the agent takes to be morally relevant. Arpaly claims that concern is a form of desire. To say someone acts out of moral concern is to say that a person acts out of an intrinsic desire to follow morality or a non-instrumental desire to take the course of action that has those features that make actions morally right.

Arpaly makes three points about what depth of concern does not amount to and offers three important markers of depth of concern in everyday life. Arpaly claims, first, that depth of concern is not intensity of feeling. For example, I can care about my friend's well-being more deeply than I care about getting to the cafeteria before the line goes out the door, although

hungry as I am, I experience desire for food more intensely than I experience concern for my friend's well-being. Second, Arpaly holds that the strength of concern does not amount to reflective endorsement. Two people can reflectively endorse the same thing, like "climate action," but they may be different in their level of concern for those things. Suppose Tom and Janice both reflectively endorse action to improve policies that affect the climate. Janice, who lives in New Orleans, expects to see the effects of climate change in her lifetime. She goes to rallies and writes senators. Tom does not think climate change will affect him in his lifetime and does not engage in any sort of "climate activism." Janice's concern for climate action is deeper than Tom's. Third, for Arpaly, depth of concern is not the same as commitment. While Tom is less committed to climate activism than Janice is, this may tempt readers to think of caring in terms of commitment – a reflective endorsement with some sort of emotional backing. This is misleading, however, since we may care deeply about things we do not reflectively endorse at all. For example, someone might care about money, beauty, religion, or the opinions of other people even though one does not reflectively believe that any of these are important.

Arpaly contends that, all other things being equal, depth of concern has three features: a motivational one, an emotional one, and a cognitive one. First, all other things being equal, a person who cares very much about morality, or about any specific moral consideration, will tend to be motivated to action by situations in which the rest of us would not. Second, the deeper a person's moral concern, other things being equal, the more they will find the thought of doing something wrong quite painful – for example, they will feel more guilty. (We can imagine the amoralist as someone who never experiences these emotional reactions in any form.) The more someone cares about morality, the more it colors that person's life. Third, a morally concerned

person is, all else being equal, morality-conscious – they notice morally salient things that a person indifferent to morality would not notice.¹⁰

Arpaly summarizes her conception of praiseworthiness thus:

for an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for them to have done the right thing for the relevant moral reason – that is, for the reasons for which the action is right (the right reasons clause); and an agent is more praiseworthy, other things being equal, the deeper the moral concern that has led to their action (the concern clause).¹¹

2.2. Blameworthiness

In this section, I turn from Arpaly's views on praiseworthiness to her views on blameworthiness. Just as she claims we are praiseworthy for acts of goodwill, she claims similarly that we are blameworthy for acts of ill-will.¹² She does not give a tidy formulation of what she takes blameworthiness to be, so the burden here is on me to do so for her. I do so by trying to maintain a parallel with her conception of praiseworthiness.

I first lay out two types of blameworthy actions that Arpaly distinguishes. Then, I offer a general characterization of what is to be blameworthy for an action, according to her.

Arpaly distinguishes two types of blameworthy actions: (1) those done for sinister reasons and (2) those done for morally neutral reasons, as a result of some indifference to moral

¹⁰ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 86

¹¹ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 84

¹² *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 31

considerations.¹³ To be praiseworthy is to do the right thing for the right reason, and, an agent is more praiseworthy, all things being equal, the deeper their moral concern is. A person is blameworthy for a morally wrong action if that action stems from a failure to respond to the morally relevant reasons. All other things being equal, a person is more blameworthy for a given wrong action if they act out of ill will than they would be if they were to act out of a lack of good will.

To illustrate this, let us return to the example of Emma. Suppose she shreds a very rare piece of art – a morally wrong action. Emma is blameworthy because she failed to respond to the morally relevant reasons for acting, that is, Emma failed to respond to the reasons that make not shredding the painting a morally right action. She is acting out of a lack of good-will. A lack of good will is insufficient responsiveness to moral reasons; and moral reasons are the reasons which make an action morally right. If Emma shreds the painting out of vindictiveness, because shredding the painting is the morally wrong thing to do, then she would have been motivated by ill-will and would also be blameworthy.

Arpaly says that blameworthiness involves either the presence of a sinister motive for action or the marked absence of concern for morally relevant factors. Thus, if no sinister motive is present, and an agent is blameworthy, then that blameworthiness must be the result of an absence of moral concern or vice versa. So, if Emma shredding up the painting was a morally bad action, and it were true that she did not do it out of a sinister motive, then what makes her blameworthy must be her lack of moral concern. If Emma shredding up the painting was a

¹³ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 91

morally bad action, and it were true that she did not do it out of a lack of moral concern, then what makes her blameworthy is her having done it out of a sinister motive.

Given what Arpaly says about blameworthiness, I believe we can provide a tidy formulation of her view that parallels her tidy for formulation of praiseworthiness. Put roughly, since she thinks of praiseworthiness as responsiveness to moral reasons, in turn she thinks of blameworthiness as either (i) responsiveness to ill-moral reasons, or (ii) lack of responsiveness to moral reasons. Thus:

For an agent to be morally blameworthy for doing the wrong thing is for them to have done the wrong thing either for (i) an ill-moral moral reason – that is, for a reason for which the action is wrong or for (ii) lack of responsiveness to reasons that make some *alternative* action right (the wrong reasons clause); all else being equal, an agent is less blameworthy the shallower the ill-moral concern that has led to their action (the ill-concern clause).

Excuse Conditions

So far, I have shown what Arpaly thinks praiseworthiness is and what she thinks blameworthiness is. To start to see where and why I disagree with Arpaly, we need now to look at what she thinks does and does not diminish blameworthiness. For my purposes, the main point of interest is that according to Arpaly, facts about how you came to lack goodwill or how you came to possess ill will do not diminish your blameworthiness for a morally wrong act that you perform. I now clarify her thinking about excuses.

Arpaly thinks that excusing conditions are conditions that break the connection between performing morally desirable actions and performing actions out of ill-will or lack of consideration for morally relevant reasons. Importantly, by “excusing conditions,” Arpaly means things that diminish blameworthiness; these are not what P.F. Strawson calls “exemptions”.¹⁴ For Arpaly, excusing conditions do not completely extinguish blameworthiness, but only reduce or diminish it.

Arpaly says, “good will, ill-will, and moral indifference add up to moral worth, and to the extent that an action is attributable to nonrational factors that have no bearing on the agent's level of good will, ill-will, or moral indifference, the blame or praise warranted is less.”¹⁵ For Arpaly, things are excuses only to the extent that they break the connection between morally desirable action and performing actions out of ill-will or lack of consideration for morally relevant reasons. If an action is attributable to nonrational factors that have no bearing on the agent’s level of good will, ill-will, or moral indifference, the blame or praise warranted is less. This includes things like serious mental conditions, stress, fatigue, mild drugs, etc. If an action is *not* attributable to nonrational factors that have no bearing on the agent’s level of good will, ill-will, or moral indifference, the blame or praise warranted is *not* less.¹⁶

In her example of a person with severe ADHD¹⁷ buying a house without a second thought, Arpaly claims that this action does not demonstrate a lack of moral concern – for the family's finances – and that is why the agent is not very blameworthy for their action. If the agent

¹⁴ Strawson, P.F. “Freedom and Resentment.” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48, 1-25.

¹⁵ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 159

¹⁶ Thus, for Arpaly, “moral ignorance is no excuse.” The fact that you did not believe or know your act was morally wrong does not diminish your blameworthiness. This follows from her view that you are blameworthy if you lack goodwill or have ill-will. Arpaly, Nomy. “Why Moral Ignorance is No Excuse.”

¹⁷ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 152

had had a second thought, but bought the house anyway, all else being equal, she would be more blameworthy. And, of course, if she did so out of ill-will, she would be more blameworthy.¹⁸

The point most interesting to me is that it does not matter to Arpaly how you came to have ill will or lack good will; for her, such facts do not excuse. Imagine Maddie is a genuinely bad person who, out of her badness, performs bad actions. For Arpaly, that is all we need to know when deciding if Maddie is blameworthy for those actions.

Arpaly says a similar sort of thing when talking about Robert Harris. She describes Harris as the “quintessential cold-blooded killer.” But as a child, Harris was consumed by his parents’ relentless physical violence and emotional abuse from the day of his birth. In correctional school, he was subjected to even more cruelty. At no time in his formative years did Harris experience genuine affection. As a result, he became a person who developed with no concern whatsoever, conscious, or unconscious, for his fellow human beings or morality. Arpaly says, “his parents (and the penal system) are blameworthy for creating his bad character, *but that need not reduce from the blame he deserves for the murders he committed.*”¹⁹ We might blame his parents for “making” him a bad person, but since Harris performed a morally bad action and

¹⁸ More complicated examples of excusing conditions are what Arpaly calls “Freudian Slips,” which Arpaly thinks often deserve very little blame or praise. The excusing condition in such a case is generally that one’s deed is due to unconscious factors in either of two senses: first, it would not have happened with conscious attention; second, even the best of us, if we were distracted, could have done something similar, because we all harbor, to the same harmless extent, the sort of petty motives involved in your average slip. However, some unconscious actions are not the average slip and are more serious affairs, in a sense that it takes marked ill-will or marked lack of good will to perform them, even unconsciously. Arpaly uses Freud’s example of a circus performer who “accidentally” kills her jealous husband by fumbling a key action of their performance. Her action cannot be written off as a result of a distraction since she is perfectly capable of performing this action under distracting conditions. Only the marked lack of good will makes her susceptible to distraction. Arpaly asserts that the performer is very blameworthy, though she would have been more so had she performed the action consciously. Additionally, there are unconscious actions which are the result of a constellation of motivations which would have produced the same outcome even if the agent were conscious of their intentions, and in these cases, unconsciousness is no excuse. *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg, 161-162

¹⁹ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg, 170. Italics and underline here are mine for emphasis.

did it for sinister reasons, and the depth of his sinister-ness seems to be great, not only is he blameworthy, but we ought also not to reduce the blame he deserves for this action, even if he had a neglectful childhood. He is motivated by ill-will and sinister motives and is unresponsive to moral reasons, and as such, is blameworthy for his actions.

Arpaly expresses this sentiment in terms of constitutive moral luck.²⁰ In short, constitutive moral luck is “the idea that luck – in the form of incidental historical facts about a person's upbringing, genetic makeup, and incidental life events – can make someone morally better or morally worse, and that person can be blameworthy or praiseworthy for actions performed out of a motive to whose existence luck has contributed.” So, while it might be unlucky that Robert Harris had this upbringing and it might be true that this unluckiness contributed to a motive for his wrong actions, nonetheless he is blameworthy for those actions.

3. How Your Will Was Shaped Affects How Blameworthy You Are

I agree with Arpaly that Robert Harris is blameworthy, but she is mistaken about how blameworthy Robert Harris is, and more generally about what can diminish a person's blameworthiness.²¹ In this part of my essay, I argue that Harris's personal history ought to diminish his blameworthiness for some of the morally wrong acts he performed. How his ill-will or lack of goodwill came into existence should affect how blameworthy he is.²² I proceed as

²⁰ Nagel, Thomas. “Moral Luck,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 50 (1976), 137–55.

²¹ On the grounds that Harris is a psychopath or otherwise insane, Susan Wolf might contend that Harris is not blameworthy at all, or only in an extremely limited way. Wolf, S. “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility.” For a contrasting perspective on that issue, see Patricia Greenspan's “Responsible Psychopaths.” Going forward, I leave aside the possibility that Harris is not blameworthy at all.

²² Although *Unprincipled Virtue* has received a lot of attention from scholars, direct responses to it that I know of have not focused on Arpaly's conception of blameworthiness. See, for example, Harmon, E. “Discussion of Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue*,” Stroud, S. “Moral Worth and Rationality as Acting on Good Reasons,” and Mason, E. “Rationality and Morality: Thoughts on *Unprincipled Virtue*”

follows. First, relying on Gary Watson, I describe Robert Harris's upbringing.²³ Second, I argue that this upbringing should diminish how blameworthy he is for some of the morally wrong acts he performed because (i) he did not have a reasonable chance to avoid becoming someone with ill-will, and (ii) this suggests that he had a lesser role in some of the morally wrong acts he performed than he would have had otherwise.

Robert Harris

When Robert Harris was executed by the state of California, other members on death row celebrated. They bought candy, cookies, and soda, and, at the approximate time that Harris was executed, they celebrated. What crime did Harris commit to be so vile that other members of death row celebrated in his execution?

On July 5th, 1978, John Mayeski and Michael Baker had just driven through a fast-food restaurant before heading out to fish for the day. Robert Harris and his brother Daniel were on the other side of the parking lot attempting to hot wire a car so they could rob a bank without using their own car. When Robert failed to start the car, he decided to take the car from Mayeski and Baker, both just 16. At gun point, Robert forced the boys to drive to the edge of a canyon, where he told them of his plan to rob a bank, promising the boys they would not be hurt. Harris and the boys came to an agreement that Baker and Mayeski would wait for the Harrises to leave, then walk into town and report their car stolen.

As Mayeski and Baker walked away, Robert Harris raised his rifle and shot Mayeski in the back. When Baker ran, Robert chased him into a valley and shot him four times. When he

²³ Watson, G. 1987. "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil."

came back to the car, he found Mayeski was still alive. Robert walked over to Mayeski, knelt beside him, put the gun to his head, and shot him. He then laughed, seeming to delight in the killing of the youths.

Robert got back into the car and drove back to a friend's house where he, just 15 minutes after killing the two boys, opened their drive through lunches and began eating. He offered food to his brother, who became nauseated at the idea. Robert laughed and taunted his brother for being "too weak." Robert then suggested the two boys dress as police officers and inform Mayeski and Baker's families that the two boys were dead. While the boys prepared to rob the bank, Robert examined the weapon he used to shoot Mayeski. He noticed blood stains and remnants of flesh on it and said, "I really blew that guy's brains out," then laughed.

Few people who knew Harris were surprised he ended up on death row. He had spent seven of the previous ten years in prison, only had an 8th grade education, convicted, and sentenced to a federal youth center at fourteen. After being released, he was twice arrested for torturing animals and convicted of manslaughter for beating a neighbor to death after a dispute.

On the surface, Robert Harris is a quintessential cold-blooded killer, as Arpaly describes him, and an archetypical candidate for blame, as Watson writes.²⁴ We respond to his heartlessness with moral outrage and loathing. Arpaly and Watson argue that Harris exhibits an inversion of moral concern, not a lack of understanding of it. A person so devoid of compassion and conscience that he could kill two youths, laugh about it, then nonchalantly eat their hamburgers.

²⁴ Watson, G. 1993. "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil." *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. Pg. 170

I argue that Harris' inversion of reason responsiveness is a result of a lack of understanding of the morally relevant reasons for acting, as a result of his personal history. Following Peter Strawson and others, I hold that these historical considerations are relevant for determining whether he is blameworthy for his actions, and if he is, how much blame he deserves.²⁵

Robert Harris' 29 years of life were dominated by suffering and pain. Harris was born hours after his mother was kicked in the stomach. She was 6 ½ months pregnant and her husband came home drunk, accusing her of infidelity. He claimed the child was not his own, he threw her down, kicked her, and hit her, causing her to hemorrhage. Robert was born that night; his heart stopped but labor was induced, and it saved his life. He was premature and would spend months in the hospital.

Robert's father was an alcoholic who was convicted twice for sexually molesting his daughters. He frequently beat his wife and children. His mother became an alcoholic and criminal who never developed love for Robert. When Robert's father first saw him in the hospital, he said "who is the father of that bastard?"²⁶ When his mother picked him up from the hospital, she claimed it was like taking home a stranger's kid.

All the blame for the pain and permanent injury that Robert's mother sustained as the result of his birth was heaped onto an infant. As the abuse continued, coupled with economic

²⁵ Strawson, P. 1962. "Freedom and Resentment." Mele, A. 1995. *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy*, p. 172. Fischer, J.M. Ravizza, M. 1998. *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*, p. 207. McKenna, M. 2004. "Responsibility and Globally Manipulated Agents." Vargas, M. 2006. "On the Importance of History for Morally Responsible Agency." McKenna, M. 2016. "A Modest Historical Theory of Moral Responsibility."

²⁶ "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil." Pp 119-147

hardship and Robert being her fifth child in a short time, she grew to hate him. When Robert would try to have physical contact by rubbing his hands on his mother, he was kicked away, one time making his nose bleed. Despite this, at age 10, while watching Bambi, Robert sobbed when Bambi's mother was killed.

As a result of the abuse and being born premature, Robert had a learning disability and a speech problem. At school, his classmates bullied him, mocked him, and made him feel stupid. When he went home, he would be physically abused.

At fourteen, Robert was convicted and sentenced to a federal youth detention facility. He was one of the youngest inmates there. He was raped several times and attempted suicide twice. When he was released from prison, he was not the kid who cried during Bambi anymore. He evolved into a man who was arrested several times for killing and torturing animals, a person who would laugh while sodomizing them and stab them incessantly.²⁷

Just Give Me a Chance

The initial reaction to Robert Harris as a straightforward example of evil might now be confused.²⁸ On one hand, we feel sympathy for the boy who was subjected to an onslaught of abuse; on the other hand, we feel disgust towards the man he became. Indeed, Harris was not responsive to moral reasons, but was instead motivated by ill-will.

²⁷ Watson, G. "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil." Pp 119-147.

²⁸ Watson, G. "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil," Pg. 134

In this section, I contend that Robert Harris did not have a reasonable chance to become someone with a tendency toward good will, and this suggests that he had a lesser role in some of the morally wrong acts he performed than he might otherwise have had.

Imagine Olivia is also a quintessential cold-blooded killer. She kills without remorse and even seems to rejoice in the suffering of her victims actively and wholeheartedly, the same as Harris. Imagine that after her childhood, she lived a nearly identical life to Harris's. She too killed two youths, laughed about it, ate their food, and showed no remorse. She too enjoyed the suffering of people and animals. The difference, however, is that Olivia grew up in a home where her parents tried to teach her the difference between right and wrong and never physically abused her. In this respect, Olivia had a reasonable chance to become suitably responsive to moral reasons, to develop a good will, and to avoid developing a bad will. She was explicitly exposed to morally right ways of acting yet chose to spurn morality.

Since Robert Harris did not have a reasonable chance to become suitably responsive to moral reasons but Olivia did, I believe that he is less blameworthy than she is for the same morally wrong acts that they both perform. In general, I hold that if an agent does not have a reasonable chance to become properly responsive to moral reasons, then that agent is not as blameworthy for doing a morally wrong act as someone else who does have a reasonable chance.

We Three Grocers

I now offer two variations on Kant's prudential grocer, which I think support my contention that Robert Harris is less blameworthy for his morally wrong acts than Olivia is for

the same acts because Robert Harris had less of a role in the production of those acts than Olivia had.

Grocer #1 learns how to be a grocer from his parents. They are bad grocers. They stock things in confusing ways; they stock near-stale or near-rotten goods; they overprice; they are rude to customers; their floors and shelves are dirty; the store is sweltering in summer and frigid in winter. That is what Grocer #1 comes to think good grocer-ing is. When they die, he as a teenager inherits the store from them. He continues to run the store as they did. Like them, he is a bad grocer.

Grocer #2 also has grocers for parents and inherits the store from them. Unlike the parents of Grocer #1, his parents are mostly good grocers. Generally, they do approximately the opposite of what G#1's parents do. They stock things in sensible ways; they stock fresh items; they price competitively; they are helpful to customers; they regularly clean the floors and shelves; they try to keep temperatures tolerable. Despite growing up in this environment, Grocer #2 does not himself do these things. He even thinks they're unnecessary. When his parents die, Grocer #2 inherits the store, but instead of running it as they did, he runs it like Grocer #1 runs his store. He is a bad grocer.

Through their informal education, G#2 and G#1 were taught grocery-store-owning practices. G#2 was taught good grocery store owning practices. Grocer #1 was led to believe that bad practices were in fact good practices. While he is criticism-worthy for being a bad grocer, he ought to be less criticism-worthy than Grocer #2, who had ample chance to become a good grocer, but prefers bad grocery-store-owning practices.²⁹

²⁹ I say 'criticism-worthy' and not 'blameworthy.' Probably, blame is not a suitable response to someone who simply stocks shelves poorly or does something else that displays their bad quality as a grocer.

Imagine G#1 and G#2 were stocking shelves side by side with each other. We can observe them doing it incorrectly and make the judgment that they are bad grocers because they do not do good grocery store owning actions. Subsequently, we are presented with the education of both the grocers and are shown that G#2 saw how to stock the shelves the right way but is choosing to do it the wrong way, whereas G#1 has only seen the right way shelves are supposed to be stocked when visiting other stores but was never taught how to actually stock shelves the right way. As far as being a bad grocer is concerned, G#2 is an even worse grocer, since he saw how to do it right but is choosing to do it wrong. Grocer #1 is still a bad grocer, but that is to be expected when someone is not taught how to stock shelves the right way. If, Chauncey, Jim, Jeff, and I all tried to stock grocery shelves, we would be bad grocers. We might have an idea of the right way to stock shelves from our time exposed to grocery stores while we shop, but that does not necessarily mean we know the right way to stock shelves. Nevertheless, if we stocked the shelves in the wrong way, we would still be criticism-worthy for having done so. However, we would not be as bad of grocers in comparison to a grocer who has worked at Giant for eight years, knows the right way to stock shelves but still does it the wrong way. Not only would this employee be criticism-worthy, but they would be more criticism-worthy than the four of us because the employee was acting specifically on his ill-will.

Return to Robert Harris and Olivia. I believe that Harris is more like Grocer #1 and Olivia is more like Grocer #2. Grocer #1 acts on the bad-grocerying features of actions – the features which make his actions bad grocery store owning practices – as a result of his bad grocer education. Grocer #2 acts on the bad-grocerying features of his actions in spite of a good grocer education.

Diminishing Blameworthiness

Now, with the grocers' examples and the contrast between Robert Harris and Olivia in hand, I contend that one grocer is less blameworthy for some act of bad grocer-ing than the other grocer is for that same act.

Grocer #1 is only exposed to good grocery store owning practices when he is in other grocery stores but is taught bad grocery store owning practices by his parents. So, he "inherits" them as good grocery store owning practices.

In contrast, Grocer #2 knows his actions are the wrong actions, is aware of the right actions, but displays moral indifference by continuing to practice bad grocery store owning habits. The relevant grocer concerns here have had ample chance to be developed and the tendency toward "grocer ill-will" or lack of "grocer goodwill" could have been nipped in the bud by Grocer #2, since he was taught the right reasons for acting. The grocer who acts on his wrong reasons while knowing the right reasons for acting is choosing ill-will. Whereas the grocer who acts on his wrong reasons while not being taught the right reasons for acting is being "led" towards ill-will by circumstances largely outside their control. And all else being equal, someone who chooses ill-will is more blameworthy for that action than someone who is led to ill-will by circumstances largely out of their control.

It is no question that G#2 and G#3 are bad grocers. It is no question that Robert Harris and Olivia are bad moral agents. The question is whether they are equally blameworthy for the morally bad acts they perform.

I propose a type of proportionality principle for blameworthiness: The greater role an agent has in producing a morally wrong act, the more blameworthy the agent is for that act. For example, refer back to the side-by-side comparison of the grocers stocking shelves. The G#2 had

a greater role in producing his wrong act than G#1, since he could have been reasonably expected to avoid it or know the right way of acting. Meanwhile, Chauncey, Jeff, Jim, and I would play less of a role in our blameworthy action because we could not be reasonably expected – we did not have a reasonable chance – to learn to stock shelves the right way because we were never taught how to do it. Additionally, one’s “role” includes events before the act is performed, things that lead up to the act, things that affect the kind of decisions one makes, the reasons for which one acts. In the previous example, this would be one’s education, since the grocer’s role in their criticism-worthy action was influenced by whether or not they learned the proper way to stock shelves. The less blameworthy you are for your bad character (someone with generally “ill will”) that resulted in a morally bad act that you performed, the less blameworthy you are for that act itself. The degree of blameworthiness for an act depends on the degree of blameworthiness for certain types of antecedents of that act, such as one’s character. Olivia and G#2 could be reasonably expected to foresee that with their bad character, they might perform various bad acts. G#2 had a reasonable chance to avoid becoming a bad grocer because of his education yet chose to still become one. Olivia had a reasonable chance to avoid becoming a bad moral agent. She was taught the right reasons for acting, yet chose to become a bad moral agent, knowing that killing is something bad moral agents do (but not limited to this). By having access to the education to make good choices where an agent can reasonably foresee, and thus have a fair chance of avoiding this outcome, Olivia is more blameworthy for her bad character, which resulted in a morally bad act, and she is more blameworthy for that act as a result. If, like Robert Harris, an agent did not have a reasonable chance to learn the right way to be a moral agent, we should regard that agent as less blameworthy for what he does than he would have been if he had had a reasonable chance.

4. An Act, An Analogy, and An Absurdity

In this section, I turn to addressing three compelling objections that Arpaly might raise in response to my argument so far. First, she might say that I am conflating blameworthiness for how one's character or ill-will was formed with blameworthiness for some act that they later perform. Second, she might allege that I rely on a flawed assumption about what blame is, about its proper targets. Third, she could contend that by emphasizing the relevance of an agent's history to their blameworthiness, my conception of blameworthiness leads to the absurd result that we can never be blameworthy for anything. I will address each objection in turn.

All Roads Lead to Robert

Arpaly writes:

We can feel sorry for the child who was tormented by his parents, and we can feel sorry for him, among other reasons, because his parents turned him into a bad person. The adult, however, already is a bad person—a thoroughly bad one. Naturally, he is not to blame for creating his bad character [...] Harris's parents (and the penal system) are blameworthy for creating his bad character, but that need not reduce from the blame he deserves for the murders he committed; there is enough blame to go around, one could say.³⁰

Arpaly and I disagree about something important. Arpaly says that we should distinguish (a) blameworthiness for Robert Harris's acts from (b) blameworthiness for Robert Harris's

³⁰ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*. Pg. 170-171

upbringing and bad character. Given this, Arpaly would likely say something similar about the grocers.

Robert Harris is a product of an astonishingly horrible childhood: his parents were relentless in their physical abuse and emotional hostility towards him from the day he was born; he was subjected to even further cruelty by his classmates in school and again in correctional school; and no one, it seems, showed him the affection he needed in his formative years. As a result of this history, his unlucky draw in the moral lottery, he developed into a person with no concern whatsoever, consciously, or unconsciously, for his fellow human beings or moral codes. Arpaly would argue, and I would agree, that Harris is all ill-will; he acts for sinister reasons and is unresponsive to moral reasons. For Arpaly, this fact about Harris alone – that he was unresponsive to moral reasons – makes him blameworthy for his morally wrong acts. She grants that we can feel sorry for Harris, partially because his parents “turned him into a bad person”, but Harris is still a genuinely bad person.³¹ As the above quote is illustrating, Arpaly believes that Harris is not blameworthy for at least initially creating his lack of responsiveness to moral reasons, his parents and the penal system are blameworthy for that. However, on this basis, Arpaly contends that it is not the case that he deserves less blame for the morally wrong acts that he performs. Although he deserves no blame for his character, once that character is in place, he is completely blameworthy for the morally wrong acts that he performs. Since we can distinguish his blameworthiness for his character from his blameworthiness for his acts emanating from his character, we should not think his lack of blameworthiness for his character diminishes his blameworthiness for his acts. Once we have distinguished blameworthiness for an act from blameworthiness for ill-will, or character, we can say that Harris does not deserve blame or much

³¹ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*. Pg. 170

blame for his initial upbringing or the initial development of his character. But that does not affect how much blame he deserves for his acts.

The Limited Scope of Blame

In conjunction with this point, Arpaly would stress that I am relying on a flawed conception of blame; it targets less than what I seem to think it targets. Here is an analogy Arpaly offers.³² Imagine that an economics professor makes a trip to the local supermarket and judges that a student working there is a poor grocer. The professor makes this judgment because the student has no appreciation for economic factors, such as supply and demand, and has no will to succeed and fails at the majority of tasks it takes to be a good grocer – whatever those might be. Now suppose the professor’s spouse tells her about the personal history of the student: The student’s family circumstances “practically ensured that no desire to succeed or appreciate economic factors could develop” in this student. The professor might reasonably sympathize with or “feel bad” for the student. But the professor would not be unreasonable to continue maintaining that the student is, as a matter of fact, a bad grocer.

As this analogy is intended to illustrate, Arpaly takes blame to be “a belieflike attitude similar to fear or various kinds of esteem.”³³ It is warranted in the way fear of a flu shot is warranted only if flu shots are dangerous to me, or in the way my admiration for Charles Dickens’ writing is warranted only if he is in fact a great writer. For Arpaly, for someone to be blameworthy does not, in itself, imply that any course of action is appropriate in regard to that person. Rather, it is for a certain attitude towards this person to be epistemically rational. Olivia,

³² *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*. Pg. 172

³³ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*. Pg. 172

each of the three grocers, and Robert Harris are blameworthy, since our attitude towards them, whether it be disgust, hate, anger, or whatever reaction accompanies our judgements of ill-will and wrong actions, are epistemically rational.

While luck might contribute to making people smart, stupid, prone to touching valuable artifacts, good at being a grocer, etc., such luck does not diminish the epistemic rationality of judging that a person displays those qualities. On Arpaly's view, the statement "Harris is blameworthy" does not mean "Harris should be punished" any more than "Kant is a bad grocer" means that "Kant should not be accepted to Columbia Grocery School." So, while Harris was unlucky in the moral lottery, the facts of the matter are that he acted out of ill-will, and our reactions towards this ill-will are epistemically rational. Therefore, it is epistemically rational to hold that Harris is blameworthy. For these reasons, Arpaly would hold that Harris's personal history does not diminish his blameworthiness for the morally wrong acts he performed.

Summing up, blame is analogous to judging whether someone is good at business. Just as that does not require taking a stand on how one came to be that way, so too blame does not involve taking a stand on how one's will came to be that way. It is focused only on the moral quality of the agent's will at the time of acting.

An Absurd Conclusion

Since Arpaly would allege that I have a mistaken conception of blame, one that assumes that in targeting some act, it also thereby targets how that act came about, that act's provenance, a third objection that Arpaly might make is that my conception of blameworthiness leads to the absurd result that we are not blameworthy for anything.

She might reason as follows: by insisting that blameworthiness for a certain act ought to be diminished if the person who committed the act is less blameworthy for their bad will than they otherwise might have been, I am committed to a wildly implausible conception of blameworthiness, one that makes it impossible. For I appear to be committed to the claim that an agent is blameworthy for an act only if they are also blameworthy for the will that led to the act, and an agent is blameworthy for their will only if they are also blameworthy for the acts that produce that will. If I am committed to that claim, then we are not blameworthy for anything. For we cannot be blameworthy for the antecedents of our earliest will, because those antecedents occur before we are born or before we are old enough to qualify as moral agents.

With this line of reasoning, Arpaly is, in essence, wielding a version of Galen Strawson's Basic Argument against me. According to Strawson:

Nothing can be *causa sui* – caused by itself. In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions, one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain critical mental respects. Therefore, nothing can be morally responsible³⁴

Let me clarify what Strawson is saying. My temperament, dispositions, eye color, home I am born into, are all the result of things that ultimately are not up to me. By some chance, my parents met and produced me. Chances in their upbringings let them afford to go to college, get degrees, and have the sort of life that allows me to attend school. The genetic makeup of their parents influences their temperament and genes, which were passed to me. All of my acts are a result of my genes, upbringing, and circumstances, which I did not cause and cannot be

³⁴ Strawson, Galen. 2008. "The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility." In *Real Materialism: and other Essays*, 319-337. Oxford University Press.

blameworthy or morally responsible for. So, I cannot be blameworthy or morally responsible for my acts.

Strawson thinks that we are like a puppet, and the past is like a puppet master. Imagine a puppet in a puppet version of Othello. The puppet master is controlling the puppet Othello as it crosses the stage to smother the puppet Desdemona for her alleged infidelity. If Othello smothers Desdemona, it would be odd to blame him, since all of his actions were being controlled by the puppet master. According to Strawson, since a person is like Othello and thus does not have ultimate control over themselves and their actions, then they do not deserve praise or blame.

While Strawson thinks that we are not morally responsible or blameworthy for anything, Arpaly's objection against me is that since we are indeed morally blameworthy for some things, my view must be mistaken, since it implies that we are not.

5. Three Replies

In this section, I reply to Arpaly's three objections. In reply to the first one, I hold that while we can and should distinguish between (a) blameworthiness for a person's character and (b) blameworthiness for an act performed by that person, it remains true that (b) depends on (a). In reply to the second objection, I argue that there is more to blame than attributing to an agent an act and making a moral assessment of that agent for performing that act. In reply to the third objection, I argue that something that suffices for diminishing blameworthiness need not be or imply the absence of something that is necessary for being blameworthy full stop. A certain sort of personal history can diminish one's blameworthiness even if the absence of that sort of history is not a necessary condition for being blameworthy. In this respect, I am not committed to

claiming the sort of conception of moral responsibility that allegedly leads to an infinite regress of moral responsibility.

Character and Act

While we can and should distinguish between blameworthiness for a person's character and blameworthiness for an act committed by that person, that does not, by itself, imply that one does not affect the other. For example, a bushel of apples might weigh 48lbs, but each individual apple is a part of the entire weight of the bushel. So, while we can distinguish between the weight of the bushel and the weight of each individual apple, the weight of the bushel is dependent upon the weight of each apple in the basket. From this analogy, the blameworthiness for an act includes, as a part, blameworthiness for the will that produced that act.

What is Blame?

While my focus in this paper is blameworthiness, in light of Arpaly's second objection, I need now to be clearer about what blame is.

Blame is a response to moral agents on the basis of their morally wrong, bad, or otherwise morally objectionable actions, attitudes, or characters. Beyond this initial clarification of what blame is, there are competing views about it, each stressing different things. Assuming blame includes some type of mental state, one can find three different types of theories, each emphasizing a different type of mental state.³⁵ Emotional theories emphasize a negative emotional reaction towards the objects of our blame. While different theorists might disagree

³⁵ Tognazzini, Neal and D. Justin Coates, "Blame," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/blame/>>.

about which emotion or emotions a person is feeling when they blame, these theories are united by a shared commitment to thinking that to blame is to respond to others' actions with a broadly negative emotion. Cognitive theories of blame hold that blame is fundamentally a judgment that we make about an agent in light of their actions, attitudes, or character. Arpaly says that blame is "a belieflike attitude similar to fear or various kinds of esteem."³⁶ By mentioning belief, she counts as thinking that blame has a cognitive dimension. She also says, "similar to fear," so she might also count as thinking blame has an emotional dimension. A conative theory of blame emphasizes motivational elements, like intentions. On this type of theory, to blame someone centrally is or involves a state that aspires to change or affect the world in some way.

Now that we know a bit more about what sort of mental state blame might be, I return to the core of Arpaly's second objection. Arpaly thinks blame is analogous to judging that someone is bad at business. Just as that does not require taking a stand on the badness/goodness of how one came to be that way, so too blaming someone for an act does not involve taking a stand on the badness/goodness of how that act or that person came to be that way. Blame is focused on or targets only the moral quality of the agent's will at the time of acting.

I contend that there is more to blame than that; it targets more than that; it focuses on or targets one's role in the act, not simply the occurrence of that act and the quality of the will "behind" or expressed in the act. When we blame someone for an act, we consider the extent of their role in that act. Specifically, when we consider whether to diminish or limit the blame we direct toward someone for some act, we consider the extent of their role in that act. For example, suppose I blame my roommate for making a mess in our kitchen, knowing that I plan to host

³⁶ Arpaly, N., 2006, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage: An Essay on Free Will*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Arpaly, N. and T. Schroeder, 2014, *In Praise of Desire*, New York: Oxford University Press.

friends for dinner. I am responding to the existence of that mess and judging that my roommate played a role in bringing it about. The more of a role he played, the more I will be inclined to blame him. If it turns out that some of the mess resulted from a strong gust of wind or a small geological tremor or an excited dog, I will blame him less; I will think he deserves less blame.

I take this case to be representative of how we tend to blame and diminish blame. Taking it that way, I think our typical ways of blaming and excusing display something like the proportionality principle I stated in §3: The lesser role an agent has in producing a morally wrong act, the less blameworthy the agent is for that act.

Furthermore, I believe that this proportionality principle can be reasonably seen as covering the role a person has in cultivating the ill-will or lack of goodwill that gives rise to an act. The lesser the role they have in that, the less blame they deserve for the actions that result. I would and should blame my roommate more for the mess in the kitchen if I have kindly requested on several previous occasions that he not do this sort of thing, and he has so far made no effort to modify what appears to be a tendency in his behavior.

It is Not That Deep, Strawson

In her third objection to my argument, Arpaly alleges that my conception of blameworthiness leads to the absurd result that we are not blameworthy for anything.

My claim is not that if a person is blameworthy for act A, then they are blameworthy for having the character or the ill-will that produced A. Rather, my claim is that if a person is less blameworthy for shaping their character (or being someone with a tendency toward ill-will) than they might otherwise have been, then they are less blameworthy for an act that emanates from

their character (or ill-will). These are not equivalent; my claim does not imply the one Arpaly that attributes to me. She takes me as saying that to be morally responsible or blameworthy for anything, you must be morally responsible or blameworthy for whatever brought it about.

My view is that an agent need not be blameworthy for the will that led to an act to be blameworthy for that act. In my view, as in Arpaly's view, Robert Harris did not have a significant role in creating the will that led to him murdering two youth, but he is still blameworthy for having done so. I argue that his blameworthiness is *diminished* because he had less of a role in creating his will than he otherwise might have had, not that he is excused of blame all together. He is less blameworthy for shaping his character than someone like Olivia, so he is less blameworthy for shaping his character than he might have otherwise been. So, he is less blameworthy than someone like Olivia for the act of murder. If you are at least somewhat blameworthy for the shape of your will and are less blameworthy for it than you could otherwise be, then your blameworthiness for an act that emanates from that will is diminished.

Let me clarify my view. If you have personal history like that of Robert Harris, then you do not have a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons. If you do not have a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons, then for any morally wrong act – in some range of morally wrong acts – you are less blameworthy for that act than you would be had you had a reasonable chance. Thus, if you have a personal history like Robert Harris, then for any morally wrong act – in some range of morally wrong acts – you are less blameworthy for that act than you would be had you had a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons.

I hold that a certain sort of personal history—one like Harris's, in which one does not have a reasonable chance to develop a good will—diminishes blameworthiness for morally wrong acts that one performs. I am not proposing a requirement for what it is to be blameworthy full stop. I am proposing a sufficient condition for diminished blameworthiness. A certain sort of personal history is a sufficient condition for diminished blameworthiness, a smaller degree of blameworthiness. The absence of that same condition is not thereby a necessary condition for blameworthiness full stop.

Conclusion

I have hoped to show that Arpaly is mistaken about blameworthiness and what diminishes it. I have proceeded by trying to show that Robert Harris deserves less blame for some of his morally wrong (indeed, heinous) acts than he might otherwise deserve because of his upbringing. He did not have a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons. I have contended that his case is more analogous to G#1, and Olivia's is more analogous to G#2. G#1 did not have a reasonable chance to learn good grocering, but G#2 did. G#2 is more blameworthy than G#1 is for the same acts of bad grocering that they both perform. I have argued that if a person has a personal history like that of Robert Harris, then they do not have a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons. If they do not have a reasonable chance to become responsive to morally relevant reasons, then for any morally wrong act – in some range of morally wrong acts – they are less blameworthy for that act than they would be had they had a reasonable chance. Thus, if an agent has a personal history like Robert Harris, then for any morally wrong act – in some range of morally wrong acts – they are less blameworthy for that act than they would be had they had a reasonable chance. It follows from this, then, certain histories diminish one's blameworthiness for certain acts. If my replies to

Arpaly's objections are satisfactory, then it appears that Arpaly has no reason for thinking that personal history is irrelevant to blameworthiness.

I propose an addition to Arpaly's view, stemming from my proportionality principle—the lesser role you had in producing a morally wrong act, the less blameworthy you are for that act. Recall the tidy formulation of her view of blameworthiness:

For an agent to be morally blameworthy for doing the wrong thing is for them to have done the wrong thing either for (i) an ill-moral moral reason – that is, for a reason for which the action is wrong or for (ii) lack of responsiveness to reasons that make some *alternative* action right (the wrong reasons clause); all else being equal, an agent is less blameworthy the shallower the ill-moral concern that has led to their action (the ill-concern clause).

To this I recommend adding a “will-shaping” clause: all else being equal, an agent is less blameworthy the less of a role the agent has in shaping the will that has led to their action.

Arpaly got most of blameworthiness right. With the addition of my will-shaping clause, I believe we have created an account of blameworthiness that is accurate to the human experience, includes an element of personal history, and does not necessitate a version of life where we have an incredible amount of control.³⁷

³⁷ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*. Pg. 141

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