WHAT FOLLOWS FROM DEFENSIVE NON-LIABILITY?

GERALD LANG
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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MALET STREET
LONDON WC1E 7HU
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CONTACT
mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk
www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk

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Gerald Lang teaches Philosophy at the University of Leeds, and received his training in Bristol and Oxford. He was the co-editor of *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (OUP 2012), along with Ulrike Heuer, and *How We Fight: Ethics in War* (OUP 2014), along with Helen Frowe. He has published on a large number of topics in moral and political philosophy: distributive justice, political liberty, consequentialism, fairness, life and death issues in reproductive ethics, well-being and death, self-defence, the ethics of war, and aspects of practical reason and metaethics. He is currently writing a monograph, *Strokes of Luck*, about the role of luck in normative ethics and justice, work on which has been partly funded by the Mind Association. His next major research project will be concerned with self-defence, war, and the foundations of deontology.

**EDITORIAL NOTE**

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**WHAT FOLLOWS FROM DEFENSIVE NON-LIABILITY?**

**Gerald Lang**

Theories of self-defence tend to invest heavily in ‘liability justifications’: if the Attacker is liable to have defensive violence deployed against him by the Defender, then he will not be wronged by such violence, and self-defence becomes morally unproblematic. This paper contends that liability justifications are overrated. The deeper contribution to an explanation of why defensive permissions exist is made by the Defender’s non-liability. Drawing on both canonical cases of self-defence, featuring Culpable Attackers, and more penumbral cases of self-defence, involving Non-Responsible Threats, a case is slowly assembled for the ‘Non-Liability First Account’ of self-defence.

IN CANONICAL CASES of individual self-defence, in which an Attacker culpably attacks an innocent Defender, something normatively eventful happens to both of them: the Attacker seems to lose normative powers, whereas the Defender appears to gain normative powers. When the conditions for permissible self-defence are in place, the Attacker is no longer protected by a right against harm which he used to have, and the Defender acquires a right, to inflict harm, which she did not used to have. The normative baton is somehow passed from one of these agents to the other. We can refer to this as the ‘Central Normative Transition of Self-Defence’, or the ‘Central Normative Transition’ for short.¹ What explains the Central Normative Transition? What are the moving parts of that explanation, and how are they related to each other? These are the questions which concern me here.

The argument unfolds as follows. Section I sets up the picture in a bit more detail. In section II, I outline the *Falling Man* case, in which the Defender is threatened by a falling person who is not exercising his agency at all. Section III examines and criticizes Victor Tadros’s solution to *Falling Man*. With the aid of a further familiar case, *Rolling Stone*, sections IV to VII explore various puzzles and slowly build up a case for what I call the *Non-Liability First Account*. Section VIII returns to the canonical case of self-defence to see how, even here, the Non-Liability First Account has an important role to play.

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¹ This term was first introduced in Lang (2014), p. 38.
I. WHY LIABILITY?

A commonly invoked piece of critical apparatus in accounts of self-defence is liability: specifically, the Attacker’s defensive liability. The fact that the Attacker is liable to defensive violence is supposed to explain how he comes to lose the protection of his ordinary right not to be attacked. If the Attacker is no longer protected by this right, then the Defender does not infringe or violate it in defending herself against the Attacker, and so the mere fact of defensive violence becomes morally unproblematic.

Two further important achievements ensue from liability justifications; alternatively, two important problems are avoided.

First, the right of self-defence does not expand to become, in effect, a right of self-preservation: the Defender cannot kill Innocent Bystanders in order to save herself, since it is commonly supposed that Innocent Bystanders, unlike the Attacker, are not liable to be attacked. The Defender's liability justification for responding with lethal defensive force will be properly directed at the Attacker, but not at those other people whose deaths would neutralize the threat posed by the Attacker, and thereby serve as a vehicle of the Defender's self-preservation. (Imagine, in the Shield case, that the Defender was in a position to grab an Innocent Bystander as a shield, thus forcing him to absorb the Attacker’s aggression. The Defender lacks a liability justification for using the Innocent Shield in this way.) In this way, liability justifications avoid the over-generation of defensive permissions. We can call this the Over-Generation Problem. Liability justifications sidestep the Over-Generation Problem, whereas any theory of self-defence that purported to be able to do without liability justifications would appear to be highly vulnerable to it.

Second, the Defender’s possession of a liability justification also ensures that the Attacker, upon being attacked, does not, at least typically, acquire the permission to counter-defend himself against the Defender. We do not end up, implausibly, with a symmetrical set of permissions, possessed by the Defender and Attacker alike: the Attacker’s offence, however culpable, does not become morally revalorized due simply to the fact that the Defender, however innocent, is defending herself against him. Thus liability justifications are in a position to avoid the Symmetry Problem as well.

2 There are, of course, other species of liability in the criminal law and tort law. My concern here is solely with defensive liability—moreover, with moral, not legal, defensive liability.

3 Subject to the familiar conditions of necessity, proportionality, and imminence.

4 Quong (2012), pp. 45-6, is helpful here.
So far, liability is a normative place-holder. It announces itself primarily by its effects: it has the effect of focusing defensive violence only on the Attacker rather than on Innocent Bystanders as well, and also of restricting counter-defensive measures by the Attacker. But how exactly does it do this?

There are really two issues embedded in this question. The first concerns the criterion of liability, or a statement of the conditions in which liability is triggered. The second concerns the explanation of why liability is triggered in these particular circumstances.\(^5\)

There are different criteria of defensive liability. I shall mention just two of them. Judith Thomson, for example, makes the Attacker defensively liable just when and because the Attacker will otherwise violate the Defender’s rights.\(^6\) Jeff McMahan, by contrast, insists that the Attacker is liable only when he poses an objectively unjust threat to the Defender for which he is also responsible.\(^7\) There are different explanatory pictures in play as well. Thomson thinks that defensive liability ensues from rights violation; in threatening to violate the Defender’s rights, the Attacker forfeits his own rights.\(^8\) For McMahan, defensive liability is the solution to a distributive problem: when harm is unavoidable, it is appealing to distribute it in ways which are just. Since the Attacker’s actions make harm unavoidable, then the just solution will make the Attacker liable to bear that harm.\(^9\)

Theories of individual defensive liability, whatever they amount to, tend to embark from the brightly lit cases in which there is a pronounced normative asymmetry between Attacker and Defender, and then rely on the powers of that illumination as they proceed to adjudicate on the murkier cases. Imagine, for example, that the Defender is wholly innocent—she is not endangering anyone, and is entitled to be where she is—while the Attacker is malicious, and comfortably satisfies whatever conditions for moral responsibility we would normally insist upon for the assignment of blame. Call this case Culpable Attacker. Culpable Attacker outlines the conditions in which a theory of defensive liability can expect to enjoy the most confident application. The normative asymmetry between Attacker

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5 Lazar (2009), p. 703, distinguishes in similar fashion between the ‘explanatory structure’ of an account of self-defence, and ‘criteria of liability’ for the specific ways in which the right to life are lost.
7 See McMahan (2005).
8 See, again, Thomson (1991). More details of her position are given in section II.
and Defender helps to deliver the claim that the Attacker is liable to be attacked by the Defender, or by third-parties acting on the Defender’s behalf. That is so, regardless of what the substantive content of the theory of self-defence amounts to: whether it is concerned with the fair distribution of unavoidable harm, or rights violation, or something else yet again.

These theories must then find something to say about the less brightly lit cases in which that normative asymmetry between Attacker and Defender is reduced or even erased. To illustrate such a case, imagine that the Defender is still innocent, but that the Attacker is also wholly innocent, due to his lack of moral responsibility for the threat he poses to the Defender. I want to give pride of place to one of these less brightly lit cases, in which the Attacker is not obviously liable. I then extend this discussion, in a reversal of the usual direction of travel, to the more brightly lit cases, in which the normative asymmetry between Attacker and Defender is ostensibly more pronounced or obvious. The full reasons for adopting this strategy will emerge in due course. But my leading idea, very roughly, is that theorists of self-defence have focused too much on the Attacker’s liability, when their primary investment should have been in the Defender’s non-liability. It is the non-liability of the Defender, not the liability of the Attacker, which permits us a straightforward interpretation of the cases in which the normative asymmetry between Defender and Attacker is starkest, and also offers us a convincing way of interpreting cases in which that asymmetry is moot.\(^{10}\)

My aim, then, is to sketch the Non-Liability First Account of private self-defence. According to the Non-Liability First Account, non-liability is the most important normative primitive in these cases; the facts about liability are constructed, in part, out of the facts about non-liability. The Non-Liability First Account pronounces on the harder cases, and makes it clearer what is doing the justificatory work in the easier cases.

II. FALLING MAN AND THE SCOPE OF DEFENSIVE PERMISSIONS

Here is a version of a famous case illustrating the erasure, or at least partial erasure, of normative asymmetry between Attacker and Defender, originally due to Robert Nozick:

*Falling Man*: Victoria is standing at the bottom of a well, with no escape options, and will be crushed to death by an entirely innocent, unconscious falling man, Victor, unless she vaporizes him with her ray gun.

\(^{10}\) See Doggett (2017) for an argument whose ambitions are similar to mine. I am highly sympathetic to its basic thrust, but there are at least some differences in emphasis between us.
Victor, by contrast, will be saved if he falls on Victoria, who will cushion his fall.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Falling Man} is the most extreme instance of a \textit{Non-Responsible Threat}: Victor poses danger to Victoria, who is not liable to be harmed, but in ways which entirely bypass his agency. Victor is falling, not acting; he is unconscious, not conscious. No agency is involved.\textsuperscript{12}

For Thomson, the scope of the Defender’s defensive permissions encompasses cases such as \textit{Falling Man}. It does not matter that Victor’s agency is entirely suppressed. His \textit{movements} still threaten Victoria; and, since he is a moral agent and she is a moral agent, these movements acquire an immediate moral significance. By threatening Victoria, who is innocent, his movements risk a violation of her rights. Thomson thinks, in effect, that there are no relevant differences among the different species of Attackers, just as long as the Defender is innocent. On Thomson’s view, Villainous Aggressors, Innocent Aggressors—whose threats to Defenders are explained by compromised agency such as ignorance, psychosis, and youth (think of child soldiers)—as well as Non-Responsible Threats such as Victor in \textit{Falling Man}, are all liable to be killed in defence, since they will otherwise violate the Defender’s rights. She writes, in connection to the particular cases she uses to illustrate these different categories of Attacker:

\begin{quote}
[T]he villainous driver in Villainous Aggressor has no right to kill you, and surely it is also true of the fault-free driver in Innocent Aggressor that \textit{he} has no right to kill you. In Hohfeldian terms, neither of the two drivers has a privilege of killing you. For them to lack the privilege of killing you, however, is for you to have rights (Hohfeldian claims) that they not do so, rights they will infringe if they succeed in killing you.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Thomson’s argumentative path appears to be plotted firmly from within the familiar Hohfeldian nexus, according to which, if agent \textit{T} lacks the claim-right to kill agent \textit{D}, then \textit{D} must have the right not to be killed by \textit{T}—a right which \textit{T} will violate if he is not resisted, however faultless he may be for this violation. So in this way all species of Attackers, including Non-Responsible Threats, will be imported into the moral world of rights-violations, regardless of their current agential capacity.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} See McMahan (2009), pp. 167-73. The term ‘Non-Responsible Threat’ is slowly acquiring hegemony over the term ‘Innocent Threat’ which was relatively commonplace in the older literature, including Thomson (1991) and McMahan (1994).
\textsuperscript{13} Thomson (1991), pp. 300-1; original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{14} Thomson’s stance on the scope of defensive permissions does not follow just from the fact that she advances a rights-based account. Rodin (2002), (2014) also espouses a
Thomson remarks that rights violation ‘is necessary, for it just is not sufficient to justify your killing a person that that person will otherwise kill you’. If these Threats and Attackers are not imported into the moral world as would-be rights-violators, the Defender will either be left without adequate protection, given their likely immunity to defensive force, or the Over-Generation Problem will immediately arise. To see why, compare *Falling Man* with *Bridge*, which conforms to the structure of what Thomson calls a ‘Riding-Roughshod-over-a-Bystander’ case:

*Bridge*: Jules is fleeing from Jim’s culpable and impermissible attack on him. His only hope of escaping from it is to cross a rickety rope bridge. This bridge will bear the weight of only one person. Already standing on the bridge is Catherine. If Jules shakes the bridge, Catherine will fall to her death, leaving the bridge unoccupied, and Jules can make good on his escape. If Jules refrains from removing Catherine from the bridge and securing this escape option, he will be killed by Jim.

On Thomson’s view, Catherine retains the right to life, and Jules will act impermissibly if he removes her from the bridge. The difference between Catherine in *Bridge* and Victor in *Falling Man* is that Victor is threatening to violate Victoria’s rights, whereas Catherine (unlike Jim) does not threaten to violate Jules’ rights. So the reference to rights-violation is required, by Thomson’s own lights, to distinguish Attackers and Threats, on the one hand, from Innocent Bystanders, on the other hand.

Many writers have argued, in response to Thomson, that Victor cannot be reasonably represented as being liable to being killed in self-defence. This conclusion arises from deeper reflection on the fact that the threat posed by Victor is not the product of his agency. He has no agential capacity: his *falling* cannot qualify as *acting*, and *a fortiori* cannot qualify as rights-violation. To boost support for this conclusion, a Non-Responsible Threat such as Victor is often compared to a non-sentient entity, entirely lacking in agency. This is the *Stone Objection*. Consider:

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16 Thomson (1991), p. 290. Now it should be acknowledged that, although Thomson herself is committed to the claim that Catherine is inviolable, *Bridge* does present us with a controversial form of bystander, as Catherine’s blockage of Jules’ escape options may make it tempting to characterize her as an *indirect* Threat. For a helpful discussion, see Frowe (2014), pp. 31 ff. Feel free to substitute another sort of bystander, such as one the one in *Shield*, if you think *Bridge* is not fit for purpose.
Rolling Stone: A stone is rolling slowly towards Sly, who can avoid being crushed by it only by destroying it with his bazooka.

No one is denying, of course, that Sly may destroy the stone. The problem is that the claim that Victor is capable of violating Victoria’s rights in Falling Man is no more plausible than the claim that the stone threatens to violate Sly’s rights in Rolling Stone. However deadly the stone is, it does not exhibit any signs of agency. The stone may present a deadly threat to a morally significant entity—Sly—but its movements resist any moral characterization. Whatever happens to Sly, the stone will not have violated his rights. But a Non-Responsible Threat, such as Victor, appears to be in exactly the same position as the stone. Even Thomson admits that the falling Non-Responsible Threat does not do anything; he is merely falling in the direction of the Defender. It follows that we have no more secure a basis for saying that Victor will violate Victoria’s rights than we have for saying that the stone will violate Sly’s rights. The Stone Objection thus makes an important contribution to the claim that Victor is an unintelligible subject of duties. Since he is not an intelligible subject of duties, the threat he poses to Victoria, as McMahan puts it, ‘is neither permissible nor impermissible’.

If Victor is relevantly like the stone, then he will not violate Victoria’s rights, and there is no basis on which establish his liability. Compare Catherine in Bridge: she is simply in the way. She does not fall within the scope of Jules’ liability justification because being in the wrong place at the wrong time—from Jules’ perspective—does not suffice to establish her liability. So, if Victor does not threaten to violate Victoria’s right, then Victoria’s violent response to him cannot be depicted as the exercise of her right of self-defence, but simply one of self-preservation. This exposes Thomson to the Over-Generation Problem. If Victoria can permissibly kill Victor, then it should also be permissible for Jules to kill Catherine.

How should Thomson respond to the Stone Objection? She might say that, given the fact that Victor, unlike the stone, is a moral agent, it then follows that his movements, even if there is nothing he can do about them, command a special moral significance simply because of his status as a moral agent. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, the fact that Victor possesses this moral standing may have the effect of transforming the significance of events and movements that would, in other circumstances, remain morally inert. Though I do not think this line of argument is obviously unsatisfactory, it does risk a stalemate with its opponents, so I will

not be relying upon it.

The Stone Objection is usually deployed in the argument as little more than satirical embellishment for those who wish to persuade us that deny that Victor is not defensively liable. I want to deny that deeper reflection on *Rolling Stone* can get us to reach that particular verdict about *Falling Man*. But I also think that reflection on *Rolling Stone* can help us to recover deeper lessons about *Falling Man*, and indeed about the Central Normative Transition itself. It can help us to see that the primary normative focus on should be on Victoria’s non-liability, rather than Victor’s liability. But we must proceed slowly.

### III. Enforcing Duties in Falling Man

An important contribution to the recent literature on Non-Responsible Threats comes from Victor Tadros, and my first critical task will be to examine his account.²⁰ Taking the agents in *Falling Man* to illustrate his argument, Tadros attributes to Victor an enforceable duty to bear costs in order to avoid killing Victoria. These costs can be imposed on Victor regardless of the degree of his responsibility for the threat. Tadros remarks:

> If a person would have a duty to allow her body to be used for some good end were she able to consent to its use, we are permitted to use her body as a means to that end regardless of whether she would consent were she able.²¹

Tadros’s position rests on the claim that, if A has a duty to B to refrain from φ-ing, then this duty can standardly be enforced, at least when the stakes are as high as they are in cases such as *Falling Man*. It can be enforced, moreover, without falling foul of the Means Principle which Tadros elsewhere upholds, according to which our treatment of other people should not use them as a means to an end.²² We can call this former principle the **Enforcement Principle**.

Now the Enforcement Principle will not, in and by itself, underwrite the claim that Victor has a duty to refrain from killing Victoria. To get to enforceable duties, we need duties. But this is just the point at issue. Perhaps, due to his inability to manifest his agency, Victor lacks any such duty. We have seen, after all, that this is the position maintained by propo-

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nents of the Stone Objection, and the mere invocation of the Enforcement Principle, however appealing it might otherwise seem, will not dislodge it.

Tadros is aware of this challenge, and has a number of remedies for loosening its grip. I shall state them before offering replies.\(^{23}\)

First, Tadros claims that we can make some progress if we dispute McMahan’s characterization of liability in terms of a loss model of rights.\(^{24}\) For McMahan, liability contrasts with other distinct mechanisms, such as the waiver model and the overriding model, through the activation of which rights can retreat from the moral scene.\(^{25}\) If Victor’s liability ensues from the loss of his right, then it may be more plausible to insist that Victor needs to have done something, reflecting responsible agency, in order to explain how this loss has occurred. Otherwise we will be forced to appeal to facts about him which are akin to the facts, concerning mere embeddedness in the causal network, which could just as well be attributed to Innocent Bystanders such as Catherine in \textit{Bridge}. Tadros contends, against this loss model of liability, that Victor simply \textit{never had} a right not to be attacked by Victoria. The correct description of the right he possessed all along would have made it clear that this right was not one which could be lost only by responsible exercises of agency. The right Victor held was always conditional: it was conditional on his not attacking or threatening others who are not liable to be attacked. If so, then the path to Victor’s liability does not have to be paved by exercises of, specifically, agency.\(^{26}\)

A second point concerning the Enforcement Principle is that, if Victor were capable of expressing actual consent, then any exercises of actual consent would not be capable of annulling Victor’s duty to refrain from harming Victoria. He would have that duty regardless of consent. Now in the situation he is in, where he is assumed to be unconscious, Victor cannot express actual consent. We can still, however, attribute hypothetical consent to him, or consent that he would be in a position to express were he conscious. Tadros argues that we can be guided by the limited significance of actual consent in trying to gauge the significance of what this exercise in hypothetical consent would return. As Tadros tells us, ‘if actual non-consent is insufficient to render the use of my body wrong, it is difficult to believe that hypothetical non-consent can make all the difference’.\(^{27}\) So, even if our best judgment about Victor’s hypothetical

\(^{23}\) I explore only Tadros’s central suggestions; the shortcomings with these should be enough, I think, to motivate us to seek answers elsewhere.

\(^{24}\) Tadros (2012), pp. 261 ff.

\(^{25}\) McMahan (2009), pp. 9-10.


consent would attribute to him the refusal to bear costs in order to avoid killing Victoria, this refusal can expect to command only very limited significance. It will not erase any duty he had to avoid killing Victoria. In short, we are left with two possibilities concerning hypothetical consent: either Victor would consent to being harmed in order to avoid harming Victoria, or he would not. The first of these possibilities permits Victoria to exercise defensive violence against Victor. The second of them is discounted from the outset, on the grounds that hypothetical refusal cannot enjoy much greater significance than actual refusal.

I am not convinced that these arguments make the progress they need to make in order to establish that Victor is liable to Victoria’s defence. Tadros’s first point, about the loss model of rights, is not decisive. For we can still compare Victor’s situation before and after he starts falling in Victoria’s direction: before the conditions for *Falling Man* are in place, Victor is an agent who is protected by rights against harm; and after these conditions are assembled, he is not protected by these rights. So, however we describe this transition, it cannot be denied that Victor is *no longer* protected by a right which he could previously rely upon.28 In this context, it does not make much of a difference whether we choose to describe Victor as having lost his ordinary rights, or as being no longer protected by his ordinary rights. We are still going to require an explanation of why Victor is no longer protected by these rights; and McMahan, Otsuka and others are still going to insist that this transition from protection to non-protection requires signs of agential life from him. When all is said and done, these writers are mainly concerned with the conditions under which the protections offered by Victor’s ordinary right are withdrawn, not with the formal jurisprudential description of the form which this withdrawal takes.29 Their view will be that the withdrawal of such protection cannot rely merely on bad luck. The underlying view they hold is nicely articulated by Seth Lazar:

> The right to life is uniquely important, and arguments for its diminishment or loss should meet a heavy burden of proof. In particular, they should be able to tie that diminishment or loss to *something distinctive about us as moral subjects*—something beyond mere bad luck.30

The second point, about the relationship between actual consent and hypothetical consent, risks being a *non sequitur*. The capacity for agency is not sought so that we can track the verdicts of its exercise, but to certify that Victor is an intelligible subject of duties. We would of course not pay

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29 Renzo (2017) offers a subtle discussion of some of these categories.
30 Lazar (2009), p. 701; emphases added.
much, if any, attention to what Victor would consent to, were he functioning as an ordinary agent, in order to be confident that he was under a duty not to kill Victoria. So it is true that, at the fundamental level, when it comes to the assignment of duties to functioning agents, hypothetical consent seems relatively unimportant. But none of this can establish that Victor is a functioning agent, or an intelligible subject of duties. Only subjects of duties can become liable. Stones cannot become liable, but that is what Victor is properly compared to in this context: a stone. We need an argument establishing that the analogy between Victor and a stone is a misleading one. It seems to me that the Tadros strategy is not, without considerable supplementation, going to deliver any such explanation. We should explore other routes.

IV. STONES AND PRIVILEGES

There is a problem, nonetheless, with the Stone Objection. By uncovering it, we can make more fundamental progress, not just with our grasp of the Falling Man case, but with the respective roles that liability and non-liability play in the Central Normative Transition. To set the ball rolling, we need to revisit what Thomson says in the passages we encountered above, as well as Rolling Stone.

Thomson’s argument is that, because the Threat lacks the privilege or liberty right to kill the Defender, he threatens to violate the Defender’s right. Perhaps we can get by, in the first instance, with only the first of these claims. For it seems to be a robust truth that the Threat, whatever level of responsibility or agency it manifests, lacks the right to kill the Defender, if the Defender is innocent. If it should turn out that the Threat kills the Defender, it will at least be true that the Threat had no right to do so. The death of the Defender will not emerge as the result of any permission to kill her.

This claim does not have any embarrassing immediate implications. It applies to Rolling Stone as well as to Falling Man. I focus for the moment on the former, since this is where the critical venom for the case against Victoria’s defensive permissions is supposed to be gathered. The plain fact of the matter is that the stone does lack the privilege, or liberty right, to kill Sly. It does not have the liberty right to do anything, and so, as one particular instance of that truth, it does not have the right to kill Sly. The normative strain here is carried by the stone, but in a way that avoids our having to imbue it with embarrassingly outlandish moral properties.
We can put the point in another way. Here is one claim:

(1) The stone lacks the right to kill Sly.

The truth of (1) does nothing to augment the prospects of the following claim:

(2) If the stone kills Sly, then Sly’s rights are violated.

There is no support for (2) from (1). This is for reasons which are hiding in plain sight in the Stone Objection itself. There is no prospect of ratifying (2) due to the truth of the following claim:

(3) Stones cannot violate or infringe rights.

Stones are simply not in the rights-violation business. So (3) is plainly true. Sly’s rights will not be violated by the stone. But there is surely no immediate tension between (1) and (3). If (3) is true, then (1) is merely a highly obvious truth. It could not be the case that the stone has the right to kill Sly,31 and so it is not the case that the stone has the right to kill Sly; accordingly, a stone lacks the right to kill Sly.32 True, a claim of the form ‘T lacks the right to kill Sly’ would in most contexts license the inference ‘If T kills Sly, then Sly’s rights have been violated’. But any such implication can be comfortably cancelled without conceptual confusion, when the particular identity of ‘T’ is disclosed.

The stone lacks the right to kill Sly. Sly is also permitted to destroy the stone. These are easy claims, and obvious truths. But trouble may lie ahead. Consider (1) again:

(1) The stone lacks the right to kill Sly.

Does (4) follow plausibly from (1)?

(4) Sly is not liable to be killed by the stone.

If (4) is true, then (5) may be true:

(5) Sly is wronged by being killed by the stone.

But (5) must be false. The stone cannot wrong Sly for exactly the same reason that it cannot violate his rights: stones do not interact with moral agents in ways which admit of this kind of moral characterization.

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31 Ignore ‘magic wand’ cases of transformation, such as we find in some of the abortion literature.

32 If the ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle strikes most people as true under at least some description of it, an even greater level of security should attach to the ‘cannot’ implies ‘does not’ principle.
This, then, is the danger: we appear to risk the ascription of extravagant moral properties to the stone, after all, if we allow (1) to license, in turn, (4), and then (5). We will have ended up with the same embarrassment that was facing us when we first entertained the idea that a Non-Responsible Threat can violate a Defender’s rights.

V. NON-RESPONSIBLE THREATS AND NORMATIVE GAPS

We need to take a step back. In the brightly lit, canonical self-defence cases such as Culpable Attacker, the Attacker acts impermissibly, and threatens the Defender’s rights. It is the impermissibility of the Attacker’s actions which inversely mirrors the permissibility of the Defender’s defensive violence. As McMahan sees matters, Falling Man breaks the justificatory circuits of this basic picture. If Victor’s movements are not impermissible, the justificatory chain is broken, and we cannot appeal to them to support the claim that Victoria’s defence is permissible. The permissibility of Victoria’s defence cannot be traced to the impermissibility of Victor’s attack.33 The normative baton cannot be passed between them in the normal way. For McMahan, that fact ends the argument: it denies Victoria defensive permissions against Victor.34 Since Victoria’s defence is not the response to an impermissible attack on her, she cannot acquire a permission to attack Victor. Victoria’s defence is not permissible because Victor’s attack is not impermissible. She is simply out of luck, and is under moral instruction to resign herself to her fate.35

There are further implications of this picture, however, which McMahan does not trace out, and which leave us in a more theoretically unsettled and ambiguous position. Victor’s attack may not be impermissible, but it is not permissible either, if we go on what McMahan himself tells us: as a Non-Responsible Threat, Victor is not an intelligible subject of duties, and so his attack is neither permissible nor impermissible. As a result, it will then follow that the impermissibility of Victoria’s defence cannot be traced back to the permissibility of Victor’s attack. But this particular breakage in the usual justificatory circuits does not encourage McMahan to abandon his steadfast commitment to the impermissibility of Victoria’s defence. The impermissibility of Victoria’s defence does not, it would seem, need to be partnered with the permissibility of Victor’s attack.

33 If you feel that the term ‘attack’ is too suggestive of agential life to be strictly appropriate, feel free to substitute a more neutral term.

34 This is not true of Thomson, of course, but McMahan will presumably say that Thomson needs to take a harder look at the wiring of the relevant justificatory circuits.

35 Though—most writers are careful to add—Victoria might perhaps be excused for killing Victor.
In McMahan’s argument, Victoria’s defence is not permissible due to the fact that Victor’s attack is not impermissible. The fact that Victor’s attack is not permissible makes no difference. We simply do not encounter these broken justificatory connections in the canonical self-defence cases such as *Culpable Attacker*. In these cases, when the Attacker does not act permissibly, he also acts impermissibly: the property of not acting permissibly is coextensive with the property of acting impermissibly. Clearly, the usual Hohfeldian connections between Defender and Attacker cannot be relied upon in *Falling Man*. There is a normative gap here, which invites a new normative settlement about the permissions and non-permissions on offer to the various parties. The existence or significance of this gap is not fully appreciated by either McMahan or Thomson.

To make progress, we can revisit *Rolling Stone*. The stone’s movements, rather more obviously than the Non-Responsible Threat, fail to be permissible, and they fail to be impermissible. There is no passing of the normative baton from the stone to Sly. The permissibility of Sly’s defence cannot be traced to the impermissibility of the stone’s movements. But it should be noticed that this claim mirrors the structure of *Falling Man*, on McMahan’s interpretation of it: the permissibility of Victoria’s defence cannot be traced to the impermissibility of Victor’s movements. Now, in *Falling Man*, McMahan thinks that this particular breakage in the normative circuit demonstrates that Victoria’s defence is impermissible. But that would not be the correct line to follow in *Rolling Stone*. Sly is clearly permitted to destroy the stone.

Let us consider the other connection in the justificatory circuit, concerning the non-permissibility of the Threat’s movements and the permissibility of the Defender’s defence. What seems to certify Sly’s defence as a permissible case of defence is that the stone’s movements are not permissible. The permissibility of Sly’s defence rests simply on the fact that the threat posed to him is not permissible.

It may be protested that we cannot expect any lessons to be straightforwardly transferred from *Rolling Stone* to *Falling Man*. First, Victor is a morally significant being—a person, albeit a temporarily incapacitated one—unlike the stone.\(^{36}\) Second, the fact that the stone has no moral standing at all will place *Rolling Stone* outside the category of ordinary defensive cases. Now these points of disanalogy may exist. But there is

\(^{36}\) Otsuka (1994), p. 92, leans heavily on the difference in moral status between Defenders and Attackers for some cases of Non-Responsible Threats: for example, when the Non-Responsible Threat is a grizzly bear, or an incorrigibly violent psychopath whose agency is permanently compromised. I am not fully convinced that this is an advisable strategy for securing these particular verdicts. My main concern, however, is to establish that there is another way to go.
still something to learn from *Rolling Stone*, regardless of how we classify this case. *Rolling Stone* teaches us that the impermissibility of a threat is not a necessary condition for the permissibility of defensive action. Even if that is an obvious lesson, it is one which can be put to more interesting uses. For we can still ask how the fact that Victor is a morally significant entity manages to defeat the suggestion that Victoria lacks permission to defend herself against him, even though the threat he poses to her is not permissible.

It will not do to reply that, because his agency is incapacitated, Victor’s movements are not impermissible. We already know, from *Rolling Stone*, that the non-impermissibility of the movements made by a threatening entity, $T$, does not confer immunity on $T$. So perhaps it all now depends on what *kind* of threat $T$ is: Victor, unlike the stone, has moral standing. But Victoria also has moral standing. That yields a tie between Victor and Victoria. We need something to break that tie: whatever happens, after all, one of them is going to be killed. A further suggestion, from McMahan, is that, other things equal, it is better that we should settle for a *letting die* rather than a *killing*.37 If Victoria lets herself be killed, rather than choosing to kill Victor, then we will have a letting die rather than a killing. But this suggestion does not work: Victoria’s inaction can only produce an outcome where it is she who is killed by Victor. She may *allow* herself to be killed, but it is still a *killing* which she allows. We have a choice of killings, not a choice between a killing and something which carries less moral disvalue than a killing. Of course, McMahan might point out here that Victor’s killing of Victoria will lack its usual moral toxicity, precisely because he is a Non-Responsible Threat, whereas Victoria’s killing of Victor will be one for which she is morally responsible. But this asymmetry can be pressed into service only if it turns out that Victoria’s defensive killing of Victor is impermissible. That is precisely what McMahan’s argument is trying to establish. He would be jumping the gun if he were to rely on this point in order to establish the conclusion he favours.

VI. BROAD NON-LIABILITY

To recapitulate some relevant points so far: in cases of defence, the movements of the threatening entity, $T$, against the Defender can fall into one of three categories. First, $T$’s movements might be permissible. Second, $T$’s movements might be impermissible. Third, $T$’s movements might be neither permissible nor impermissible. If $T$’s movements are permissible, then the permissibility of defence is blocked. If $T$’s movements are impermissible, then the permissibility of defence is enabled. If $T$’s movements

are not permissible and not impermissible, then there are no clear lines of normative transmission from the T’s situation to the Defender’s situation. But we need concrete settlements in these cases, on pain of severe gaps in coverage in our theory of defence.

Now it is self-evident that Sly can destroy the stone in *Rolling Stone*. That fact suggests that, at least for some values of T, where T’s movements are not permissible and not impermissible, we should be guided by the *non-permissibility* of T’s movements in arriving at the verdict that defence against T is permitted. The only challenge for Sly is to ensure that the stone’s movements fail to be permissible. An easy enough task: nothing the stone ever did could be permissible. The stone’s movements do not need, in addition, to be *impermissible*. Sly can destroy it without a second thought.

More generally, though, what could explain the significance of the non-permissibility of T’s movements, if and when they are not also impermissible? I suggest that the answer should be centrally concerned with facts about the Defender. The Defender has interests which her rights serve to protect. The central function of her rights is to protect those interests, and to give her normative remedies for preventing their frustration. As a rights-bearer, the Defender can typically be expected to have permissible means to frustrate those frustrations, unless she has already acted in such a way as to endanger the interests of other rights-bearers. These thoughts suggest the following schema for what I call ‘broad non-liability’, where ‘D’ designates the Defender, and ‘T’ designates the Threat:

**BROAD NON-LIABILITY:**

If D is broadly non-liable to be attacked by T, then it is either the case that (i) D is not wronged by T, but is permitted to defend herself by taking the necessary steps to neutralize the threat posed by T, or it is the case that (ii) D is wronged by T, and is permitted to defend herself by taking the necessary steps to neutralize the threat posed by T.

**BROAD NON-LIABILITY** encompasses a heterogeneous catalogue of Threats. It clearly encompasses, as possible values for T, stones, which will fall under (i), and Culpable Attackers, who will fall under (ii). These provisions are not suspicious, at least as far as the Defender’s relationships with Culpable Attackers and stones are concerned. The Defender is, after all, permitted to destroy stones. That settles the case for the applicability of (i). And the Defender is also permitted to kill Culpable Attackers, as-

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38 See Lang (2014), pp. 55-7, for one way of articulating this line of argument, drawing on resources offered in Narveson (1965).
summing necessity and proportionality conditions are in place. That settles the case for the applicability of (ii).

So far, BROAD NON-LIABILITY is just a schema. It does not contain an argument for why every threatening individual should be assigned to either (i) or (ii). So what about Non-Responsible Threats such as Victor? Morally speaking, Non-Responsible Threats such as Victor have a hybrid character: according to proponents of the Stone Objection, they retain the high moral standing of ordinary non-liable human persons, which renders it impermissible for Defenders to kill them. But the reasons for their moral immunity derive from the fact that their movements can be significantly compared to the stone in *Rolling Stone*. Their agential incapacity makes it implausible to suggest that Non-Responsible Threats can *wrong* the Defender. And isn’t that the sticking point? If they don’t wrong the Defender, how can it be permissible to kill them?

My suggestion is that, when all is said and done, we do not have to worry about this issue. We need not agonize over whether Victor wrongs Victoria. All we need to establish is that Victor’s attack is not permissible. So either we can take seriously the analogy between Non-Responsible Threats and stones, and assign Victoria’s permission to kill Victor under sub-category (i), or we can resist that analogy, and insist that Victoria’s permission to kill Victor falls under sub-category (ii). Either way, Victoria is permitted to kill him. That should count as an advantage, given the likelihood of low credences for our intuitions in these unusual cases.

Proponents of the Stone Objection will, of course, resist these options, and claim that, because the Non-Responsible Threat does not violate the Defender’s rights, the Defender ought to resist engaging in defensive violence. But I find this attempt to carve out new space for Non-Responsible Threats unconvincing. It fails to explain why the hybrid category of *not-permissible-but-not-impermissible* should take one form when applied to Non-Responsible Threats and another form when applied to stones. The fact that Victor is morally valuable and the stone is valueless, which is an obvious enough contrast, does not make the critical difference, as we have seen. So what else do we have to go on? We should allow Victoria’s non-liability to call the shots.

VII. FROM BROAD NON-LIABILITY TO BROAD LIABILITY

Even if we are sceptical about the claim that Victor violates Victoria’s rights, several claims are true: first, Victor poses a causal threat to Victoria; second, Victor *lacks* a right to threaten Victoria; and, third, that Victoria is broadly non-liable to be threatened by Victor. The combination
of these facts delivers the verdict that Victoria may kill Victor in defence. Now Victor is clearly liable in some sense. If it is permissible for Victoria to use defensive force against him, then Victor is an appropriate object of defensive force. But if Victor is an appropriate object of defensive force, then it may seem difficult, in turn, to deny that he is liable to defensive force. But if he is liable to defensive force, then aren’t we committed to the familiar entailment that he has—in an agency-free way—wronged her after all?

My suggestion is that we can indeed affirm that Victor is liable, but in a way that simply reflects a correlative fact about Victoria’s broad non-liability. To see what his liability amounts to, I am going to suggest, as an accompaniment to the BROAD NON-LIABILITY schema, the following BROAD LIABILITY schema, in which D and T change places:

**BROAD LIABILITY:**

If T is broadly liable to be attacked by D, then it is either the case that (iii) T poses a threat to D where D is broadly non-liable in sense (i) of BROAD NON-LIABILITY, or it is the case that (iv) T poses a threat to D where D is broadly non-liable in sense (ii) of BROAD NON-LIABILITY.

What is the connection between these two schemas? BROAD NON-LIABILITY is the primitive, and BROAD LIABILITY is the correlate of it: that is the essence of the Non-Liability First Account.

If we apply BROAD LIABILITY, then Victor will be broadly liable under either (iii) or (iv). Victor’s instantiation of broad liability is simply the correlate of the relevant sense of broad non-liability instantiated by Victoria. The facts about broad liability ensue from, or are constructed out of, the facts about broad non-liability. Once again, BROAD LIABILITY encourages us not to worry too much about which of these sub-categories Victor falls under. Victoria need not be depicted as being wronged by Victor. Again, perhaps his movements are not impermissible. But Victoria is nonetheless entitled to kill Victor, because she is broadly non-liable not to be killed by him.

Here is an immediate problem with this line of argument: by the same token, the stone, which falls squarely under sub-category (iii), also emerges as being broadly liable. Is this ridiculous? No, it is not: the stone’s satisfaction of broad liability is simply the correlate of the relevant sense of broad non-liability satisfied by Sly. Sly is of course not wronged by the stone—that thought is ridiculous—but he is certainly permitted to destroy it. Because he is permitted to destroy it, the stone is broadly liable to be destroyed by him.
A further challenge awaits BROAD LIABILITY. If Victor has not determinately wronged Victoria—if he is simply broadly liable to be killed—then we should recognize that there is no real moral stigma that can be attached to him which demonstrates that he, and not an Innocent Bystander, is appropriately selected to bear the costs of Victoria’s defence. This point gives rise to a dilemma.

The first horn of it returns us directly to the Over-Generation Problem. If what really matters, at the end of the day, is Victoria’s broad non-liability, and if Victor is not determinately guilty of wrongdoing, then this point might reduce the significance of the distinction between self-defence and self-preservation, and call into question the claim that it is Victor, rather than an Innocent Bystander, who is chosen as the appropriate recipient of defensive force. Does it matter which one of them bears the costs of Victoria’s defence? Can it matter, if the difference between Victor and the Innocent Bystander is not a morally deep one?

The second horn of the dilemma is this: if the Over-Generation Problem is resisted simply by reiterating the claim that Victor, but not the Innocent Bystander, is broadly liable to defensive force, then it may seem that we are forced to endow the fact that Victor causally threatens Victoria, and lacks the right to do so, with a significance that cannot be reconciled with his lack of occurrent agency. Isn’t the fact that Victor threatens Victoria and lacks the right to do so being given a tacit significance which belies the official view that Victor’s wrongdoing of Victoria is not functioning as the key consideration?

The concerns lying behind the horns of this dilemma are understandable, but they can be dealt with by closer attention to the commitments of the Non-Liability First Account. To tackle the first horn, we can simply invoke the difference between being broadly liable and not being broadly liable: Victor is broadly liable, and the Innocent Bystander is not broadly liable. The Non-Liability First Account holds that this is a morally relevant distinction. To tackle the second horn, the moral significance of the distinction between being broadly liable and not being broadly liable does not require the ascription of wrongdoing to Victor. The distinction between Victor’s broad liability and the Innocent Bystander’s broad non-liability is significant because Victoria is broadly non-liable not to be harmed by someone who threatens her. It is that fact—Victoria’s broad non-liability—which makes Victor’s broad liability morally significant. The Non-Liability First Account does not attempt to downplay the moral significance of Victor’s broad liability. It simply makes the moral significance of Victor’s broad liability derivative from the moral significance of Victoria’s broad non-liability.
VIII. PUTTING NON-LIABILITY FIRST

Even if the Non-Liability First Account explains defensive permissions in some penumbral cases of self-defence, why should it do any interesting work in cases such as Culpable Attacker? Even here, in these central cases of self-defence, I think liability justifications are much less forthcoming than they might be. It is really the Defender’s non-liability that is doing the explanatory heavy lifting.

Liability justifications are primarily Attacker-focused rather than Defender-focused.39 On these views, the Central Normative Transition is completed due to a loss of the Attacker’s right—or, more cumbersomely but accurately—the disappearance of the protection offered by the Attacker’s right.40 When this happens, the route to defence is unobstructed.

It may appear at first that liability must be the missing or at least implicit ingredient in certain statements of how defensive permissions are generated. Again, we can look at Thomson and McMahan to see how the story might be constructed. First, here is Thomson:

> [W]hat makes it permissible for you to kill [Attackers and Non-Responsible Threats] is the fact that they will otherwise violate your rights that they not kill you, and therefore lack rights that you not kill them.41

The ‘therefore’ in Thomson’s claim seems premature. Why does the fact that the Attacker threatens the Defender’s right lead to the loss of his right? The Defender’s right may be under unjustified threat, but why does any difference in the Attacker’s moral standing ensue from that fact? A natural answer will invoke liability: in virtue of the fact that the Attacker threatens to violate the Defender’s right, the Attacker then becomes liable to defensive violence. Without liability, it may at least appear that this explanation runs aground. But what produces the Attacker’s liability?

There is a more detailed and explicit acknowledgement of liability, or at least the role played by liability, in this statement by McMahan:

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39 In Lang (2014), I argued, more cautiously, that the explanatory burdens of a theory of self-defence should be distributed more evenly between a Defender-focused and an Attacker-focused approach. I maintain my earlier view that the debate on defence has often been too Attacker-focused, but I now want to argue for the more fundamental importance of a Defender-focused approach.

40 This caveat is to accommodate Tadros’s way of looking at these matters.

If A will otherwise violate B’s right, he loses his own right not to be attacked; thus, if B attacks him in self-defense, B does not violate any right of A’s; therefore B retains his right not to be attacked; therefore A is not permitted to attack B in self-defense. On this theory, if one party to a conflict is justified, the opposing party cannot be. The same is true on the other major theories of self-defense.42

Though, as we have seen, McMahan’s preferred theory of self-defence is not Thomson’s, there are also similarities between them: A’s attempted violation of B’s right generates B’s right to engage in defence against him in virtue of the fact that A loses his right against defence. For McMahan, the loss of A’s right ensues from his attempted violation of B’s right.43

There are limitations in the approach taken by Thomson and McMahan. Though it seems to me that there must be provision for the role played by liability,44 liability itself need not, and does not, deserve a fundamental role in the explanation of the Central Normative Transition. The fact that, for McMahan, liability is only triggered by an objectively unjust threat for which an individual is morally responsible does not fully explain why the Attacker is liable. It is A’s unjustified threat against B which, for McMahan, makes A liable. But why does that make A liable? Why does the fact that A is guilty of attempted wrongdoing against B then make it permissible to inflict the same sort of harm on A?45 This looks like a non sequitur.

The explanation will run aground unless we invoke the Defender’s non-liability. Liability, by itself, still looks like a normative place-holder. Similarly, for Thomson, the fact that we must impute liability to the Attacker to show why the loss of his right ensues from his attempted violation of the Defender’s right does not show liability to be anything more than a place-holder.

The Attacker’s liability ensues—it must surely ensue—from the non-liability of the Defender. The Defender is entitled to take necessary steps to defend herself against the Attacker. She is not entitled to take necessary steps against just anyone; that would collapse the distinction between self-

43 McMahan (2009), p. 10. For McMahan, the languages of loss, of liability, and of forfeiture are all stationed together.
44 The existence of the BROAD LIABILITY schema confirms this point. Though BROAD NON-LIABILITY is more fundamental than BROAD LIABILITY, our account of defence will not be complete unless BROAD NON-LIABILITY is accompanied by BROAD LIABILITY.
45 I suspect that the arguments contained in Renzo (2017), though officially targeted at only theories of rights forfeiture, are largely applicable to liability justifications, and indeed to Attacker-focused theories more generally.
defence and self-preservation. Given her broad non-liability, she is permitted to take necessary steps against those who are broadly liable, as defined by BROAD LIABILITY.

It is only by labouring the non-liability of the Defender do we even begin to understand why liability in the Attacker would ensue. To have a right is to be presumptively assured of permissible means for protecting the interests which that right protects against threats to those interests. Thus canonical cases of self-defence such as Culpable Attacker, just like more penumbral cases such as Falling Man and Rolling Stone, offer rich pickings for the Non-Liability First Account. Without an attention to defensive non-liability, we cannot make sense of the existence or significance of defensive liability. Non-liability comes first.46

University of Leeds
School of Philosophy, Religion, and History of Science
Woodhouse Lane
Leeds, LS2 9JT

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