ABSTRACT. In the recent book *The Geometry of Desert*, Shelly Kagan explores, with a rare degree of precision, how best to cash out two fundamental and widely shared intuitions. The first intuition says that virtuous people deserve to be doing well, and that less virtuous (or vicious) people deserve to be doing less well – and thus, that it’s *good* (other things equal) if virtuous people are doing well and if less virtuous (or vicious) people are doing less well (or even badly). The second intuition says that the distribution of the satisfaction of people’s desert claims *across persons* matters: that it’s good (other things equal) if people’s desert claims are satisfied in accordance with the demands of interpersonal fairness. The former intuition states the basis of what Kagan calls ‘absolute desert’. The latter articulates the basis of what he calls ‘comparative desert’. I advance an internal critique of Kagan’s conception of comparative desert; I argue that it contravenes the demands of interpersonal fairness in the domain of desert, and so fails on its own terms.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent book *The Geometry of Desert* – and earlier, in the article ‘Comparative Desert’ – Shelly Kagan explores, with a rare degree of precision, how best to cash out two fundamental and widely shared intuitions about distributive justice.¹ The first of these intuitions says that virtuous people deserve to be doing well, and that less virtuous (or vicious) people deserve to be doing less well – and thus, that it’s *good* (other things equal) if virtuous people are doing well and if less virtuous (or vicious) people are doing less well (or even badly).² The second intuition says that the distribution of the satisfaction of


² Kagan, *The Geometry of Desert*, pp. 5 and 8. He allows that it might even be a good thing if sufficiently vicious people are doing badly (or are suffering), but does not take a stand on this issue.
people’s desert claims *across persons* matters: more specifically, that it’s good (other things equal) if people’s desert claims are satisfied in accordance with the demands of interpersonal fairness. The former intuition states the basis of what Kagan calls ‘absolute desert’. The latter articulates the basis of what he calls ‘comparative desert’. These two intuitions, taken together, yield Kagan’s complete conception of desert. I shall focus on the second of these intuitions in the present paper.

Kagan does not, himself, claim to be concerned with distributive justice – he identifies his subject as the goodness and badness of states of affairs. But his discussion has direct implications for our thinking about distributive justice. The claims (1) that it’s good (other things equal) if people get what they deserve, and (2) that it’s good if people’s desert claims are satisfied in accordance with the demands of fairness, have normative correlates, namely, that we have reason to try to bring about a situation in which people are getting what they deserve and in which their desert claims are satisfied in accordance with the demands of fairness. Presumably, bringing this situation about would involve the (re)distribution of society’s resources, and this is the subject matter of distributive justice.

It’s also worth making explicit that Kagan’s two basic intuitions about desert can come apart in various ways. Let me mention just one, which pertains to the discussion at hand. Someone might be skeptical about the existence of absolute desert, but believe that if it were the case that virtuous people deserved well-being (etc.), then it would be important to satisfy people’s desert claims fairly. If one holds this view, then Kagan’s discussion of comparative desert would still hold considerable interest, since his exploration of how the demands of fairness apply to the satisfaction people’s desert claims might yield important insights about how the demands of fairness apply to the satisfaction of other, non-desert-based, types of claims. I suspect aspects of Kagan’s discussion of comparative desert can indeed be exported fruitfully in this way (even if – as I shall go on to argue – certain key conclusions of his should be rejected). But I will not pursue this matter here. The discussion to follow will be strictly internal to Kagan’s project. My task, in this paper, is to offer an internal critique of Kagan’s theory of comparative desert: I will be

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3 At least this is so given the plausible premise that we have reason to promote the good.