

1-1-2013

# Basic Desert and Reactive Emotions

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## Recommended Citation

Cogley, Zac, "Basic Desert and Reactive Emotions" (2013). *Publication*. Paper 3.  
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## **BASIC DESERT AND REACTIVE EMOTIONS**

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REASSIGNED TIME AWARD ABSTRACT

SEPT 14, 2012

It is common for philosophers to invoke the idea that someone deserves an emotion like anger because she has done something morally wrong. While appeals to this notion of desert are common in the literature, such references aren't thoroughly examined. For example, what do we mean when we say that someone deserves anger because she wronged us? This question is important because it is common for one philosopher to claim that someone deserves anger for a moral wrong while another denies it. Without an account of desert claims it is difficult to evaluate which position is more plausible.

We can make headway if we expand upon a claim I have defended in other work: emotions serve three interrelated psychological functions. Emotions function to appraise the conduct of others, to communicate that appraisal to their targets, and to sanction or reward their targets for acting well or ill. In the paper I hope to complete with Reassigned Time support, I will argue that these psychological functions underwrite three different ways in which emotions like anger can be deserved. They can be deserved as accurate appraisals, tenable communications, and credible sanctions. I will demonstrate the differences between these functions and apply them to shed light on the considerations that impact someone's deservingness.

The upshot of the piece is a new theory of emotional desert that explicates a notion that many thought intractable and enlightens our practices of holding each other responsible—as well as the considerations relevant to forgiving each other.

## BASIC DESERT AND REACTIVE EMOTIONS

ZAC COGLEY  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY  
REASSIGNED TIME AWARD APPLICATION  
SEPT 14, 2012

### Introduction

Last year, I received a Reassigned Time Award to write a book chapter, “The Three-Fold Significance of the Blaming Emotions.” The award was incredibly helpful and fruitful; my chapter is now forthcoming as part of a new book series from Oxford University Press, *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*. I was also able to bring the research supported by the Reassigned Time Award to bear in the design of my current Honors 211 course: Philosophy and Psychology of Emotion. This year I propose to use NMU’s Reassigned Time Award to complete an article on “Basic Desert and Reactive Emotions,” which builds upon my previous writing and extends one of my current research projects.

Let me introduce the project with a short vignette: It’s the middle of your tenure year. You submitted your documents early with everything in good order and you sailed through the departmental review; you’re starting to believe that you will succeed. One day, however, the dean tells you that while the departmental evaluation as a whole was excellent, one of your colleagues has independently written the dean *against* your promotion. In your colleague’s letter there are numerous unfounded and false allegations: plagiarism, failing to hold required office hours, and even copying lecture notes from Wikipedia.

This fictional anecdote brings out our sense that when someone does something morally wrong, we often feel she *deserves* an emotional response in the form of anger or some other reactive emotion. This sense of desert is sometimes termed *basic desert* and has become

enormously important in the moral responsibility literature (Zimmerman 1988; Scanlon 1998; Pereboom 2001; Bennett 2002; Strawson 2002; Sommers 2007; Pereboom 2008; Pereboom 2009; McKenna 2012). While there has been significant attention to arguments about whether people deserve anger or some other reactive emotion for what they do, just what we mean when we say that such a reactive emotion is deserved (or not) is unclear.

This is problematic because there are situations where philosophers disagree about whether people deserve anger. Suppose, for example, you found out that your colleague was being treated for severe depression and other psychological problems that are impeding his ability to make good judgments. Would he still be deserving of your anger? Recently philosophers have debated whether or not people diagnosed with psychopathy are deserving of anger for moral wrongs they do (Wolf 1987; Shoemaker 2007; Talbert 2008; Talbert 2011; Shoemaker 2011). It is very hard to see what reasons could be brought to bear in settling such disputes without an account of desert for anger and other reactive emotions.

I believe we can make headway in addressing these issues by further developing a thesis that I defend in my recent work on emotion (Cogley Forthcoming A; Cogley Forthcoming B): emotions like anger have multiple psychological functions. My aim in the paper I propose to complete with help from a Reassigned Time Award is to rely on the argument about psychological functions to give an account of when emotions can be deserved. I argue that the psychological functions of emotions correspond to three related, but distinct, moral aims: appraisal, communication, and sanction. Each of these is demonstrated by other things we often take to be deserved: grades, retorts, and sanctions. I think we can shed light on when and how reactive emotions can be deserved by discussing the aims of grading, retorting, and sanctioning. Grades we primarily take to be deserved or undeserved in virtue of their appraising role, retorts

are deserved as more or less tenable communications, and sanctions and rewards are deserved in virtue of being credible marks of acts as wrongful or beneficent.

Consider the idea that reactive emotions like anger are appraisals (Parkinson 1997). An appraisal is a person's evaluation or interpretation of a situation. Since reactive emotions are appraisals, they can be appropriate or inappropriate depending on whether or not their appraisal is accurate. By analogy, consider the grade deserved by a paper that shows significant confusion about the topic and doesn't manage to develop a coherent thesis. The writing is too hurried and there are numerous grammatical mistakes. Underlying your assessment that the paper doesn't deserve an 'A' but does deserve a 'C' is that accurately appraising student work is the point of assigning discrete grades. A similar observation connecting appraisal and desert applies to reactive emotions. Such emotions are deserved if they accurately reflect the quality of someone's action. Return to the above story about your diabolical colleague who appears to be trying to sabotage your promotion out of ill will. There's an obvious sense in which, if you're going to feel any reactive emotion toward your colleague at all, it's anger, not gratitude, that he deserves. Similarly, it would be shockingly inappropriate if you felt happy about what your colleague had done, rather than angry or indignant.

This is a sketch of how I plan to analyze desert claims in light of different aims of the reactive emotions. My project of explicating what it is for a reactive emotion to be deserved will fill a significant hole in the literature on moral responsibility, as there has been little attention to what it means to say that emotions like anger are deserved. I also anticipate that my account will shed light on situations where we're conflicted about whether someone deserves a reactive emotion. I will argue that expressed reactive emotions usually serve all three of the aims but that in some situations a reactive emotion can be deserved in one sense but not in another. For

example, I will analyze what has become known as “The Paradox of Forgiveness” (Hieronymi 2001; Griswold 2007; Lucy Allais 2008; L. Allais 2008a; L. Allais 2008b; Zaibert 2009; Warmke): the feeling that in one sense a wrongdoer who begs our forgiveness still deserves our anger, and in another sense she does not. I will argue this ambiguity results from the fact that resentment would still accurately *appraise* the wrongdoer’s action as wrongful, but there is no longer any moral reason to *communicate* the resentment to her if she has already acknowledged fault for what she did.

This project on basic desert and reactive emotions will culminate in an approximately 8,000-word article I hope will be included in a special issue of a volume of *Philosophical Explorations* dedicated to basic desert, edited by two highly influential philosophers, Derk Pereboom and Maureen Sie. If I am granted Reassigned Time for the Winter term, I will be able to complete a draft of the chapter by the mid-semester recess, with the hope of having two months for revisions and edits before the final submission. This project will significantly advance my ongoing research program into emotions and moral responsibility, raise the status of NMU’s Philosophy Department professionally, and allow me to continue using my research to develop and augment new courses, as I did with my Honors course this term, which benefits both the Philosophy Department and the College of Arts and Sciences.

## **Methods**

My interdisciplinary methodology—Psychological and Biological Realism—assumes that the correct philosophical accounts of morality and other distinctively human concepts must be based on what human beings are actually like. As human nature is investigated in many overlapping fields from many diverse perspectives, I must stay current in the literature in

biology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, among others. This requires an enormous amount of attention to developments in these disciplines, especially empirical psychology, where new work on the emotions and morality is generated almost daily. A Reassigned Time Award will thus help ensure that I have time to continue my interdisciplinary inquiries by allowing me time to read new articles in all these fields, write summaries of them, and incorporate their insights into my own research.

As my methods bring philosophical scrutiny to bear on relevant sociological, psychological, and biological research, I will not need any special equipment other than my current NMU resources: my office, computer, and library access.

### **Reassigned Time**

To ensure the successful timely completion of this project, I request a 4-credit release for the Winter semester. Teaching a full three-course load this Winter would pose significant challenges given the time-sensitive nature of this undertaking. I prefer not to balance my high standards for teaching against the demands of this research project. Four credits of reassigned time will ensure that I can stay true to my commitment to discussion-based learning in the classes I teach while at the same time completing this significant project.

## Works Cited

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- . Forthcoming B. "A Study of Angry Virtue and Vice." In *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd. New York: Oxford University Press.
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**ZAC COGLEY**  
*CURRICULUM VITAE*

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**ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

Assistant Professor, Northern Michigan University, 2010-present  
Visiting Lecturer, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006-2008

**EDUCATION**

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., Philosophy, 2010  
University of Cincinnati, M.A., Philosophy, 2001  
St. Louis University, B.A., Philosophy, *Summa Cum Laude*, 1998

**AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION**

Ethics, Political and Social Philosophy, Agency Theory

**AREAS OF COMPETENCE**

Philosophy of Law, Applied Ethics (especially Medical Ethics), Feminist Philosophy

**FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS**

Faculty Reassigned Time Award, Northern Michigan University, 2011  
Faculty Reassigned Time Award, Northern Michigan University, 2010  
Graduate Student Outstanding Paper Prize, Eastern Division Meeting of the APA, 2009  
Travel Grant, Edward F. Hayes Graduate Research Forum, The Ohio State University,  
2006  
Graduate School Leadership Award Nominee, 2004  
Fellow of The Ohio State University Graduate School, 2001-02  
Departmental Nominee, University Finalist, University of Cincinnati Summer Graduate  
Fellowship, 2000  
Phi Beta Kappa, 1998  
Charles Phelps Taft Fellow at University of Cincinnati, 1998-99

**PUBLICATIONS**

“Trust and the Trickster Problem,” *Analytic Philosophy* 53, no. 1 (2012): 30–47.

“The Three-Fold Significance of the Blaming Emotions.” Forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*. Oxford University Press.

“Virtuous and Vicious Anger.” Provisionally forthcoming in *Virtues and Their Vices*. Oxford University Press.

## PRESENTATIONS

- “Basic Desert and Reactive Emotions” (refereed poster)  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress 2012
- “A Different Kind of Selective Hard Compatibilism: Response to Paul Russell”  
Central European University Workshop on the Manipulation Argument, 2012
- “The Three-Fold Significance of the Blaming Emotions” (refereed)  
New Orleans Workshop on Agency and Responsibility, 2011
- “Virtuous and Vicious Anger”  
UAB Conference: The Normative Implications of Moral Psychology (refereed), 2011  
Northern Michigan University, 2011  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress (refereed poster), 2011
- “Modifying the Reactive Attitudes: Reply to David Goldman”  
Central States Philosophical Association, 2010
- “Moral Responsibility, Manipulation, and Two Concepts of Desert” (refereed)  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, 2010
- “Trust and the Trickster Problem” (refereed)  
Eastern American Philosophical Association Meeting, 2009  
Feminist Ethics and Social Theory Conference, 2009  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress (poster), 2009
- “Does Morality Demand Our Very Best? On Moral Prescriptions and the Line of Duty:  
Reply to Ferry”  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, 2009
- “Free Will and Reasonable Doubt: Reply to Vilhauer”  
Pacific Division APA Meeting, 2008
- “Plum-Confused about Blame and Responsibility”  
Southern California Philosophy Conference, 2007
- “Strawson on What to Feel, and Why” (with Daniel Farrell)  
Contemporary Analytic Philosophy Conference on Regulating Attitudes with  
Reasons, 2006
- “Protecting Intentions from Mental Birth Control: Reply to Buckareff”  
Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference on Action, Ethics, and Responsibility, 2006
- “Mitigation and Responsibility” (refereed)  
32nd Conference on Value Inquiry, 2005

“Responsibility and Integrity” (refereed)  
North American Society for Social Philosophy, 2004

“Kantian Dirty Hands” (refereed)  
North American Society for Social Philosophy, 2003

“Whose Evaluative Practice, Which Self-Understanding?” (refereed)  
Ohio Philosophical Association Meeting, 2002

“Feyerabend’s Incommensurability Thesis in *Against Method*” (refereed)  
Ohio Philosophical Association Meeting, 2000  
Kentucky State Annual Conference on Science and Culture, 2000

### **WORKS IN PROGRESS**

“A Compatibilist Account of the Manipulation Argument’s Force”  
“Basic Desert for Reactive Emotions”

### **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

American Philosophical Association  
Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory  
Society for Analytic Feminism  
Society for the Philosophy of Agency

### **SERVICE**

#### UNIVERSITY

Academic Senate, 2011-present  
Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), 2010-present

#### DEPARTMENTAL

Departmental Evaluation Committee, 2010-present

#### PROFESSIONAL

Journal Referee: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophical Studies*,  
*Canadian Journal of Philosophy*

#### COMMUNITY

Marquette General Health System Ethics Committee, 2011-present

## **COURSES TAUGHT**

### **FULL RESPONSIBILITY—UPPER LEVEL COURSES**

Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Northern Michigan University  
Philosophy and Psychology of Emotion, Northern Michigan University  
Philosophy and Psychology of Emotion (Honors), Northern Michigan University  
Social and Political Philosophy, Northern Michigan University  
Medical Ethics, University of California, Los Angeles  
Society and Morals, University of California, Los Angeles  
Early Modern Political Philosophy, University of California, Los Angeles  
Philosophy of Law, University of California, Los Angeles  
Contemporary Social and Moral Problems in the United States,  
The Ohio State University

### **FULL RESPONSIBILITY—INTRODUCTORY LEVEL COURSES**

Fundamentals of Ethical Theory, Northern Michigan University  
Issues in Legal Ethics, Northern Michigan University  
Issues in Business Ethics, Northern Michigan University  
Issues in Medical Ethics, Northern Michigan University  
Issues in Computer Ethics, Northern Michigan University  
Introduction to Ethical Theory, University of California, Los Angeles  
Introduction to Ethics, The Ohio State University  
Political and Social Philosophy, The Ohio State University  
Introduction to Ethics, University of Cincinnati

### **TEACHING ASSISTANT**

Philosophy of Law (Philosophy 338), The Ohio State University  
Ancient Greek Philosophy (Philosophy 301), The Ohio State University  
Philosophy of Religion (Philosophy 270), The Ohio State University  
Symbolic Logic (Philosophy 250), University of Cincinnati and  
The Ohio State University  
Probability, Data, and Decision Making (Philosophy 153),  
The Ohio State University  
Logic (Philosophy 150), The Ohio State University  
Introduction to Philosophy (Philosophy 101), The Ohio State University

# ZAC COGLEY WINTER 2011 REASSIGNED TIME AWARD REPORT

## **Overview**

This report covers my NMU Reassigned Time Award for the Winter term of 2011. During that term, I received a one-course class reduction; my colleague Sarah Jones taught the section of PL180: Fundamentals of Ethical Theory that I had been assigned to teach.

My Reassigned Time Award was incredibly beneficial for the advancement of my own research and writing; because of it, I was able to write a book chapter on the virtue of Patience and the corresponding vice of Wrath that will be included in an upcoming collection under contract with Oxford University Press on philosophical accounts of individual virtues and vices. Oxford University Press anticipates a full draft of the book to be completed in 2012, with publication to follow that year or the next. I did not seek outside grants during my term of reassigned time as the NMU grant provided the necessary time and funds to complete my chapter.

## **Results**

Patience and Wrath are generally thought to be the virtue and vice with respect to anger. My work on this project is an extension of research I first undertook in my dissertation, where I developed a philosophical account of anger that I brought to bear on the problem of free will. For my chapter, I did additional research in empirical psychology and philosophical work on the virtues. Drawing on this research, I argued that virtue and vice in anger is determined by excellence or deficiency along three functions that anger serves in human psychology: appraisal, motivation, and communication.

## ZAC COGLEY WINTER 2011 REASSIGNED TIME AWARD REPORT

While there has been some recent attention to angry virtue and vice in the philosophical literature, most contemporary accounts of virtue in anger allow angry virtue to be determined by *only one* of the three functions that anger serves. So, for example, Macalester Bell (2009) holds that virtue in anger is determined only by how appropriate someone's anger is: essentially, does a person get very angry at significant injustices and less angry at minor slights? Others, like Lisa Tessman (2005), argue that virtue in anger is determined only by how motivated the angry person is to resist injustice and promote the flourishing of others.

In my chapter, I show that this focus on one function of anger to the exclusion of others fails to accurately characterize virtue in anger by using the examples of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both Douglass and King are thought to be exemplars of virtue, so their example helps me to demonstrate that virtue in anger requires both getting very angry at major injustices and at the same time being motivated to combat them. Douglass and King were both incensed by the treatment of blacks in the United States and were motivated to tirelessly oppose such treatment. So the proper account of virtue in anger requires attention to both anger's appropriateness and the sort of motivations the angry person has. The examples of Douglass and King also help me emphasize that another important function of anger is communication: an excellently angry person urges others to become angry at injustice or wrongful conduct and tries to motivate them to resist the injustice or wrong, just as both Douglass and King did through powerful and inspiring speeches.

Part of the reason that Douglass and King are moral exemplars, then, is that they possessed excellence in anger with respect to appraisal, motivation, and communication.

## ZAC COGLEY WINTER 2011 REASSIGNED TIME AWARD REPORT

Excellence along all three dimensions is constitutive of virtue in anger. Viciousness in anger, on the other hand, is characterized by excessiveness or deficiency along all three dimensions. For example, the wrathful person gets angry when it is inappropriate and is angrier than the situation warrants. He acts aggressively and impulsively toward others and is quick to communicate his excessive anger. The moral danger of wrath is thus moral overconfidence and moral insensitivity. The threat of the wrathful person's anger often discourages others from legitimately challenging his authority. This can lead to him growing in overconfidence and insensitivity—wrath can thus enter into an increasingly vicious cycle with pride (Taylor 2006).

I am incredibly grateful for the Reassigned Time Award for providing me the time to advance my research outside the philosophical literature into current psychological research on the emotions. This was very helpful in grounding and advancing my philosophical thinking, and in helping to produce a chapter that, while maintaining its philosophical strength, also demonstrates a commitment to interdisciplinary thought and research. I was also able to use some of the fruits of my research to develop and offer a new class: Philosophy and Psychology of Emotion. I very much value the opportunity to share the fruits of my research with NMU students and I am committed to continuing to do so in the future.

### **Further Directions**

While I continue to revise and revisit my thinking about vice and virtue with respect to anger, my philosophical and psychological research on anger and other emotions leads in several promising directions. Here I highlight just one. I am

## ZAC COGLEY WINTER 2011 REASSIGNED TIME AWARD REPORT

particularly interested in exploring the connection between emotions like anger and certain moral concepts, like moral responsibility. My view is that we can understand more about moral responsibility and thereby have a greater appreciation of the conditions under which it is appropriate to hold people morally responsible if we have a greater understanding of emotions, like anger, that I believe help to shape our concept of moral responsibility. If anger has several different psychological functions, that should mean that moral responsibility is a concept with several functions as well. I hope to explore the implications of this thesis in future work.

## ZAC COGLEY WINTER 2012 REASSIGNED TIME AWARD REPORT

**Overview**

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My Reassigned Time Award was highly beneficial for the advancement of my own research and writing; because of it, I was able to complete a paper on “The Three-Fold Significance of the Blaming Emotions” that will be included in an upcoming volume under contract with Oxford University Press: *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*. The collection has been sent out for external review and should be published late this year or the next. I did not seek outside grants during my term of reassigned time as the NMU grant provided the necessary time and funds to complete my paper. However, without the award, there is no question that I would have been unable to complete the paper. The Reassigned Time Award was thus indispensable for helping to advance my research. The Award also allowed me to continue to balance my commitment to teaching with the advancement of my own scholarship.

**Results**

Many philosophers working on moral responsibility follow P.F. Strawson (1982) in thinking that we should understand claims about someone’s moral responsibility or the phenomenon of holding someone morally responsible in terms of the appropriateness of a certain class of emotions (Bennett 1980; Watson 1993; Wallace 1994; Fischer and Ravizza 1998; McKenna 1998; Macnamara 2009). But even those who do not follow Strawson in identifying moral responsibility attributions with the appropriateness of emotions hold that emotions do play a role in our moral responsibility practices (Scanlon 2008, 143). In spite of this, the significance of the blaming emotions for moral responsibility has been under-theorized.

In order to fully appreciate the import of the blaming emotions for moral responsibility we need a more adequate moral psychology. As an initial step, my work appeals to recent psychology of emotion to argue that the blaming emotions—anger, resentment, and indignation—are significant for our moral responsibility practices in three different ways. They are important to moral responsibility in *appraising* people as acting wrongfully, in *communicating* the appraisal to perceived wrongdoers, and in *sanctioning* people who are appraised as wrongful. I also investigate the conditions of appropriateness of the blaming emotions.

My analysis is also inspired by the fact that although there has been significant recent attention to the concept of moral responsibility, there is little agreement about it. Indeed, in one recent attempt to clear the conceptual territory, John Martin Fischer and Neal Tognazzini argue that there are up to *thirteen* different analytical or conceptual ‘stages’ of moral responsibility attributions, organized (roughly) into two broad categories: attributability and accountability (2010).

I am deeply sympathetic to the project of achieving clarity about our conception of moral responsibility as it is central to making progress on some of our most vexing issues, including whether moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. However, I fear that some recent attempts to introduce clarity risk further confusion because they have not paid sufficient attention to the moral psychology of the blaming emotions. Not only, then, do I try to enrich our moral psychological picture of the blaming emotions, but I also link appraisal, communication, and sanction to representative accounts of moral responsibility. I suggest that each kind of account is

inspired by a different way in which the blaming emotions are significant, and thus each account implicitly emphasizes a different consideration of emotional appropriateness. Fittingness accounts of moral responsibility are linked to appraisal, moral address accounts correspond to the communicative dimension of the blaming emotions, and desert accounts of moral responsibility are inspired by the blaming emotions' sanctioning role. If I am right, part of the reason debates about moral responsibility have been so intractable is that many theorists share the assumption that appropriate blaming emotions are a reliable indicator of a person's moral responsibility, while inappropriate blaming emotions are evidence of a lack of moral responsibility. This makes it appear as if all parties to the debate are operating with the same conception of moral responsibility in mind. However, because different accounts are implicitly linked to different kinds of appropriateness, the wide agreement that the appropriateness of the blaming emotions is revealing of moral responsibility obscures significant disagreements about the concept and the conditions for its application that emerge with a more refined focus.

I am incredibly grateful for the Reassigned Time Award for providing me the time to advance my interdisciplinary research on emotions and their philosophical significance. I believe that many of our strongest philosophical debates are clarified with a deeper understanding of work being done in psychology. This is demonstrated in the progress we make by paying attention to the significance of emotions for understanding moral responsibility. The Award was incredibly helpful in allowing me the time to produce a chapter that, while maintaining its philosophical strength, demonstrates a commitment to interdisciplinary thought and research.

### **Further Directions**

While I continue to revise and revisit my thinking about moral responsibility, my philosophical and psychological research on anger and other emotions leads in several promising directions. Here I highlight just one. I am particularly interested in exploring the connection between emotions like anger, resentment, and indignation with other moral concepts, like desert. I believe that the framework I have developed in this project might fruitfully be used to illuminate different senses in which someone can be said to deserve punishment, reward, and other kinds of treatment. I hope to explore the implications of this thesis in future work.