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# Desert Is a Dyadic Relation

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## 1 Introduction

There is a basic metaphysical error which persists in the orthodoxy concerning desert. The mistaken view is the idea that desert is a triadic relation that obtains between a subject, an object, and a desert base:

Desert Schema: A subject  $S$  deserves an object  $O$  in virtue of desert base  $B$ .

Sometimes the idea is expressed by simply giving the Desert Schema (Feinberg 1970: 61) or by saying that desert has a certain “formula”, specified by the schema (Pojman 1997: 556; 1999: 86). Other times, the focus is on the structure of desert claims (Kleinig 1971: 71; Sher 1987: 7; Miller 1999: 133). And very often, theorists explicitly commit themselves to the metaphysical thesis that desert is a three-place relation between subject, object, and desert base.<sup>1</sup>

The Desert Schema mimics the structure of many of our desert claims. For instance, we might say, “The cat deserves a treat for being such a good girl.” Of course, desert claims which do not overtly include any mention of a desert basis are perfectly intelligible as well, as in “The cat deserves a treat.” The idea, then, is that, very often, the desert

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Olsaretti 2004: 12; Arnold 1987: 389-390; McLeod 2008; Mulligan 2018a: 165; Mulligan 2018b: 65; Brouwer & Mulligan 2019: 2275. Feldman & Skow 2020 remain neutral on the structure of desert.)

base relatum is left implicit in desert claims, but it is always part of the propositional content that is expressed by such claims.

The possibility of concepts and properties that have relata which are often left implicit in ordinary speech is familiar from various contextualisms and relativisms about, say, knowledge, truth, morality, and simple gradable adjectives like ‘tall’ or ‘smart’.<sup>2</sup> In those cases, there is a hidden parameter—a standard of evidence, a culture’s moral framework, or a relevant comparison class, for example—which the propositional content is relativized to. On a simple contextualism about knowledge, for example, a claim like ‘ $S$  knows that  $p$ ’ does not express the proposition that  $S$  knows that  $p$ , but rather the proposition that  $S$  knows that  $p$  relative to the standard of evidence  $E$ , where the standard of evidence will vary depending on the context in which the claim is made. Knowledge, on such a view, is triadic—contrary to surface appearances—relating a knower, a proposition, and a standard of evidence. But while these various sorts of contextualisms and relativisms are very much live options within their respective literatures, the view that desert is a triadic relation, I will argue, should not be. Indeed, this view renders the Desert Schema, our desert claims, and the concept of desert itself, incoherent.

## 2 The Incoherence of the Desert Schema and the Triadic Account of Desert

Consider the role of desert bases, as specified by the Desert Schema. A subject is said to deserve an object *in virtue of* or *because* the desert base obtains. The role of a desert base, therefore, is explanatory. It does not provide a parameter to which propositional content can be relativized, as in the above example involving a contextualism about knowledge. More specifically, a desert base is meant to provide a kind of grounding

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<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., DeRose’s (2009) contextualism about knowledge, MacFarlane’s (2014) discussion about various kinds of relativisms and contextualisms about truth and taste predicates, Harman’s (1975) moral relativism, and Kennedy & McNally’s (2005) analysis of gradable adjectives.

explanation. A grounding explanation for what, exactly? The only plausible answer, suggested by the Desert Schema, is that the desert base grounds the fact that a subject deserves an object. For example, a worker might deserve an income in virtue of their economic contribution or because of the sacrifice they make by doing the job.

But at this point we immediately run into a problem. Our above example only makes sense if we think of the fact that a worker deserves income as involving a dyadic desert relation that obtains between a subject and object, where the obtaining of that relation is grounded by the obtaining of the desert base—the sacrifice the worker makes by doing the job. If, instead, we think of *being deserving* as a triadic relation, then the desert base must, instead, ground a fact of the form ‘*S* deserves *O* in virtue of *B*’. After all, if desert is triadic, all desert-facts have this three part structure. And in that case, desert bases cannot ground facts of the form ‘*S* deserves *O*’, because there are no such facts.

But then how do we make sense of the Desert Schema if desert is triadic? Despite the fact that the schema tells us that desert bases ground desert-facts of the form ‘*S* deserves *O*’, this cannot be the case. Again, if desert bases ground desert-facts, then they must ground triadic desert-facts. Thus, desert-facts would seem to have a structure that is more like this: ‘(*S* deserves *O* in virtue of *B*<sub>2</sub>) in virtue of *B*<sub>1</sub>’. But this cannot be right either, as *B*<sub>2</sub> must also ground a triadic desert-fact, which will include *B*<sub>3</sub>, and so on. The result is that if desert bases are meant to ground facts about subjects deserving objects—and, by definition, that is what they are meant to do—then desert-facts involve a vicious regress of desert bases. The result is that desert claims, and the concept of desert, are rendered incoherent.

This argument suffices to show that desert is not triadic, and indeed, it is strange that it is thought that the Desert Schema specifies a triadic relation at all, since the structure specified by the Desert Schema is the structure of simple grounding-facts: the fact that *p*<sub>1</sub> obtains in virtue of the fact that *p*<sub>2</sub>. But this sort of grounding explanation

is dyadic—it is a relation that obtains between two facts.<sup>3</sup> It is true that in the case of the Desert Schema, the fact that is grounded has a slightly complex structure, involving what looks to be a dyadic relation (*'S deserves O'*), but nevertheless, no triadic relations appear in facts that have the structure specified by the Desert Schema.

Where does this leave us? First, desert is not a triadic relation that obtains between a subject, an object, and a desert base. Rather, desert is what it appears to be on the surface—a dyadic relation between a subject and an object:

Dyadic Desert Schema: A subject *S* deserves an object *O*.

The corresponding desert concept, likewise, is dyadic. Second, the Desert Schema does not specify the structure of desert-facts, but rather the structure of the grounding explanations of desert-facts. The mistake of the triadic account of desert is that it incorporates into desert-facts the purported grounding explanation (i.e. the desert bases) for those very facts. The dyadic account of desert rectifies this by treating the obtaining of desert bases as distinct facts which ground dyadic desert-facts.

### 3 Objections to the Dyadic Conception of Desert

Let me now address some of the arguments that have been made in favor of the triadic view of desert (and so against the dyadic view), before briefly discussing how the arguments of this paper bear, more broadly, on theorizing about desert in the next section.

The view that desert is triadic is more often assumed than it is argued for, but McLeod and Kleinig do attempt to adduce some reasons in support of it. McLeod writes:

For example, one might say that Hans deserves praise (without specifying

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, grounding relations can obtain between properties as well. Desert bases, in fact, are typically taken to be facts or properties. The point I am making here can be made either way, and so for the sake of simplicity, I consider desert bases to be facts, and grounding explanations to obtain between facts.

the basis of his desert)...But unless one can fill these claims out further—say, by explaining why one thinks that Hans deserves praise...then the concept of desert is being misused. (2008)

Similarly, Kleinig writes:

When we say “X deserves A” we are implicitly committed to holding reasons for X’s desert. It is logically absurd for X to deserve A for no reason in particular, or for no reason at all. (1971: 73)

Even if these claims were true, I will argue, they would not motivate the triadic account of desert. But let’s first consider whether they are true. Suppose one believes that *S* deserves *O* without having any idea as to why. Perhaps they defer to someone who they take to be an expert on desert, and are not interested in understanding why *S* is so deserving. This might be epistemically irresponsible, but is certainly not a “misuse of the concept” of desert, or at least, not a misuse that is any more egregious than is involved in any other instance of making a claim without adequate justification. And while it might be logically absurd to think that someone deserves something for no reason at all, it does not follow that we are committed to any particular reasons as to why *S* deserves *O* when we say that *S* deserves *O*.

The more important point, however, is that, even if true, McLeod’s and Kleinig’s claims do not motivate the triadic account of desert, but rather the more pedestrian claims that dyadic desert-facts are grounded by desert bases, and that when we make a desert claim, we are committed to there being some desert base which grounds the desert-fact which we commit ourselves to in making the claim. The fact that we expect someone to be able to give an explanation for why someone deserves something—or at least not to deny that there is some explanation—tells us nothing about the structure of the desert relation. Rather, these expectations just follow from the assumption that facts which are not sufficiently fundamental have some explanation, and where possible,

we expect someone to try to give such an explanation when prompted for one.

Consider that when someone says that they are going to the store, for example, we expect them to be able to give an explanation as to why they are doing that. We do not then conclude that *is going to* is a relation between a person, a location, and whatever explains their going to that location. Likewise for facts about moral obligation, or harm, or the facts that something is a language, or a game of chess. It would be absurd to claim that some action was wrong in virtue of nothing at all, but this gives us no reason to reject the idea that wrongness is a property of actions in favor of the absurd view that is a relation between actions and whatever facts ground the wrongness of the action. This latter view renders the concept of wrongness incoherent in the same way that the triadic account of desert renders the concept of desert incoherent.

The metaphysical constraint that the considerations from McLeod and Kleinig motivate, then, is simply the idea that desert-facts have grounds:

Desert-Base Grounding Requirement: If  $S$  deserves  $O$ , then there is some desert basis  $B$  which grounds  $S$ 's deserving  $O$ .

And indeed, this grounding requirement is pretty pedestrian—it is just an application of the idea that facts which are not sufficiently fundamental have some kind of grounding explanation. There is, therefore, nothing special about the desert relation here. The very same considerations apply for all sorts of non-basic facts.

It should also be emphasized that even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, Kleinig's and McLeod's claims that the concept of desert is misused if one denies that a desert-fact has a desert base, it would not, and *cannot* follow that desert is triadic in the way specified by the Desert Schema. None of their claims undermine the regress argument given in §2, and so whatever follows from the apparent misuses of the desert concept, it does not lend any credence to the idea that desert is a relation between subject, object, and desert base.

Kinghorn (2021) has recently defended a novel account of the contents of desert claims, and in doing so, levies a novel objection against the triadic view of desert given by the Desert Schema. Since he rejects the dyadic view of desert that I defend here, and since his objection to the traditional triadic view would seem to apply just as well to the dyadic view, some remarks on his objection and his account of desert are in order.<sup>4</sup>

On Kinghorn's account, "three placeholders...are needed in order to make a conceptually well-formed statement about desert," but the Desert Schema does not provide a proper account of desert claims (Kinghorn 2021: 46). On his "Expanded Model", desert claims express contents with the following form:

Expanded Model Schema: The truth about  $A$  possessing  $Y$  should be acknowledged by  
 $A$  receiving  $X$ . (Kinghorn 2021: 136)

On the surface, it would appear that the Expanded Model conflicts with the thesis that desert is a dyadic relation that obtains between a subject and an object. Further, because the Expanded Model Schema does not take the form of a grounding claim like the Desert Schema, it avoids the regress problem that the Desert Schema suffers from.

But in fact, Kinghorn's Expanded Model is not incompatible with the idea that desert is dyadic, because it simply carries no commitments about the structure of the desert relation. The Expanded Model Schema is meant to specify the propositional contents of desert claims. And if it is correct, then the desert relation is not a part of those contents. Rather, the contents that are expressed are propositions concerning what truths about someone's possessing some property should be acknowledged by them receiving some object or treatment. Thus, the account is silent about the structure of desert-facts, and indeed, it is even consistent with the elimination of such facts, as there might simply be no facts with the structure specified by the Desert Schema.

To be clear, this is not a criticism of Kinghorn's account, the merits of which I do

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<sup>4</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing Kinghorn's work to my attention.



not take up here. Rather, the point is just that Kinghorn’s account gives an analysis of the concept of desert (or perhaps the term ‘deserves’) in terms of more fundamental ones. Those who endorse the triadic view of desert specified by the Desert Schema, by contrast, take desert claims to express contents involving the desert relation, where that relation is taken to be basic. Thus, they do not attempt to give a constitutive analysis of desert or the concept of desert, as Kinghorn does, but simply specify the structure of the relation. Consider, for instance, the difference between claiming that knowledge is a relation between a knower and a proposition, and giving an analysis of what it is for someone to know something.

Now, Kinghorn rejects the Desert Schema because it “seems unable to pinpoint the concern that lies behind the desert claim” (Kinghorn 2021: 109). His primary concern seems to be that the Desert Schema doesn’t adequately explain the normative force behind desert claims. On his view, endorsing the Desert Schema commits one to the faulty assumption that the normative force of desert flows from the intrinsic value of some proportionality obtaining between the desert base and the object of desert—e.g., some wrongful action and some proportionate punishment (Kinghorn 2021: Ch. 7). If this is a good objection to the traditional, triadic view of desert, then it is a good objection against my simple dyadic account as well. After all, if the traditional triadic view relies on the value of proportionality between desert base and desert object to explain the normative force of desert claims, then the dyadic account would seem to have no explanation at all, since desert bases are removed from the desert relation.

But the objection wrongly assumes that the value of desert must be made clear from an account of the metaphysical structure of the desert relation—or of the structure of the contents expressed by desert claims. However, committing to a thesis about the metaphysical structure of desert-facts, or of the structure of the contents expressed by desert claims, does not commit one to any position concerning the value of desert. One could endorse the Desert Schema, or the dyadic account of desert, for instance, and

think that desert has no normative force at all. Alternatively, one might (as is often the case), think that it is intrinsically valuable that people get what they deserve, where no further explanation of that value is required or possible. Both views about the value of desert are consistent with either view about the structure of the desert relation.

Consider, again, the analog to knowledge. The following are three distinct tasks for a theory of knowledge. First, one might want to know the structure of the knowledge relation, or of the structure of the contents expressed by knowledge claims. Here, one might think that knowledge is a relation between a knower and a proposition, or that it relates a knower, a proposition, and a standard of evidence. Second, one might want to give an analysis of knowledge—an account of what it is to have knowledge. Here, one might think that knowing a proposition is having a justified belief in some true proposition (plus some additional constraints), for example. Third, one might want to know why knowledge is valuable. And here, one might think knowledge is intrinsically valuable, or perhaps instead knowledge has merely instrumental value which stems from the practical value of having true beliefs. Crucially, for our purposes, whatever one's account may be of the value of knowledge, it does not dictate one's position on the structure of the knowledge relation, or of the structure of the contents of knowledge claims.

Likewise for desert and desert claims. The thesis of this paper concerns, specifically, the structure of the desert relation (and so the structure of the corresponding concept of desert and likely the structure of the contents of desert claims—assuming desert-facts can be expressed by desert-claims). The dyadic account of desert is neutral on the question of what, if anything, being deserving consists in, and it is also neutral on the question on what, if anything, is the source of the value of desert. Thus, Kinghorn's objection, properly understood, does not tell against either the dyadic or triadic account of the structure of desert, but rather against additional theses concerning desert's value, which are not the subject of this paper.

## 4 Implications for Theorizing About Desert

If desert is dyadic, then the orthodox assumptions concerning the structure of desert, and of the contents of desert claims, are mistaken. Worse, if the regress argument from §2 is correct, it follows that the standard view, when taken seriously, renders desert claims and the concept of desert incoherent.

However, almost none of the theorizing about desert depends in any important way on the metaphysical structure of the desert relation. We can, therefore, reject the triadic view of desert, adopt the dyadic account of desert, and leave intact just about everything else. The metaphysics of the desert relation, for instance, does not importantly bear on questions about desert's connection to justice, the value of desert, whether jobs or punishments are deserved, or what grounds one's deserving various kinds of goods or treatment.

Much of the interesting theorizing in the desert literature concerns the nature of desert bases, and removing desert bases as relata in the desert relation in no way diminishes their theoretical importance. Just as was intended by the Desert Schema, desert bases are still needed to ground facts about subjects deserving objects. Thus, we still want to ask, for any desert claim, what the desert base is. In many cases, the primary challenge of desert theorists is to specify desert bases for various goods—for jobs, income, punishment, prizes, etc. Do employees deserve their wages, for example, because they make a sacrifice by performing the job, or is it because of their economic contributions to society? There are also questions about various constraints on desert bases that might hold—whether being deserving of something requires that one be responsible for the desert base, or whether the value of the desert base must be proportional to the object of desert, for instance. So long as we hold to the more pedestrian view that desert bases ground desert-facts, these questions remain just as pressing as before.

It is worth emphasizing the importance of desert bases, then, and demanding and

exploring explanations for desert claims. But this can easily be done without conceiving of desert as a triadic relation, thereby undermining its very coherence. Desert is dyadic, and desert bases ground dyadic desert-facts.<sup>5</sup>

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