ABSTRACT. I argue that any successful account of permissible self-defence must be action-guiding, or practical. It must be able to inform people’s deliberation about what they are permitted to do when faced with an apparent threat to their lives. I argue that this forces us to accept that a person can be permitted to use self-defence against Apparent Threats: characters whom a person reasonably, but mistakenly, believes threaten her life. I defend a hybrid account of self-defence that prioritises an agent’s subjective perspective. I argue that it is sufficient to render the use of defence permissible if an agent reasonably believes that (a) she is morally innocent, and (b) if she does not kill this person, then they will kill her. I argue that the correct account of self-defence must distinguish between whether an agent is permitted to inflict harm, and whether the target is liable to bear that harm.

I. INTRODUCTION

Moral theorists are often identified as subjectivists or objectivists. What this means, roughly, is that they prioritise different sorts of facts when thinking about what morality permits us to do. Objectivists are concerned with facts of the matter. Some strands of consequentialism fall under this banner. A person who thinks that morality requires us to actually maximise the good will think that a given action is right if and only if it does in fact maximise the good. This will be true even if, for example, the agent had no intention of maximising the good, but intended rather to decrease overall welfare.

Other types of consequentialist emphasise the importance of expected consequences. If an agent believes that performing an action will maximise the good, then it is the right thing to do. This is true even if, for some unforeseen reason, the action does
not in fact maximise the good. It might have disastrous consequences that seriously decrease the good. But on such accounts, the rightness of an action is to be measured in terms of facts about what an agent believed, not facts about how the action turned out.

These two positions give us the general gist of the debate between objectivists and subjectivists. Roughly, objectivists care about how the world really is. Subjectivists care about how the world appears to agents. As far as I can tell, the importance of this divide has been rather overlooked by philosophers working in the field of self-defence. In this paper, I show that this debate throws into stark relief some of the most central problems in defensive theory. How we answer these problems will play an important role in shaping our answer to the question of what a person is permitted to do in order to save her own life.

In section one of the paper, I explain the problem of Merely Apparent Threats: characters whom Victim reasonably, but mistakenly, believes to pose a threat to his life. (From now on, I will refer to these as Apparent Threats.) Such characters are epistemically indistinguishable from Genuine Threats, who really do pose a threat to Victim’s life. I argue that this poses a significant problem for anyone who wants their theory of self-defence to be practical: to be able to tell Victim what he is permitted to do when faced with an apparent threat to his life. Such practicality should be an aim of all theories of permissible defence. I claim that the correct account of self-defence must be hybrid: it must incorporate both objective and subjective elements. In section two, I consider Kimberly Kessler Ferzan’s attempt to develop just such an account in light of Apparent Threat cases. I argue that Ferzan’s account fails because it takes the objective element to precede the subjective element, and thus cannot meet the practicality requirement that I defend and that Ferzan herself endorses. I suggest that we deal with Ferzan’s concern that prioritising subjectivism in self-defence will lead to general moral subjectivism by making a special case for self-defence, based upon the typically urgent nature of defensive action. In the third section of the paper, I develop and defend