

Why disregarding hypocritical blame is appropriate

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Abstract

The topic of standing to blame has recently received a lot of attention. Until now, however, it has focused mainly on the blamer's perspective, investigating what it means to say of blamers that they lose standing to blame and why it is that they lose this standing under specified conditions. The present paper focuses on the perspective of the blamees and tries to explain why they are allowed to disregard standing—less, more specifically hypocritical, blame. According to the solution proposed by the paper, while hypocritical blamers present themselves as caring about justice or about the moral or material good of the blamees—and they themselves half-believe this presentation—their real motivation in blaming is less respectable. It is this problematic motivation that explains why blamees are permitted to disregard hypocritical blame. Ill-motivated blame is often unreliable, and readiness to even consider it often involves a compromise on the self-respect of the blamees.

KEYWORDS

ad hominem, hypocrisy, ill-motivated blame, moral grandstanding, standing to blame

1 | INTRODUCTION

The last decade or so has witnessed a wave of publications on the topic of standing to blame¹ which has focused on three main questions: (a) what does it mean to say of blamers that they have standing to blame? (b) under what conditions can blamers lose this standing? and (c) why is it that they lose their standing in such conditions? All

¹See Wallace (2010); Radzik (2012); Cohen (2013); Lippert-Rasmussen (2013, 2020); King (2015, 2019); McKiernan (2016); Isserow and Klein (2017); Roadevin (2018); Rossi (2018, 2020, 2021); Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019); Todd (2019); Dover (2019); Riedener (2019); Herstein (2017, 2020); Edwards (2019); and Piovarchy (2020).

these questions take the *blamers'* perspective. But there is another perspective that has attracted much less attention, that of the *blamees*. Here the question is: Why are blamees allowed—as most philosophers seem to assume²—to disregard standingless blame? It is this question that will be the focus of the present paper.

Since hypocritical blame is the paradigmatic case of standingless blame, it is this blame that will serve as my main point of reference. I hope my analysis can also shed light on other cases of standingless blame, such as blame when it's "none of your business," but even if it does not, its success in providing a satisfactory explanation for the moral and prudential permission to disregard *hypocritical* blame would still mark significant progress.

On the face of it, if some blamer, B, lacks standing to blame an assumed wrongdoer, W, for *phi*-ing, then W is permitted to disregard the blame just as people may disregard *orders* that are issued to them without authority. But this move is a bit too hasty because the fact that blamers lack standing is consistent with the possibility that the fault to which they draw attention is genuine and thus needs to be corrected. To reject blame, condemnation³ or advice just because of facts about the blamer, condemner or advisor seems like a version of *ad hominem*. Though it does not involve a genuine fallacy, as it does not infer from the blamer's lack of standing that the content of her condemnation is false, it does seem to reside in the vicinity of this fallacy. The purpose of my paper is to explain why nonetheless it is permissible—at times even advisable—for blamees to disregard hypocritical blame.⁴

I start, in Section 2, by arguing that hypocritical blame is often driven by problematic motives of the kind that drive much of the practice of blaming in general. I then explain, in Section 3, why disregarding ill-motivated blame is permissible, but why, nonetheless, caution is required when choosing to disregard. Section 4 offers a brief summary and a direction for future research.

2 | ON WHAT MOTIVATES HYPOCRITICAL BLAME

As argued by several philosophers (Rossi, 2018, 2020; Todd, 2019), what characterizes hypocritical blamers is their lack of commitment to the values that underlie their blame. It's not that B is necessarily uncommitted to or cynical about morality, just that when he blames W for *phi*-ing, the immorality of *phi*-ing plays at most a marginal role in motivating him to do so. This lack of commitment, however, is insufficient to explain the permission to disregard the condemnation. Following the point I made above, the fact the blame does not stem from the right kind of motivation falls short of explaining why its content may be ignored.⁵

I believe that the key to solving this puzzle is by asking what *does* motivate B in blaming W. Given that he is not motivated by a genuine commitment to the values that underlie his blaming, the suspicion is that he engages in it because of various ways in which the blaming is expected to benefit him. Contrary to the impression B tries to convey, he does not really care (in his act of blaming) about W's well-being or about his morality, but about himself.

Indeed, O'Neill (2005, pp. 438–439) has proposed that "there is a dark and tempting undercurrent of pleasure in blaming," and this holds true in particular for hypocritical blame.⁶ Blamers often blame others as a way to elevate themselves. By exposing the assumed faults of the blamees, blamers hope to promote their own moral image,

²For an exception, see Bell (2013).

³In spite of various differences between them, throughout the paper I shall be using "blame", "condemnation" "criticism" and "rebuke" interchangeably, see also Bell (2013, p. 265).

⁴For why biographical facts about an author might justify disregarding a philosophical argument she makes, see Leibowitz (2016).

⁵Isserow and Klein (2017, p. 199) are of the few who explicitly recognized this point ("[The blamer's] inconsistency suggests that we ought to question the strength of her moral commitments. But we should not necessarily question the content of her moral advice"). See also Edwards (2019, p. 456), who says, following Radzik (2012), that there is something oddly "legalistic" in an outright dismissal of criticism that "may be entirely accurate, proportionately expressed, and likely to help forestall similar wrongdoing in the future."

⁶On "the darker side of moral criticism," see also Malle et al. (2014, pp. 173–174).

both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. When they rebuke somebody for doing such and such, they broadcast the message that *they* are not the kind of people who do such things and also that they care so much about morality or about the good of the blamee that they are willing to risk confrontation and to invest time and energy in the act of rebuke.

Another problematic motivation for blaming is bad temper or negative emotions that have little to do with the alleged misbehavior of the blamee. Think of a father who had a bad day at work and, when he gets home, starts yelling at his kids for all kinds of faults: “Again with your PlayStation?” “Is that all you had for dinner?” “Why haven’t you had your shower yet?” and so on and so forth, instantly finding new faults in response to attempts by the kids to justify or excuse themselves. The father probably sees himself in those moments as “educating” his children, but any third party watching the event will not miss the aggressive nature of the father’s behavior. Though part of the aggression might be valid, or justified, in the sense of pointing out genuine faults in the children’s behavior, it is not the identification of these faults that motivates the blaming. Parents are often angry with or disappointed by their children for reasons unrelated to these faults, and the blaming is just a way for them to act out this anger or disappointment. If these other “external” reasons were not present, the blaming would not take place (or would be much milder).

Problematic motives often underlie the moral condemnation of practices carried out by religious or ethnic minorities. A good illustration lies in the laws (or bill proposals) against so-called religious (Jewish or Muslim) slaughter in some European countries. If such laws had been motivated by a true concern for animals, there would have been similar prohibitions on other forms of “inhumane” slaughter, but, as shown by Porat (2021), when these forms are unrelated to Judaism or Islam, they are licensed. What I mainly have in mind is home and small farm slaughter that is often performed the same way as ritual animal slaughter (using a knife), and which is not banned, supervised or regulated in any way. In Porat’s estimation, “the number of animals slaughtered by this majority-practice in European countries substantially exceeds the number of animals slaughtered by minority ritual animal slaughter forbidden or campaigned to be forbidden in the same countries” (2021, p. 46). Faced with these facts, one would have to be extremely charitable to assume that calls to ban religious slaughter are motivated, for the most part, by a genuine care about animal suffering.

Finally, there are the more sinister cases in which condemnation expresses the condemner’s hidden attraction to the sin for which he condemns others. A zealous condemner of assumed illicit sexual behavior might be investing himself with the details of this misbehavior as a perverted way of satisfying his own desire to engage in it. Or—more likely—it might be a way of denying the attraction of such misbehavior to himself or his actual failures in this regard. The psychological mechanism underlying this process is explained in detail by Miceli and Castelfranchi (2003, esp. 289–290), who show how the ascription of one’s faults to others is instrumental in denying these faults in oneself; how “blaming others is functional to viewing ourselves as exempt from blame” (p. 295). More recently it has been shown that “when people cannot deny, confess, or compensate for their wrongdoing, they distance themselves from these transgressions, use stricter ethical criteria, and judge other people’s immoral behavior more harshly” (Shalvi et al., 2015, p. 128, relying on Barkan et al., 2012). Thus, blaming others is often a way of making the blamer’s own questionable behavior appear less unethical to himself and to others.

For readers who still believe that what motivates *them* in blaming others is true concern for justice or for the moral perfection of the blamees, the empirical study of blame should make them pause. What this research shows is that “the psychological processes manifested in cognitive and motivational biases are central rather than peripheral to the psychology of blame” (Alicke, 2000, p. 556).

I cannot go into the details of the empirical studies showing these biases.⁷ Let me just underline the lesson to take home from them. Contrary to a widespread picture, often B does not develop a negative attitude toward W *as a result* of confronting W’s misbehavior, but the other way round; B often *starts* with a negative

⁷For a helpful review, see Alicke et al. (2018, esp. pp. 386–387).

attitude towards W, which then leads him to condemn W for all kinds of assumed moral misbehavior. That acts of condemnation are motivated this way is not that surprising: “Given that motivational cognition is well-established in other areas of judgment, it would be astonishing if blame judgments were immune from this possibility” (Nadler, 2014, p. 228).

The fact that usually blaming does not result from a rational weighing of the evidence is also apparent from the fact that “evaluation is the most fundamental component of human judgment [and it] occurs automatically” (Alicke, 2000, p. 564). When we see or hear of the assumed misbehavior of some people (those we do not particularly like, for instance), or of the transgression of certain norms (say, sexual ones), we immediately switch to a blaming mode, while we refrain from doing so regarding others, or other moral failures, although they merit a similar response judged by their moral severity. As Alicke et al. put it, “blame attributions are largely emotion-driven *and relatively independent of the state of the evidence*” (2018, p. 287, italics added).⁸

Are hypocrites aware of their true motives in their condemnation of others for violating norms to which they (the blamers) are not themselves committed? To wit, are they aware of their *hypocrisy*? As I have argued elsewhere (Statman, 1997),⁹ real-world hypocrites tend to be far more self-deceived than deliberate other-deceivers.¹⁰ This applies to other ill-motivated blamers as well, who half believe the unfair accusations they make against their children, their spouses or their political rivals. The more they work themselves into the blaming mode and tone, the more they convince themselves of the accuracy and severity of the accusations.

As must be clear by now, the category of ill-motivated blame is much wider than that of hypocritical blame, which is only one instance of it. In their act of blaming, hypocritical blamers are not motivated by a commitment to the values that underlie the blaming, nor by concern for the well-being of the blamee. At times, their blaming is a way of acting out their anger at, disappointment from, or hatred of the blamees. At other times, blamers have “no purpose other than to massage their ego.”¹¹ They want to be seen as caring about justice and about society but what really drives them is “narcissistic or egoistic self-absorption” (Tosi & Warmke, 2016, p. 215). At still other times, the blaming is a way by which the blamers try to deny their own hidden attraction or actual involvement in *phi*-ing. By blaming others, the blamers make their questionable behavior appear less unethical to themselves and to others.

The practice of blaming is so often tainted by such dark aspects that one might worry that “the whole business of appropriate blame [is] impossible” (King, 2015, p. 7). I’ll leave this worry for another day. Let me just note that, to my mind, the result to which King points, namely, that blaming is almost always inappropriate, is not that absurd. If nobody is in a position to cast the first stone, maybe nobody should.

3 | WHY DISREGARD POTENTIALLY VALID BLAME

So far, I have ignored the question of what exactly is meant by saying that B blames W for *phi*-ing. Some philosophers contend that to blame somebody is just to express a belief about the blamee’s misbehavior.¹² They hold what has been called a “cognitive theory” of blame (Tognazzini & Coates, 2021). Others assume an “emotional theory” (ibid.), according to which blaming also includes a negative attitude towards the assumed wrongdoer. The central philosopher in this camp is Peter Strawson, who argues that blaming involves a tendency “to inhibit or at least to limit our goodwill” towards the blamees and “to promote an at least partial and temporary withdrawal of good will” (1997, p. 138). In the same vein, Roger Wertheimer argues that condemnation, “like

⁸This selectivity—or inconsistency—in blaming corresponds to a similar pattern in praising. We often praise A for *phi*-ing but refrain from praising B although B is just as praiseworthy for *his phi*-ing.

⁹Followed by Wallace (2010, p. 315, n. 17); Isserow and Klein (2017, p. 211); Roadevin (2018, p. 144); and Bloomfield (2018).

¹⁰Thus, it is rarely the case that a hypocrite *decides* “not to know or consider something she should have known better” (Roadevin, 2018, p. 147).

¹¹Fullinwider (2005, p. 112). See also Miller (2003, pp. 15–16); Lippert-Rasmussen (2013, p. 315); and Fabre (2018, p. 170).

¹²See, for instance, Zimmerman (1988, p. 38).

punishment... is assaultive, expressing aggressive antipathy, anger, hatred, or disgust" (1998, p. 493) and, furthermore, that condemners "favor some suffering for the condemned" (p. 491). That is why blame, as noted by Isserow and Klein (2017, p. 617), "is an especially unpleasant experience; none of us wants to be on the receiving end."

For the sake of the present discussion, it is important to note that, as a matter of fact, blamees are more prone to disregarding perceived standingless blame when the blame is "emotional," and that they are more *justified* in such disregard than in cases of "cognitive" blame.¹³ Why they are justified in disregarding ill-motivated, "emotional" blame is based on three main reasons.

First, if the blamer's motivation is problematic, there is good reason to suspect the reliability of the charges he makes. His ill-motivation is likely to make him base his blame on factual and normative premises which are either completely false or, at any rate, present only a partial and hence distorted picture of the blamee's assumed misbehavior. Ill-motivated blame is often ill-informed and hence unreliable.¹⁴

Second, the readiness to reflect seriously on the content of ill-motivated blame demands a compromise on the self-respect of the blamee. Think of a battered wife who, instead of totally rejecting the accusations of her partner which usually accompany his physical and verbal abuse, would comment to herself, "I should pay more attention to what he says, maybe there *is* something to it." Her readiness to do so would constitute a compromise on her self-respect and would confirm her lower status vis-à-vis her husband in her own eyes as well as in those of her partner.

Third, the blamee's willingness to engage in an evaluation of the first-order reasons that underlie the ill-motivated blame would constitute a kind of victory for the blamer. Even if, in the end, the blamee rejects the blame, his willingness to reflect and agonize on it will make true the blamer's assumption that the blamee is not entitled to the same moral treatment as others (an assumption manifested in the fact that while B blames W for *phi*-ing, he refrains from blaming Z for *phi*-ing although there are no relevant differences between the cases). The standing constraint on blaming means that, in cases of ill-motivated blame, blamees may refuse to grant their blamers such victory.

My answer, then, to Daniela Dover's question, "Why are we so unwilling to accept criticism from those to whom we could truly say 'you're no better'?" is that more often than not, the criticism in such cases is ill-motivated and is, therefore, both unreliable and disrespectful.¹⁵

The advice to disregard ill-motivated blame applies with special force to blamees who belong to groups with a long history of prejudice, hostility and discrimination, like women (vis-à-vis blame from men), blacks (vis-à-vis blame from white Westerners), or Jews (vis-à-vis critics from Christian or Muslim background).¹⁶ For such blamees, whose equal dignity is under constant threat and who sometimes partially internalize the disrespectful message of others, it is especially important to unequivocally reject what seems like ill-motivated blame. Such blame can be identified, inter alia, by noticing that the blamers commit the same sins for which they rebuke others, or judge the blamees by harsher criteria than they judge others. Kate Manne has shown

¹³I think the same is true for "conative" and "functional" blame (Tognazzini & Coates, *ibid.*), but we need not go into that here.

¹⁴See Malle et al. (2014, p. 174), who claim that when people "play the blame game" of pointing fingers at each other, they argue "with sloppy information processing, or in the form of outright lies." See also the above citation from Alicke et al. to the effect that "blame attributions are largely emotion-driven and relatively independent of the state of the evidence"; and Isserow and Klein (2017, p. 201), who say that such blame "may sometimes undercut our reasons for trusting the soundness of their judgment as well."

¹⁵My analysis makes ill-motivated blame close to cases of moral grandstanding. According to Tosi and Warmke (2016), grandstanders often overstate their claims, insist on the existence of a moral problem where there is none, and display excessive outrage. All this means that their moral criticism is unreliable *and* that it is "disrespectful to those one addresses when one grandstands" (p. 213).

¹⁶Of these three groups, the Jews are probably the one with the worst history of (being the object of) groundless accusations, leading to endless cases of discrimination and persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the Jews have been blamed for all of the world's ills—for murdering God, for the Black Death, for Germany's defeat in WW1, for socialism, for capitalism, and, more recently, for the Coronavirus (Gerstenfeld, 2020). Israel, as the state of the Jews, has received its own share of accusations, the most recent being its alleged responsibility for the war against the Ukraine (see <https://www.maannews.net/articles/2061468.html> [in Arabic]). With this background in mind, and on the basis of the argument developed in the text, the reluctance of Jews to consider yet more accusations against them is understandable.

how when men engage in actions of some sorts “it is unremarkable and hence tends to go unremarked. But when a woman encroaching on men’s turf does the same thing, her actions—and she—may seem deceptive or negligent” (Manne, 2018, p. 272). Once again, the problem in such blaming of women by men is not the mere inconsistency expressed by it, but what this inconsistency indicates, to wit, a disrespectful attitude to women, or *misogyny* in Manne’s terminology. It is this misogynist message that women need to fight, inter alia, by refusing to even consider accusations driven by it.

In spite of all the above, just as one should suspect the *blamer’s* motivation, one should also suspect the motivation underlying its *deflection*. Such suspicion is warranted given our instinctive resistance to criticism. When we are blamed for doing such and such or for being so and so, our “inner lawyer” (as Haidt, 2012, puts it) immediately gets to work and provides us with arguments to deflect the blame from ourselves. This is especially so when the blame is directed at our cherished group (national, religious, or other). Because we are so “groupish” (ibid.), our immediate response to such blame is to “deploy our reasoning skills to support our team and to demonstrate commitment to our team” (ibid., p. 107). Pointing to the blamer’s ill-motivation might, therefore, be an attempt to escape the moral criticism which we well deserve.

Macalester Bell concludes from such considerations that “targets of blame should resist the temptation to try to undermine criticism by bringing up the moral record of the criticizer” (Bell, 2013, p. 280). My own conclusion is different. Since hypocritical blame is ill-motivated and consequently also ill-informed, there is good reason to resist it. However, not all blame is such. Sometimes the blame is perfectly reasonable while at other times the ill-motivation is relatively weak and mixed with benign motivation. Given that blamees have an instinctive urge to deflect *all* blame, they have good reason to control their inner lawyer and pause before they assign her regular task to her, that of finding faults in the behavior or motivation of the blamer. In other words, because blamees should be wary about their own motivation in rejecting blame addressed at them, they should raise the epistemic bar for such rejection and be more open to criticism. Yet such openness should not be understood as an unlimited readiness “to give uptake to criticism voiced by the morally flawed” (Bell, 2013, p. 280). When the criticism is clearly ill-motivated and insincere, as it so often is, blamees are fully justified in deflecting it.

Dover (2019, p. 394) mentions another reason why people should consider what their critics say instead of silencing them, namely, that others “frequently see us more sharply than we see ourselves.” Yet the psychological reality is more complicated. Those who see us better than we see ourselves are typically those who are closest to us, like parents or spouses. But these are precisely the people whose motivation in criticizing us is often so complex, having to do with a whole bag of expectations, disappointments, projections, and so on. Criticism from one’s spouse could be the most fitting and helpful while it could be, for the same reason (knowing one best), the most nasty, unfair and aggressive.

My argument for disregarding hypocritical blame might also partially explain the “mind your own business” strategy for silencing critics. If B condemns W for *phi*-ing although B has no prior acquaintance with W, and although it is not part of B’s job as teacher, policewoman and so on, W (as well as third parties witnessing the event) naturally wonder what B is trying to gain by it, what really motivates B to intervene. The possibility that B would go out of her way to condemn B just for the sake of morality is often looked at with distrust.

4 | SUMMARY

My purpose in this paper has been to offer an answer to a neglected question regarding the standing to blame, to wit, why, from both a moral and a prudential point of view, blamees are generally (though not always) permitted to disregard the standingless, mainly *hypocritical*, blame addressed at them. The question grows out of the worry that motivated this paper that even if blamers are hypocritical, their criticism of the blamees might be sound, hence it would be wrong for them (the blamees) to disregard it.

My answer is based on two main premises. The first is that hypocritical blame is often ill-motivated. Since by definition such blame is not motivated by a commitment to the values that underlie the blame, one can fairly assume that the blamers have their own interests—broadly construed—in mind when they carry out the blaming. At best, the blamer uses the blamee, or the act of blaming her, as a way to reap all kinds of social or psychological benefits; to convince himself that he is less blameworthy than he really is, to elevate himself in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, and so on. At worst, such blame is a form of aggression stemming from hostility against the blamee either as an individual or as a member of a group perceived as deserving such adverse treatment. Either way, contrary to the impression that blamers wish to create by the tone and content of their criticism, the criticism is not motivated by a genuine concern for the blamees' well-being or moral integrity.

The second premise is that that ill-motivated criticism may be ignored; it tends to be unreliable, and readiness to even consider it (i.e., to reflect seriously on its content) is often a compromise on the blamee's self-respect. In cases of individuals or groups who have long been victims of oppression or discrimination, such readiness would contribute to the perpetuation of the oppression and to the lower status of the blamees vis-à-vis the blamers.

Finally, the proposal defended here which aimed at explaining why blamees are permitted to disregard standingless blame might also be utilized to explain why people might lose their standing to *blame*, a question to which, in Todd's estimation, "we presently do not have an adequate answer" (Todd, 2019, p. 371). I hope to develop such an explanation elsewhere.¹⁷

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¹⁷For the idea that the blamer's motivation "plays an important role in whether that agent has the standing to blame," see Piovarchy (2020, p. 618).

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