

Article

Time as a Moral Defense?

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Abstract

When an individual *A* is accused of having committed a morally impermissible action *X*, it is generally accepted that they may invoke three types of defenses to mitigate, or even eliminate, their moral responsibility (or at least the fittingness of blame): justifications, excuses, and exemptions. However, another consideration—one that does not *prima facie* fall under any of these three types of defenses—also appears capable of influencing moral responsibility: the passage of time. *A* might argue that, although they did indeed commit the morally impermissible action *X*, the fact that it occurred twenty years ago partially absolves them from responsibility. This idea, which underlies several legal principles—such as statutes of limitations, rehabilitation, and sentence reduction—raises underexplored philosophical issues. In this paper, we argue that the passage of time does not constitute an autonomous moral defense. Rather, it is morally relevant only insofar as it makes possible certain transformations—including psychological reform, repentance, and processes of moral repair—capable of modifying the normative conditions under which it is appropriate to hold an agent to account. Accordingly, the attenuation of diachronic responsibility is best understood not as a direct consequence of temporal distance itself, but as a consequence of changes in those normative conditions.

Keywords: passage of time; moral responsibility; blameworthiness; defenses; personal identity

1. Introduction

When an individual *A* is accused of having committed a morally impermissible action *X*, it is generally accepted that they may invoke three types of defenses to mitigate, or even eliminate, their moral responsibility—or the fittingness of blame: justifications, excuses, and exemptions [1–3]. A justification establishes that action *X* was not morally impermissible, even if it likely violated a norm (e.g., a killing in self-defense). An excuse acknowledges the impermissibility of *X* but denies that it resulted from ill will on *A*'s part, or highlights *A*'s lack of control over their conduct (e.g., theft committed under duress). An exemption, finally, attributes to *A* certain properties that exclude them from the class of agents who can be (fully) held to answer for *X* (e.g., verbal aggression by a child or by someone with a cognitive impairment).

However, another consideration—one that does not *prima facie* fall under any of these three types of defenses—also appears capable of influencing moral responsibility: the passage of time. To illustrate this point, consider two surgeons, *B* and *C*, who committed the same negligent surgical error. *B* committed the error last week and is now being called to account for it. *C* committed the same error twenty years ago and is now being called to account for it only after a long period during which no comparable misconduct occurred. Intuitively, many people judge *C* less harshly than *B*. Why? One natural explanation is that, in the intervening years, *C* may have changed significantly: they may have become a



Academic Editor: Kristie Miller

Received: 29 April 2026

Revised: 12 June 2026

Accepted: 17 June 2026

Published: 25 June 2026

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careful and conscientious physician, thereby psychologically distancing themselves from the negligent person they once were. Under these conditions, it may seem unfair to assess *C* in exactly the same way as *B*, despite the similarity of their wrongdoing.

This intuition—according to which we do not remain indefinitely responsible for past wrongdoing (or at least not to the same degree), especially when we have worked to avoid repeating it—finds support in several principles of positive law, such as statutes of limitations, rehabilitation, and sentence reduction. These mechanisms rest in part on the idea that, over time, a person may change to the point of no longer being fully identifiable with the person they were at the time of the offense: they may no longer deserve the original punishment (exhaustion of the retributive function of punishment) and may no longer pose the same risk to society (exhaustion of the incapacitative function). It is primarily the former aspect—the retributive function—that is relevant for moral responsibility [4–6].

The widespread intuition that the mere passage of time can mitigate moral responsibility raises an important philosophical question. We commonly hear claims such as: “Yes, I did it, but it was twenty years ago”. The aim of this paper is not to defend that intuition, but to determine whether it can be vindicated and, if so, what explains its plausibility. Contemporary discussions of personal identity and diachronic responsibility offer several ways of understanding this phenomenon. Some philosophers maintain that responsibility is fundamentally tied to authorship and therefore does not itself vary over time, even if the fittingness of blame changes [7,8]. Others argue that diachronic responsibility depends on psychological relations between an agent and their past actions, such as psychological continuity or connectedness, and may therefore diminish as those relations weaken [9–11]. More recently, some authors have suggested that these relations themselves come in degrees, and that survival, prudential concern, or responsibility may therefore admit of corresponding gradations [12,13]. Still, others maintain that what ultimately grounds prudential concern is not personal identity itself but the relations underlying our concern for future and past selves [14–17].

The present article builds on approaches emphasizing psychological connectedness and the relations underlying prudential and moral concern, while arguing that they leave open a further normative question. Even if psychological connectedness weakens over time, why should that weakening itself matter morally? We argue that psychological connectedness and continuity do not by themselves explain the attenuation of diachronic responsibility. Rather, they matter because they can affect the normative conditions governing practices of answerability, accountability, and moral repair. Our claim is therefore not that psychological change is irrelevant, but that it is explanatorily incomplete when considered in isolation from those broader normative practices.

To develop this claim, we distinguish between two dimensions of moral responsibility that are often conflated: responsibility as *attributability* and responsibility as *answerability*. We argue that responsibility in the sense of attributability does not vary over time: once an agent is the author of an action, this fact remains unchanged¹. By contrast, responsibility in the sense of answerability can evolve, insofar as the normative conditions under which it is appropriate to demand that an agent answer for their action may change. This distinction makes it possible to account for the intuition that the passage of time can affect our practices of responsibility while preserving the fact that the action remains attributable to the agent who performed it.

In this article, we argue that the passage of time does not constitute an autonomous moral defense. Rather, its moral significance is indirect, insofar as it may enable transformations capable of justifying a revision of our practices of answerability and blame. When such transformations have occurred, we suggest that two interpretations are available: either the passage of time operates as a *non-standard form of exemption* (or *denial*), by

rendering it inappropriate to treat the agent as belonging to the class of those from whom an account is properly demanded, or it functions as a *mitigating circumstance* that, without undermining the agent's responsibility, supports adopting a more lenient response among the range of morally appropriate reactions.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the relation between the passage of time, personal transformation, and responsibility. Section 3 analyzes legal mechanisms that incorporate the passage of time. Section 4 investigates the status of the passage of time as a defense. Section 5 examines psychologistic accounts of diachronic responsibility and develops an alternative framework centred on answerability and moral repair. Section 6 concludes.

2. Time, Personal Continuity, and Responsibility

In what sense might the passage of time influence moral responsibility? Suppose that an individual *A* has committed a morally impermissible action *X*. If the time that has elapsed since this action has allowed *A* to change to the point of becoming psychologically distinct from the person they once were, the fittingness of demanding that they answer for it may thereby be weakened. This idea finds support in psychological (or neo-Lockean) approaches to personal identity, which ground the persistence of persons over time in the existence of psychological connections (in particular, memories, intentions, and character traits), which tend to weaken over time. Indeed, if one accepts that moral responsibility presupposes a form of diachronic persistence, it becomes plausible to think that, as *A* becomes psychologically detached from the person they were at the time of action *X*, the conditions under which it is appropriate to demand that they answer for it may be altered. In this sense, even if some degree of continuity remains, *A* is no longer quite the *same* person—and this may carry moral significance.

But in what sense might *A* be said to be “no longer quite the *same* person”? Different theories of personal identity and psychological continuity answer this question in different ways.

It is important to distinguish several positions that are often associated with psychological approaches to diachronic responsibility. Some philosophers hold that psychological relations play an important role in personal identity or in what matters for prudential concern and related forms of diachronic responsibility, although they disagree about the precise nature of that role [10,14–17]. More recently, some authors have argued that these relations themselves admit of degrees and that survival, prudential concern, or responsibility may therefore come in corresponding degrees [12,13]. The present argument is compatible with several of these approaches, since our primary concern is not the metaphysics of personal identity but the normative conditions governing answerability.

Some theories do, however, draw a direct connection between psychological continuity and personal identity itself. Thus, David Lewis argues that Methuselah at nine hundred years old and Methuselah at twenty-five—who share neither memories nor psychological traits—are not numerically identical, even though a form of psychological continuity remains (through overlapping chains of mental states). As he puts it, “(.) the fading-out of personal identity looms large as a fact of life” [18] (p. 66).

Similarly, *exdurantists* maintain that the persistence of a person (like that of any object) does not require numerical identity: “if persons are instantaneous stages, then no person lasts more than an instant. However, (.) the stage view includes a counterpart theory of *de re* temporal predication, according to which instantaneous stages may nevertheless have temporal properties such as *being F* in ten minutes” [19] (p. 193). Within such an *exdurantist* framework, a person is never numerically identical to the one who performed an impermissible action at an earlier time, and although these two persons may stand in a

non-transitive counterpart relation, that relation may, over time, become too tenuous to sustain moral responsibility [20] (pp. 23–25).

That said, it is not necessary to adopt such a radical view—one that denies the preservation of numerical identity—in order to maintain that responsibility may evolve over time. Indeed, numerical identity does not, in any case, appear to be a necessary condition for moral responsibility. As shown by Benoit Gaultier and Vincent Grandjean [21], consider a case in which Leonardo commits a crime just before undergoing a fission operation: the two resulting individuals, Leonardo* and Leonardo**, must both be held morally responsible for that act, even though they are not numerically identical to Leonardo (on pain of violating the transitivity of identity). To deny this would be to treat fission as a “way out” of all forms of moral responsibility, a consequence that many discussions of fission and moral responsibility have regarded as implausible [11,22,23]². Does this violate the intuitive principle that “to be responsible for an action, one must have performed it—one must be its author” [7] (p. 19)? *Not necessarily*. Leonardo* and Leonardo**, although not numerically identical to Leonardo, may still be regarded as the authors of the crime, insofar as they have inherited his psychological structure through the process of fission³. Thus, without supposing that the passage of time affects numerical identity, it remains plausible that an agent may have changed sufficiently—while remaining numerically identical—for the conditions under which it is appropriate to demand that they answer for their action to be modified.

But how, then, can the passage of time affect moral responsibility without implying a break in identity? The foregoing discussion suggests that changes in psychological connectedness are not sufficient, by themselves, to explain why responsibility may attenuate over time. Even if one grants that psychological relations weaken, this leaves open a further question: why should such weakening matter morally? One way of answering this question is to distinguish between the identity or continuity relations linking an agent to a past action and the normative conditions governing practices of holding agents to account. The passage of time does not affect the fact that the agent is the author of the action—this is a matter of *attributability*—but it may alter the conditions under which it is appropriate to demand that they answer for it—this is a matter of *answerability*. Accordingly, the evolution of moral responsibility can be understood without positing any rupture of identity: what changes is not the fact that the agent performed the action, but whether it remains appropriate to hold them to account for it.

3. Time and Legal Responsibility

In law, several principles appear to rest—at least in part—on the idea that the passage of time can affect responsibility. Thus, for most offenses, one recognizes (i) a temporal limit beyond which legal proceedings may no longer be initiated (*the statute of limitations*), (ii) the possibility of conditional release in cases of incarceration (*rehabilitation*), and (iii) the possibility of reducing the total length of a sentence (*sentence reduction*). These mechanisms do not all operate in the same way. Conditional release and sentence reduction may partly reflect the thought that, over time, a person can change sufficiently such that, on the one hand, they no longer fully deserve the original punishment imposed, and, on the other hand, they no longer pose the same risks to society. Statutes of limitations, by contrast, are more often justified by a broader set of considerations, including legal certainty, evidentiary decay, and social peace. These two considerations correspond respectively to two fundamental functions of legal punishment: *the retributive function*, which aims to punish an individual for what they have done, and *the incapacitative function*, which aims to protect society from individuals deemed dangerous. It is primarily the former—*the retributive function*—that is of interest here. After all, one can imagine cases in which

incapacitation is justified (e.g., in the case of a dangerous psychopath), even though moral responsibility is not engaged (e.g., due to mental illness).

However, these legal principles raise several difficulties. Why, for instance, do statutes of limitations vary according to the severity of the offense? It would seem arbitrary to suppose that a murderer changes less over time than a thief; yet in most legal systems, the limitation period for theft is shorter than that for murder. Similarly, why are conditional release and sentence reduction more readily granted to those who have committed less serious offenses? (We set aside here the issue of recidivism). These asymmetries call for justification.

A first response would be to argue that murder reveals deeper and more troubling dispositions than theft: in other words, it may be more difficult—and therefore take longer—to rid oneself of a propensity to kill than of a propensity to steal, thereby justifying differential treatment. But this explanation seems insufficient. Consider an individual who committed a murder under exceptional circumstances (e.g., a man who killed his father-in-law, the only person toward whom he harbored such hostility) and who, since then, no longer poses any danger. For such a person, the long limitation period for murder seems less justified than the shorter limitation period applicable to theft committed by a compulsive thief, whose rehabilitation would require substantial and prolonged effort. (We assume here that the compulsive nature of the thief's behavior is not sufficient to exempt them from their actions, and that they therefore remain morally responsible.)

A more satisfactory response is to recognize that statutes of limitations—as well as the criteria governing conditional release and sentence reduction—depend on a plurality of factors, some of which are independent of the passage of time and of the agent's moral transformation. These include, in particular, (i) legal certainty, which aims to ensure finality in legal matters; (ii) the reliability of evidence, which tends to deteriorate over time; and (iii) social peace, which encourages prioritizing more immediate concerns. Accordingly, the passage of time constitutes only one ground among others for statutes of limitations, and one whose relevance is often independent of any reduction in responsibility itself. By contrast, in the case of conditional release and sentence reduction, considerations relating to moral transformation may play a more direct role. Moreover, some of the considerations relevant to statutes of limitations are not moral in the narrow sense but epistemic and procedural. As time passes, evidence may deteriorate, memories may fade, and witnesses may become unavailable. Accordingly, the appropriateness of holding an agent legally accountable depends not only on transformations in the agent, but also on the practical conditions required to establish responsibility in the first place. It is likely by taking this broader set of factors into account—rather than focusing solely on the agent's moral change—that we can explain the variability in limitation periods across different types of offenses. The legal analogy is therefore limited. It does not show that the passage of time itself reduces responsibility. Rather, it helps isolate the question that will occupy us in the following sections: when time is morally relevant, is it relevant in its own right, or only insofar as it enables changes in the agent or in the normative conditions governing accountability?

4. Time: What Kind of Defense?

If the preceding argument is correct, the passage of time should not be treated as an independent ground of diminished responsibility. It matters only indirectly, insofar as it makes possible changes in psychological connectedness, moral orientation, or the normative conditions governing accountability. Still, this leaves an important classificatory question. When agents appeal to the fact that their wrongdoing occurred long ago, how should such an appeal be understood? Is it a justification, an excuse, an exemption, or

something closer to a mitigating circumstance? Intuitively, it is not a justification. If *X* is morally impermissible, the mere passage of time does not alter its moral status. This claim is sometimes contested, particularly by moral relativists. They might accept that (i) *X* is morally impermissible in 2026, while (ii) it was not impermissible in 2006. A plausible response is to maintain that it is not the impermissibility of *X* that has changed, but only our perception of it. Indeed, this distinction between moral perception and moral status partly underlies practices of restorative justice: we may now recognize certain past actions as unjust, even if they were not perceived as such at the time.

Nor does the passage of time constitute an excuse. An excuse aims to diminish or eliminate responsibility (or blameworthiness) by appealing, for instance, to the absence of ill will or control. But time, in itself, does not affect the agent's intentions at the time of the act, nor their degree of control. For example, if *X* acted with the intention to steal in 2006, it remains true in 2026 that they had that intention in 2006. It is worth noting that the question of what makes true, in 2026, a tensed proposition such as "*X* intended to steal in 2006" raises a well-known issue in the philosophy of time—the truthmaker problem—which arises in particular for theories such as presentism, which deny the existence of the past [24] (p. 26).

Finally, the passage of time cannot serve as an exemption (at least in the standard sense), since it does not retroactively alter the capacity *A* had at the time of performing the impermissible action *X* to perform that action. If *A* was fully capable (both physically and mentally) at the time of acting, the fact that they have since changed does not affect that past capacity, and therefore does not remove them from the scope of responsibility⁴.

Should we then posit a new, *sui generis* type of defense? A first hypothesis is to interpret the passage of time as a *non-standard form of exemption—or denial*. The idea would be that *A*, although they did indeed perform action *X* in the past, is no longer quite the same agent in the morally relevant sense. They now endorse different values, hold different beliefs, and pursue different intentions. Accordingly, *A* might claim that they no longer stand in the same morally relevant relation to the past action as they once did. They should therefore be excluded from the class of individuals who can be (fully) required to answer for it. In other words, even if *A* bears some psychological continuity with the original author of *X*—understood as an overlap of successive mental states—this continuity may have become too weak to ground the fittingness of demanding that they fully answer for it. From a psychological point of view, the present agent and the past agent may be sufficiently distinct, without being numerically distinct, for the conditions under which it is appropriate to hold them to account to be weakened, or even no longer satisfied. It is important, however, to distinguish this non-standard form of exemption from denial proper. In cases of denial, the question of responsibility for an act can legitimately be addressed to *A*, but *A* contests its application to them (by denying that it is their act); by contrast, in cases of exemption, it ceases to be appropriate, within practices of responsibility, to address such a demand to them [25].

A second hypothesis is to treat the passage of time not as a defense *stricto sensu*, but as a *mitigating circumstance*. Unlike a partial excuse, which aims to attenuate the judgment of responsibility, a mitigating circumstance operates at the level of determining the appropriate response. For example, even in the absence of justification or excuse, certain considerations—such as the fact that an offense is a first offense—may justify moderating the severity of a sanction. Similarly, the passage of time, without undermining the agent's responsibility, may justify a weakening of blame, especially when it has allowed for a significant psychological transformation. On this view, invoking the passage of time amounts, on the one hand, to acknowledging that the agent is responsible for the impermissible action *X*, while, on the other hand, requesting that a more lenient response be adopted from among the range of morally appropriate reactions, in order to take into

account the changes through which the agent has psychologically distanced themselves from their earlier self who committed X. On this interpretation, what remains unchanged is the historical fact that the agent performed the wrongful action under responsibility-conferring conditions. What may change, however, is the fittingness, severity, or form of the response that it is appropriate to adopt toward them.

5. Psychological Transformation and Answerability

The discussion so far might suggest that psychological transformation is the primary factor explaining changes in diachronic responsibility. In this section, however, we argue that such transformations matter only insofar as they affect the normative conditions governing practices of answerability, including apology, repair, and reconciliation.

According to Jules Coleman and Alexander Sarch, resentment may become inappropriate over time, independently of any transformation in the agent. They write:

“While it may be entirely appropriate today, say, to resent someone for a particular misdeed, it will not necessarily be appropriate to resent that person for that misdeed five, ten, or fifty years on; and even when it is still appropriate to feel some resentment or indignation, the extent or depth of the emotions is often appropriately diminished as time goes by—quite apart from the steps the wrongdoer has or has not taken to atone for his mischief” [26] (p. 107).

However, the passage of time, by itself, cannot constitute a defense—something that is also supported by empirical studies [27]. Suppose that an individual *A*, fully in control of their faculties, intentionally and without justification harms another person, *B*, and is then cryogenically frozen for twenty years, before being revived with the impression that only a few seconds have passed. Intuitively, although two decades have elapsed since the act, the fact that *A* is answerable for the action remains unchanged. This holds even if, in the meantime, *B* may have forgotten the incident, or even passed away.

One way of accounting for this intuition is to argue that the passage of time relevant to the assessment of moral responsibility should not be understood in a *purely objective sense* (as measured by an external clock), but rather in a *subjective sense*: what matters is not so much the time that has elapsed as the time as experienced by the author of the act. This idea is straightforward: unless one assumes that the original impermissible action was “out of character”, in which case it requires no change on *A*’s part [28], what matters for determining whether it is appropriate to hold *A* to account is not the mere passage of time, but the opportunity it affords them to transform their psychological dispositions. This approach is also defended by Andrew Khoury and Benjamin Matheson when they investigate the conditions under which blameworthiness—which they do not distinguish from moral responsibility—may diminish over time. According to them, “(. . .) it is not these outward redemptive acts, as such, that matter to an individual’s diminishing diachronic blameworthiness. Rather, it is the change in her underlying psychology. Redemptive acts can serve as evidence of such a change, but what matters is a relevant change in the psychology itself [. . .]. What is required is deep psychological change” [9] (p. 219)⁵.

Khoury and Matheson thus offer a powerful explanation of why responsibility may appear to diminish over time. Nevertheless, their account leaves open a further question. Even if deep psychological change occurs, why should such change matter morally? What explains the connection between altered psychology and diminished answerability? The remainder of this section argues that psychological transformation is at most part of the explanation. What ultimately matters are the normative conditions governing practices of holding agents to account.

Accordingly, psychological transformation often constitutes an important part of the explanation of why it may become less appropriate to demand that *A* answer for action *X*. The passage of time appears as a generally *necessary* condition for such attenuation, insofar as the relevant transformations cannot normally occur instantaneously. Yet neither the passage of time nor psychological transformation, taken in isolation, provides the fundamental explanation. Their moral significance depends on the way in which they affect the normative conditions governing practices of answerability, apology, repair, and reconciliation. Returning to the example of the two surgeons, it seems less appropriate to hold *C* fully to account than *B* only if *C* has, in the intervening years, undergone a morally relevant transformation such that, if confronted with a similar situation today, they would no longer act in the same negligent manner. Of course, as has been suggested [27], not all forms of psychological distancing are equal: ordinary judgments of responsibility and blame are more sensitive to morally relevant transformations—such as acknowledgment of wrongdoing and repair (a process of “decontamination”)—than to mere psychological change (a process of “dilution”).

But is such psychologically relevant distancing really *sufficient* to attenuate (or even eliminate) moral responsibility? Suppose that, after being intentionally harmed by *A*, the victim *B* boards a spacecraft traveling near a black hole, such that, in accordance with the predictions of general relativity, they return to Earth highly desynchronized relative to *A*. From *B*’s perspective, the journey has lasted only a few weeks, but on Earth, twenty years have passed. Upon returning, *B* discovers that *A* is now a person profoundly different from the one they were at the time of the wrongdoing. Should *A* still be held to answer for their action? If one answers in the negative, on the grounds that *A* has had twenty years to change, *B* may experience a sense of frustration: for them, the event remains recent, the harm perhaps still vivid, and the resentment intact. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to reply that such frustration—though psychologically understandable—is not morally appropriate if *A* has indeed undergone a significant transformation. In other words, the time that is morally relevant for the assessment of responsibility is neither the time as experienced by the victim nor the time measured objectively, but the time as experienced by the author of the act, insofar as it makes possible a process of self-transformation.

A second objection is that, if one assumes that the conditions under which it is appropriate to hold someone to account depend on the passage of time—or more precisely, on the psychological transformations it makes possible—it becomes epistemically difficult to determine what response is appropriate [30] (pp. 227–228). On the one hand, the author of a wrongful action has an obvious incentive to misrepresent—or at least exaggerate—their transformation. On the other hand, even assuming sincerity, it is empirically difficult to assess the extent of psychological change and, *a fortiori*, to match it with a proportionate response.

Edgar Phillips argues that this epistemic difficulty reveals a more fundamental problem: it suggests that psychologistic models of diachronic responsibility rest on a mistaken conception of what morally matters in our practices of blame (*pace* Khoury & Matheson). The deeper issue is therefore not simply whether psychological transformation has occurred, but why such transformation should matter morally in the first place. Even if psychological connectedness changes over time, what remains to be explained is why those descriptive changes should alter the normative appropriateness of holding someone to account.

It is precisely this question that our proposal seeks to address. Psychological connectedness cannot by itself explain diminished answerability, since its normative significance remains to be explained. Our claim is that psychological change matters only insofar as it affects the normative conditions governing practices of answerability, apology, repair, reconciliation, and accountability.

In this respect, our proposal departs from both traditional psychological-continuity views and more recent degree-theoretic approaches. We agree that changes in psychological connectedness often accompany changes in diachronic responsibility. However, we deny that such relations themselves provide the fundamental explanation of diminished answerability. Rather, psychological connectedness functions primarily as evidence of morally relevant change and as one of the factors capable of altering the normative conditions under which demands for apology, justification, repair, or reconciliation remain appropriate. Our disagreement with psychologistic accounts is not that psychological change is irrelevant, but that it is explanatorily incomplete.

Phillips's emphasis on moral repair points in what we take to be the right direction. According to him, what matters is not primarily whether the agent still possesses the psychological dispositions that motivated their past action, but whether the wrongdoing has been adequately acknowledged, taken up, and addressed. More precisely, Phillips argues that moral responses to wrongdoing are embedded in a process of "moral repair", which is "(...) largely overt, social, and interactive—it is not something that occurs wholly within an individual, be it the offender or the victim" [30] (p. 233). This process includes, in particular, apology, atonement, and certain forms of corrective justice, through which the emotional responses of victims—such as anger, resentment, or remorse—may find appropriate resolution (see also [31]).

Three considerations support Phillips's approach, which emphasizes actions actually performed rather than internal psychological transformations.

First, individuals appear unequally disposed to carry out the psychological transformations in question, and it is difficult to justify making an appropriate moral response depend on a psychological capacity largely independent of the original wrongdoing. A person may have acted very badly while being particularly capable of introspection and self-reform; another may have acted less badly while being far less capable of transforming their internal dispositions. It would be strange, however, for the latter to be judged more harshly than the former for this reason alone. After all, the point of moral response is primarily to address an agent for a particular action, not for their general capacity for inner reform.

Second, one can imagine a case of "epiphany" in which the agent has made no effort to transform their psychology—that is, to acquire new beliefs, intentions, or values. In such a case, acts of moral repair still seem minimally required to attenuate, or even eliminate, the fittingness of holding them to account. It is difficult to accept that a revelation, a mystical experience, or any comparable event—occurring independently of any effort on the agent's part—could constitute an immediate escape from having to answer for a wrongful action. This intuition is supported by the empirical findings [27], which suggest that purely passive transformations, lacking any connection to guilt, do not suffice to produce a significant attenuation of responsibility or blame.

Finally, as Chevarie-Cossette [28] argues, the attenuation of diachronic responsibility does not always require a deep transformation of the agent's psychology. He likewise distinguishes between *attributability* and *answerability*, showing that, even in the absence of character change, it may cease to be appropriate to demand that an agent answer for their action—particularly when they have already answered for it through apology, reparation, or other forms of moral resolution. This analysis suggests that what is at stake in the evolution of responsibility is not solely the agent's psychological state, but also the normative conditions governing practices of holding agents to account. It thus invites us to move beyond purely psychologistic approaches to diachronic responsibility by integrating the constitutive role of moral response practices themselves.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that neither the passage of time itself nor the weakening of psychological connectedness provides the fundamental explanation of diachronic responsibility. Both may be morally relevant, but only insofar as they affect the normative conditions governing practices of answerability. What ultimately matters is whether demands for blame, apology, repair, reconciliation, or further accountability remain appropriate. The attenuation of responsibility is therefore best understood not as a direct consequence of temporal distance or psychological change themselves, but as a consequence of changes in those normative conditions.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that the passage of time does not, in itself, constitute an autonomous moral defense. Although it may, under certain conditions, contribute to modifying—or even suspending—the conditions under which it is appropriate to hold an agent to account or to maintain attitudes of blame, this influence is not grounded in any intrinsic moral relevance of the time that has elapsed. Rather, it is explained by the fact that time makes possible certain morally relevant transformations, such as psychological reform, repentance, or various processes of moral repair.

Our proposal therefore differs from approaches that explain diachronic responsibility solely in terms of psychological continuity or connectedness. Although such relations are often morally significant, we have argued that they do not by themselves provide the fundamental explanation of why answerability may attenuate over time. Psychological connectedness may be evidentially and causally relevant, but it is not explanatorily fundamental. Its moral significance depends on the way in which it affects the normative conditions governing practices of answerability, accountability, apology, repair, reconciliation, and other forms of moral response.

On this view, processes of moral repair help explain why psychological transformation may alter the conditions under which it is appropriate to hold an agent to account. The central claim of this article is therefore not that psychological change is irrelevant, but that its significance can only be understood within the broader normative practices in which it is embedded. When such transformations have indeed taken place, an appeal to the passage of time may be understood either as invoking a non-standard form of exemption or as appealing to a mitigating circumstance bearing on the appropriate moral response.

More generally, our analysis suggests that debates about diachronic responsibility should focus less on psychological continuity itself than on practices of answerability and moral repair. In this respect, time is not itself a moral defense. It matters only indirectly, insofar as it enables the changes that can make continued demands for answerability no longer appropriate.

Funding: Swiss National Science Foundation: project no. 100012_215262, “The Defence-First Approach to Responsibility”.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. This manuscript presents a theoretical framework and does not report empirical data.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to the members of the DFAR research group at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Neuchâtel—Simon-Pierre Chevarie-Cossette, Robin Bianchi, Antoine Dang Van, and Patricia Sanchez Oliva—for their helpful comments and stimulating discussions. I would also like to thank Kristie Miller and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Even if, as we will see in Section 2, in cases of fission a single action may be attributable to multiple agents.
- ² It might be objected that few would be willing to undergo fission merely to avoid, for example, a prison sentence. But matters would change dramatically if the penalty were more severe. For instance, if Leonardo's crime warranted the death penalty, and if fission does not count as a form of death [10,18], then undergoing fission could clearly appear as a preferable alternative.
- ³ In fact, Leonardo* and Leonardo** inherit psychological structures of *the same type* as Leonardo's. For if they were numerically identical structures, the problem of the transitivity of identity would arise again.
- ⁴ It might be objected that we sometimes experience a sense that we ought to answer, at a later time, for actions committed at a stage when we were in fact exempt from moral responsibility (e.g., when an adult expresses regret about behavior exhibited during childhood or during a period in which they suffered from a mental impairment from which they have since recovered). However—provided that we were not ourselves responsible for the condition in question—such a feeling appears inappropriate.
- ⁵ The idea that the passage of time is not, by itself, sufficient to affect moral responsibility is reinforced by a spatial analogy often invoked by B-theorists [29] (pp. 163–164). Just as being in Spain while our crime was committed in Switzerland does not morally exonerate us, being located in 2026 while the crime was committed in 2006 makes no difference either.

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