HYPOCRITICAL BLAME, FAIRNESS, AND STANDING

CRISTINA ROADEVIN

Abstract: This paper argues that hypocritical blame renders blame inappropriate. Someone should not express her blame if she is guilty of the same thing for which she is blaming others, in the absence of an admission of fault. In failing to blame herself for the same violations of norms she condemns in another, the hypocrite evinces important moral faults, which undermine her right to blame. The hypocrite refuses or culpably fails to admit her own mistakes, while at the same time demands that others admit theirs. The paper argues that this lack of reciprocity—expecting others to take morality seriously by apologizing for their faults, without one doing the same in return—is what makes hypocritical blame unfair.

Keywords: blame, hypocrisy, moral standing, reciprocity.

1. The Charge of Hypocrisy

My concern in this paper is to make sense of the norms that govern our overt blame directed at the wrongdoer (McKenna 2012). Specifically, I ask when it is appropriate to express our blame to someone who wrongs us and what exactly can undermine our right to blame wrongdoers. Philosophers usually discuss conditions related to whether an agent S is actually blameworthy for doing X or to whether S has appropriate excuses, which could diminish her culpability. In this paper I focus on the question of standing: that is, I ask under what conditions an agent S has a right to blame another agent M for a wrong that M committed against S. In particular, I am interested in whether hypocrisy can undermine (at least in some cases) an agent’s standing to blame.1

Let us consider an example. Suppose Harvey blames Laura to her face for lying to him about an affair she had with his best friend. Harvey is angry and is demanding an explanation from her, and probably expecting an apology. Now suppose that Harvey has also cheated

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1 There are many other things that could undermine an agent’s standing to blame, such as complicity in the wrongdoing, lacking the appropriate relationship with the blamed, issues of proportionality, and so forth.
on Laura in the past, without apologizing to her. Does this mean that Harvey’s moral criticism of Laura is inappropriate, even if what Harvey is accusing Laura of is true? In what follows I argue that his blame is undermined by the fact that his blame is hypocritical. That is to say, Harvey is at fault for expressing his moral criticism towards Laura, even if the content of what is hypocritically said is true—Laura is indeed at fault for what she is accused of.

I take this form of directed blame to consist in the expression of the moral judgment of disapproval (Bennett 2013; Cohen 2006), typically accompanied by some sort of reactive negative emotion, such as resentment, anger, indignation, or guilt (Wallace 2011). I also assume here that to blame someone to her face for some moral fault is a form of moral address and thus implicitly demands an apology or at least that the other person explain her behaviour.

Let me turn to discuss in detail Harvey and Laura’s example. Harvey is blaming Laura for cheating on him, even if he has engaged in similar wrongdoing in the past. Laura is blameworthy for cheating on him. The question I aim to answer is whether Harvey’s blame is appropriate, despite the fact that it is hypocritical.

Macalester Bell’s (2013) answer is that Harvey’s blame is still appropriate even if he is a hypocrite—even if he is guilty of the same thing he accuses Laura of. Bell claims that blame is appropriate if and only if it is fitting (that is, if Laura is actually culpable for her wrongdoing) and valuable (if it benefits us in some way). In the case of hypocritical blame, Bell discusses the value of education. She suggests that we can sometimes learn from hypocritical blame: “We can learn from the morally corrupt just as we can learn from the morally pure” (2013, 275). Further, she claims that we are wrong to deflect and deny the content of blame, even if it is hypocritical, because the blame is actually accurate (it speaks the truth about the blamed person). I discuss these two claims in turn.

Let me start with the claim that blame is appropriate if and only if it is fitting and valuable. It cannot be denied that blame can have a certain value for our moral life and can achieve a certain aim in the world. It may have an educational role; it may generate motivational reasons and inspire the blamed to recognize his faults and change for the better (Fricker 2016; Williams 1995). For this to work, however, the blamed should probably not know that the blamer is a hypocrite. It may be difficult to inspire remorse in another person and help her

2 I do not have space here to defend this account of blame.
3 Whenever I use “blame” I refer to overt blame directed at the wrongdoer. I do not discuss the norms of private cases of blame and remain agnostic over whether the same considerations apply to private blame. I focus on the expression of blame because the moral demands implicit in our blaming practices typically arise in these contexts.
question her own wrongful behaviour, if it turns out that you are a notorious liar yourself. Bell’s examples of blame, which might have an educational role, are of a blamed person who has no idea the other person is a hypocrite. But the difficult case would be to explain how blame could educate in situations where the blamed knows that the other person is a hypocrite.

Even supposing hypocritical blame could be valuable in some way, however, we are interested here in the question of justification and fairness, and thus in whether Harvey has a right to blame Laura, independently of blame’s benefits. I assume here that if a practice is unfair, then it is also unjustified, unless there are overwhelming reasons that could count in favour of performing even an unfair action. Now, some philosophers convincingly argue that sometimes we have good reasons to blame individuals, precisely because doing so will have good consequences that cannot be achieved in any other way, even though the blame is not strictly speaking justified.

For instance, Cheshire Calhoun (1989) distinguishes between the justification of blame (which asks whether our assignments of moral responsibility are warranted) and its point (which is concerned with whether blame can be useful). Calhoun draws this distinction when she asks whether there is a point in reproaching certain individuals who engage in oppressive behaviour, even if they are not strictly speaking at fault for what they have done because they could not have known better—so their ignorance is non-culpable. Calhoun argues that in contexts of oppression there may be an educational and motivational point to moral reproach. We can indeed achieve moral progress by pointing out how harmful the behaviour of individuals is, despite the fact that we are not justified in doing so because the individuals are not blameworthy for their actions. Blaming individuals in order to change their behaviour and educate them is crucial in contexts of oppression. But this would be unacceptable in everyday moral contexts: blaming those we should not blame cannot be warranted by the benefits of doing so.

I agree with Calhoun that blame can be valuable in oppressive moral contexts, and even required. Indeed, in such contexts we should ask why it is worthwhile to worry about moral responsibility and what the point of assigning moral responsibility is. If it turns out that it can achieve good consequences and, more importantly, if it is the only way of doing so, then we have good moral reasons to engage in a practice that would otherwise be illegitimate. It would be unfair, however, to blame individuals in everyday moral contexts if the conditions of moral

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4 Imagine, for example, that they behave in discriminatory ways because they are unconsciously influenced by their implicit biases, which are out of their control and awareness.
responsibility were not in place. Questions of point can only prevail over questions of justification in “abnormal moral contexts,” where it is impossible to achieve moral progress differently.

Bell does not provide us with an overwhelming reason for why questions of point should override questions of justification in the case of hypocritical blame. Calhoun does provide us with such a reason. It is the only way to educate and motivate individuals in exceptional circumstances where any other moral response will be counterproductive, will reinforce ignorance and perpetuate oppressive moral practices. But in the absence of such a reason, we should keep the issue of what warrants blame separate from the question of whether it can have a point and be valuable. In everyday moral contexts, where people can easily distinguish right from wrong, questions of justification override questions of point. So, even if hypocritical blame may have an educational role, it does not necessarily follow that this role will automatically justify it; it may still be the case that hypocrisy will undermine our moral right to blame, and this is exactly the problem I am trying to address.  

At this point, we need to consider the following objection. Bell might insist that questions of justification vs. questions of point do not pose a problem only in exceptional moral contexts like the ones described by Calhoun. Suppose, for example, that Harvey does not blame Laura to her face, but blames her in front of his friends. Isn’t he still hypocritical and isn’t his blame unfair? Suppose that Harvey decides nevertheless to express his moral condemnation because that is the only way to get his friends to understand what a terrible thing she has done; imagine, for the sake of the argument, that it is the only way to convince his friends that lying and cheating is bad, so it is something they need to hear from him. He wants to express his moral disapproval of what she did and avoid complicity in wrongdoing. Harvey wants to avoid encouraging wrongdoing and decides to take a stance, although he knows he is hypocritical because he did the same thing to Laura. Isn’t there a point to his blame, and isn’t it the right thing to do, despite his hypocrisy? I think this is a clear case of hypocritical blame where that blame is unfair, but it is nevertheless justified by its good consequences, which in turn could not be brought about in any other way. Indeed, if it is the case that the only way to prevent further wrongdoing is by blaming someone, despite the fact that the blame is unfair, then it is morally justified, all things considered. So I am willing to accept that there are exceptional cases where we may blame for

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5 For a similar objection, see Fritz and Miller 2015.
6 I assume here that his friends do not know he is a hypocrite, as someone may argue that his friends would not provide the necessary uptake if they had known, so they would not take his blame seriously.
merely consequentialist reasons, even if our blame is unfair. In these cases, the hypocrite is thus not blameworthy for expressing his hypocritical moral condemnation of another.

It is also worth mentioning at this point that I am mainly concerned with the justification of second-personal cases of overt hypocritical blame, not with cases of third-party blame where blame is directed at third parties not directly involved in the wrongdoing. The norms may be different in third-personal cases, due to various facts: the third party might not know that the blamer is a hypocrite; moreover, the blamer does not accuse her directly of anything, so Harvey is not asking her to answer to him in the same way he is asking Laura to account for her behaviour. In blaming Laura, he does not show the proper moral integrity when he addresses Laura, as he is asking her to do something (recognize her faults and apologize), while he is not himself willing to do the same in return. But even when Harvey is hypocritically blaming Laura in front of his friends, he is still not warranted in blaming her. From his point of view, the blame is unfair. Nevertheless, from an outside perspective and in exceptional circumstances, the good consequences justify and may require his moral intervention. But Harvey should nevertheless feel torn and bad about doing it, as he knows in his heart he is a hypocrite and that in normal circumstances he would not be entitled to condemn Laura for something he himself is guilty of.

Let me return to the second point in Bell’s argument I mentioned above. Bell further suggests that we have no reason to deflect someone’s hypocritical blame, and this is because the blame is nevertheless fitting. So we should acknowledge, when we criticize the hypocritical blamer, that his criticisms are correct. We have a tendency to deflect hypocritical blame, Bell argues, because we want to deflect unwelcome criticism; so instead of taking seriously the criticism, we insist the blamer has no standing to criticize us, and this is unfair (2013, 281). We should instead respond appropriately to the hypocrite’s criticism and try to learn from it.

I propose to look at the responses the target of hypocritical blame has and see whether Bell is right to suggest that what we do when we bring a charge of hypocrisy is deflect the content of blame. I argue that Bell’s suggestion is unwarranted.

Suppose Harvey accuses Laura of lying without acknowledging that he himself is a liar. Laura knows about his tendencies to lie, and she answers to his accusation by saying: “Who are you to judge me?” or “Look who’s talking!” Suppose that Laura is culpable for what Harvey accuses her of, and thus the blame is fitting. The question is, why is Laura’s response nevertheless appropriate, despite the fact that the blame is fitting?

What Laura is doing here is not necessarily to deny the content of Harvey’s blame. She is not saying that Harvey is not speaking the
truth; after all, she is culpable for what she did and knows it. She is denying his moral standing to blame her. She is attempting to question and discredit Harvey’s right to perform the speech act of morally condemning her. She is demanding that Harvey explains himself before she has to explain herself in front of him. So it is not clear that in saying “Who are you to judge me?” we are actually deflecting the blame by ignoring its content. Laura is not trying to discredit Harvey because she does not want to be morally condemned. She is reacting to something blameworthy Harvey’s accusation reveals and is asking him to be fair or at least to recognize that he is not. If Laura denied the content of the blame by suggesting that the blame is unfitting, she herself would be hypocritical (here I am assuming that Harvey is accusing Laura of something she is culpable for, so the blame is fitting). Her reproach of him is appropriate only if she is not hypocritical herself (she may even feel guilty for what she did), otherwise he would have no obligation to address his hypocrisy when challenged. Accordingly, I suggest that when someone responds to hypocritical blame by saying “Who are you to judge me?” she is not necessarily denying that the blame is fitting but denying that the blamer has no authority to demand an explanation from her before he himself explains and addresses his own wrongful behaviour.

So far I have argued (against Bell’s proposal) that hypocritical blame may undermine one’s entitlemet to blame, even though the blame might have a point (bringing about good consequences, educating the audience, or motivating them to do the right thing). Further, I have argued that a charge of hypocrisy does not necessarily imply that the blamed party simply dismisses the content of blame, without taking it seriously. The blamed agent might actually feel remorse for what she has done. Nevertheless, she is entitled to question the moral authority of the hypocrite.

In the next section I turn to look more carefully at what makes one a hypocritical blamer and why hypocritical blame is morally problematic. I consider and reject three accounts, which argue that hypocritical blame renders blame inappropriate: the pretence account, the reciprocity account formulated by Antony Duff, and the equality of persons accounts. In section 3, I present my own solution to the problem of hypocritical blame. The last section addresses some objections to my proposal.

2. What Is Hypocritical Blame, and Why Is It Wrong?

So far I have worked with an intuitive notion of hypocrisy. But it is important to spell out in more detail what I mean by hypocritical blame, as it will help us clarify what the main objection to hypocritical
blame is. The case of hypocritical blame I am interested in here is the following. Suppose Harvey cheats on his wife. He thinks it is wrong to cheat, but he is not apologetic when he himself engages in adultery. Harvey is reproaching his wife Laura for cheating on him, and he demands an explanation and an apology from her. Laura, in return, reproaches Harvey for his hypocrisy, and so she demands an explanation and an apology from him. The question is, why is Harvey not seeing and not admitting his own moral faults first? Why doesn’t he admit he has done the same thing in the past and that he owes her an apology? My claim is that Harvey is a hypocrite if he tries to excuse his wrongful actions without good reasons or if he fails to see his actions are wrong because he refuses to critically question his own behaviour. As a result, he makes an exception of himself without good reasons or he engages in self-deception. Calhoun defines self-deception as “being motivated not to examine one’s actions or reasoning too carefully lest something unpleasant turn up” (1989, 399). Harvey is culpable for making that exception of himself because there are no good reasons that could justify the differential treatment. Further, if he is deceiving himself, this is the result of a culpable moral flaw.

Many accounts of hypocrisy have argued that hypocrisy involves pretence and an attempt to deceive or mislead another (McKinnon 1991; Kittay 1982; Smilansky 1994; Taylor 1981; Runciman 2008). In expressing my indignation towards some fault you have, I imply that I am not myself the type of person who would do such things or who possesses that same fault. I might accuse you of being unreliable in front of your friend, even if I know full well that I am myself unreliable, in order to make a good impression on your friend and appear virtuous. This is a case where it is in my own interest to pretend to be someone I am not. For Bell such a hypocrite is “clear-eyed,” because he does not really care about the norms he implies he cares about. He only feigns to care in order to gain something. I do not consider this case to be a proper case of hypocritical blame, however. The person who pretends to care about the norms she says she cares about is not really blaming the wrongdoer, she is only pretending to blame him. My concern is with cases where the hypocrite really cares about the norms in question and is sincerely exercised about their violation. Despite all her concern about the violations of some norm, she is in no position to morally condemn someone for violating the norm, because her standing has been compromised by her own behaviour.

Furthermore, even if we accept that pretending to care in order to deceive is a genuine case of hypocritical blame, it still does not cover all cases of hypocritical blame. Attempting to deceive is not necessary

7 On this point, see also Fritz and Miller 2015.
for hypocrisy. In order to be a hypocrite, Harvey does not need to intend to deceive Laura. He may be a totally sincere hypocrite who is truly worked up by what she did to him, but who has conveniently forgotten that he has committed a similar wrong in the past. He is not pretending or deceiving her. If challenged about it, he may even admit to hypocrisy. He may be self-deceptive about his own mistakes, but he has no intention to mislead her by suggesting that he has not done similar things in the past. He may be completely oblivious of the fact that he is guilty of the same thing he accuses her of, even if he should not be. It follows that we can have unfair hypocrisy without deceit.

I turn now to briefly discuss the reciprocity account. Now, Laura is demanding an explanation from Harvey and gives him a chance to show that he is not a hypocrite (anymore). If he refuses to take her demands seriously, he confirms that he is a hypocrite. Duff (2010) sees this lack of reciprocity as the deepest problem with hypocrisy. The fact that Harvey (the hypocrite) calls Laura (the blamed) to account for her wrongdoing while at the same time refuses to answer to her for the same mistake when she is challenging him in return is what undermines his standing to blame her. Duff has in mind a case where Harvey dismisses Laura’s challenge and insists that Laura focused instead on Harvey/C’s reproach of her.

I agree with Duff that Harvey has no right to demand an apology or an explanation from Laura if he refuses to answer to her when challenged. This does not, however, exactly capture the main objection to hypocritical blame. Suppose that Harvey wants to answer to Laura and does engage with her criticism. He thinks his wrongful behaviour is excused by certain considerations but fails to see that the same factors would also excuse her behaviour; or perhaps he fails to see that he has done anything wrong at all, or he has conveniently forgotten he has engaged in similar wrongdoing in the past. So he makes an unfair exception of himself when he blames Laura and fails to blame himself. He is still hypocritical despite the fact that he agrees to engage with her criticism, even if there is no lack of reciprocity involved in this sense. If he failed to respond to Laura’s criticisms at all, he would be blameworthy for this particular failure as well. But the main problem is that he should not have reproached Laura to begin with, as he had no right to do so without addressing first his own fault by at least feeling guilt about it or apologizing for it. Although I have shown that Duff’s account is not right as it stands, I shall come back to his account in

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8 Interestingly, Statman (1997) argues that hypocrisy usually involves or leads to self-deception, and hypocrites are not typically aware of the discrepancy we perceive between their attitudes and their beliefs.

9 I assume here that there are no good reasons that could justify or excuse his behaviour. Therefore, he is culpably unaware of his own mistakes.
section 3 and argue that the reciprocity requirement is crucial to understanding why hypocritical blame typically undermines standing.

Now, just because a wrongdoer has engaged in similar behaviour in the past does not make him a hypocrite if he is remorseful and apologetic for what he has done. Hypocritical blame is also inconsistent blame, because the blamer morally condemns what he implicitly approves of.\(^\text{10}\) If the wrongdoer apologizes for what he has done, he is not inconsistent anymore, as he already morally condemns his wrongful behaviour. So he does not inconsistently make an exception of himself by criticizing other people’s faults but not his own. He is probably a weak-willed individual who simply cannot always do the right thing, although he wishes he had. He is not hypocritical, because he openly admits his faults, knows full well what the right thing to do is, and always blames himself for his own faults, so he does take morality seriously.

From this analysis, it follows that whether someone is a hypocrite will depend on her attitudes towards her own wrongdoing, on whether she is able to admit her faults and to apologize for them when challenged. This claim will play an important role in how I explain why hypocritical blame undermines one’s standing to express blame.

Fritz and Miller (2015) and Wallace (2010) argue that what is wrong with hypocritical blame is the fact that the hypocrites treat or regard people’s interests as less important than their own, and this is why they tend to blame others for mistakes they themselves are guilty of without blaming themselves first. The fact that hypocrites make exceptions of themselves undermines the equal standing of people. The hypocrite treats the ones he blames as his inferiors, he elevates his interests above those of the others and thereby denies the equal standing of persons, which “is practically constitutive of morality in the first place” (Wallace 2010, 330). Wallace claims that when I hypocritically blame you “I ascribe to myself a moral standing that I am not willing to grant to you,” and “this offends against a presumption in favour of the equal standing of persons” (328).

But this account is not quite right, since we can imagine situations where one can be a respectful hypocrite. For example, suppose our hypocrite addresses another as an equal without assuming or behaving as if the person she blames were her inferior, as if her interests were more important than the other person’s interests. Harvey can blame Laura while sincerely believing that he is free of the fault he accuses

\(^{10}\) Wallace (2010) and Cohen (2006) also argue for the claim of inconsistent blame. Cohen thinks that blame is impossible, because it is inconsistent, and this is the main problem with hypocritical blame. I agree that we should try to be consistent in our actions, attitudes, and beliefs. The fact that hypocritical blame is inconsistent is not, however, what undermines our standing to blame.
her of, maybe because he has conveniently forgotten he did the same thing himself years ago. His blame is genuine, and he does not neglect her interests; nor does he believe his interests are more important than hers. So he makes an exception of himself, but not, as Wallace’s account suggests, because he puts his interests above Laura’s. It may be because he is not very good in general at engaging in self-criticism and moral reflection (although he may not have good excuses for this failure); or maybe he is a very forgetful person when it comes to moral mistakes. He might also forget easily about Laura’s mistakes at a later time, but at the moment he is very angry and worked up about them. If he were treating Laura differently because he did not respect her as a person, then this would indeed be problematic, and it would constitute a further wrong over and above the prior offense.

In addition to this, one may argue that in engaging with her fault, Harvey shows some form of respect towards Laura, because he thinks her capable of moral transformation, so he evaluates her by higher standards then he evaluates himself in this particular case. If he did not respect her, maybe he would not even be bothered about reproaching her and demanding an explanation to begin with, but instead would decide to break off relations because he wants nothing to do with such a rotten person. Thus, “denying the equal standing of persons” need not be involved in all cases of hypocritical blame, even if it might explain part of its wrongness in certain cases.

3. Why Hypocritical Blame Undermines Standing

Let me turn now to explain my own account of what the main problem with hypocritical blame is, by drawing on some of the considerations I discussed previously. I argued that what undermines the standing of the hypocrite to blame are his own attitudes towards his own acts of wrongdoing. Harvey fails to critically engage with his behaviour, and this undermines his moral authority to blame someone for that particular fault. His attitudes towards his own wrongdoing shows that he does not understand what is morally significant for our moral interactions—that is, that we have to live by the same moral standards we hold others to; he needs to critically examine his own faults, if he expects others to examine their own in return. The hypocritical blamer does

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11 For example, Bennett argues that in blaming a wrongdoer “we pay him a backhanded compliment. For we continue to regard him as a member of the moral community and thus as meriting the forms of treatment that go with this status, despite his wrong” (2003, 133).

12 Lippert-Rasmussen (manuscript) offers a detailed discussion of Wallace’s account. Lippert-Rasmussen argues that the value of equality is important to understanding the wrongness of hypocrisy. However, he substantially modifies Wallace’s account.
not really understand what morality requires of him if he fails to realize that he also has to recognize and address his own faults; so, in a sense, he is morally incompetent when it comes to addressing his own mistakes, and this constitutes a serious moral failure. After all, this is precisely why we are reluctant to call a hypocrite the weak-willed person who sincerely believes he has done wrong; he wishes he had not but cannot help but do the same thing again. Such a person is not a hypocrite, because he is serious about his moral failings, albeit weak-willed. The failure of Harvey to carefully consider his faults undermines his authority to demand that others examine and address their faults, even if he may well be accurate in judging other people’s faults. Morality not only demands that we get to the moral truth by judging correctly other people’s characters; the moral interaction between us also requires that we pay attention to our own faults and change our behaviour, especially if we want our demands to be taken seriously when we ask others to answer to us.

The fact that Harvey is guilty of the same thing he accuses Laura of does not, however, by itself undermine his standing to blame. Whether he is hypocritical will depend on how he responds to her when he is confronted. Let us look again at how Laura responds to his blame. She questions his authority to blame her and is challenging his anger. Assuming that Harvey is a sincere hypocrite who is not trying to deceive Laura by pretending he is innocent, the main problem with his blame is that he fails to see and understand something he should see and understand. He fails to see he is doing something he has no right to do.

I am assuming here that his actions are unjustified and he is culpable for what he has done. I am also assuming that his moral ignorance of his own mistakes or character flaws is culpable. If it turns out that Harvey could not have avoided the mistake or that he does not have the moral capacity for self-scrutiny through no fault of his own, then his ignorance is non-culpable, and so he is not a hypocrite.

Harvey might respond to Laura’s accusations by trying to explain why his action was not actually wrong, or why his action was excused; or he might say that he has forgotten about that event. Trying to excuse his behaviour or diminish his culpability when it is clear he has no excuses for what he has done is problematic and confirms the charge of hypocrisy.

Harvey can regain the right to blame Laura if he engages in self-scrutiny and if he starts to critically consider and repudiate his past mistakes.

So, what is objectionable about hypocritical blame is the decision by the hypocrite not to know or consider something she should have known better. The hypocrite either fails to see her own wrongful acts as being as serious as they are (she engages in a form of self-deceptive
complacency), so she does not blame herself for them, or fails to remember she possesses the same fault when she should have taken her past actions into consideration. Her attitudes reveal important facts about how seriously she takes morality and about how much she cares about her moral obligations, and this I think is fundamental to morality. As Wallace points out, we owe it to each other to engage in self-scrutiny and self-reflection, and to try to remember and learn from our own moral faults.

The hypocrite’s moral standing to blame is undermined when she fails to engage in the very thing she is asking the person she blames to engage in. Harvey is demanding that Laura account for her moral faults, therefore he implicitly expects that she should reflect on her faults, critically examine them, and give them due consideration. Laura in effect is reproaching Harvey for the fact that he has not done so himself. Thus there is something right about Duff’s analysis. If Harvey expects that Laura owes something to him (that she should examine and acknowledge her faults), he should also realize that he also answers to her in the same way—he owes it to her to critically examine his own behaviour. In denying that he owes something to her and to the moral community he is a part of, he is denying “the fellowship on which his criticism depends for its legitimacy” (Duff 2010, 128).

Duff argues that when we criticize another person, we address each other as members of a certain normative community. And this implies we are answerable to each other. Indeed, we owe it to others to be critical and admit our own faults if we are to demand the same of our fellow members. What undermines Harvey’s standing to blame Laura is not the fact that he is guilty of the same thing but the fact that he culpably fails to observe, criticize, and scrutinize his own moral faults while demanding that others do. So the badness of hypocrisy can be best explained by a failure of reciprocity. Why does this typically undermine standing? In blaming Laura, Harvey is expecting an apology from her; however, Harvey himself owes Laura an apology. As a matter of justice, he needs to clear himself of his “moral debt” before he can be in a position to demand an explanation from Laura regarding her moral faults. Otherwise, he opens himself to moral criticism and justified blame.

Let me briefly turn to Bell’s suggestion that, instead of criticizing the hypocritical blamer, we should instead take his criticism seriously and do something about it. I agree here with Bell that we have a duty

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13 Another account that emphasizes this point is that developed by Crisp and Cowton (1994), who argue that hypocrisy amounts to a failure to take morality seriously.
14 Moody-Adams (1999) interestingly argues that this is fundamental to morality (to engage in self-scrutiny, self-reflection, and examination of our own behaviour), because this is how moral progress is achieved.
to scrutinize our own behaviour and make sure that, when we reproach the hypocrite, we are not simply doing it because we want to avoid moral criticism. We also, however, have an obligation to challenge the behaviour of the hypocrite. Deciding to ignore his hypocrisy may have the effect of sanctioning his behaviour—it may encourage more wrongdoing, and, further, by not challenging him we may fail to provide the hypocrite with the only opportunity he may have for reflecting on what he has done. Mainly, in cases where the hypocrite routinely engages in self-deception about his own moral flaws, reproaching him may be the only way to get him to change his behaviour.

4. Worries and Replies

I would like to consider some possible worries and replies.

One may wonder whether the wrong committed by the hypocrite has to be exactly the same as the one committed by the one blamed. Should Harvey’s wrongdoing be as serious as Laura’s? Further, must the wrongdoing be committed against Harvey? Does it matter if Harvey wronged Laura a long time ago and he has now forgotten about the incident?

This paper has simplified the account and assumed that the wrongs committed are relevant enough (are of the same kind or exactly the same). I also gave examples of wrongs committed against the hypocrite. Harvey accuses Laura of something Laura did directly to him, and not to someone else.

Of course, Laura cannot accuse Harvey of being hypocritical about his own past infidelities if he has never been unfaithful before. I am, however, willing to accept that there are cases where one is justified in making a charge of hypocrisy even if the wrongs are not exactly the same. Crisp and Cowton (1994) give a good example of a hard-working and highly motivated Mafia leader who blames his son for his laziness and lack of motivation. The son might reasonably complain and demand that his father first explain his criminal activities, which are much worse than the things he accuses his son of, before he apologizes to his father for his own failings.15

Even if I focus here on examples of hypocrites who have been directly wronged by the person they blame, the same considerations can apply to wrongs done to third parties. Harvey might hypocritically condemn her actions when Laura lies to her mother, although she has never lied to him before. Laura can justifiably accuse him of hypocrisy if she knows he has lied to her or other people in the past. So the wrongdoing does not necessarily have to be against the hypocrite.

15 For a nuanced discussion of this issue, see Lippert-Rasmussen 2012.
Let me turn now to discuss the epistemic question. Does it matter if Harvey has forgotten that he cheated on Laura in the past? My answer is that it does not. Unless Harvey apologizes for what he has done in the past and unless he makes a commitment that he will not repeat the bad behaviour, he is still at fault for what he has done. The fact that he has forgotten does not excuse his behaviour. It makes it much worse, because he should remember such important things—above all, because he now thinks they are important enough to blame someone else for. It also matters how Harvey responds to Laura’s charge of hypocrisy and whether he is willing to change and admit wrongdoing. Suppose he remembers that he has been unfaithful before, and he feels remorse but never expresses it to Laura. I think he is still a hypocrite until he apologizes to her. This is because, in openly blaming Laura, he expects an apology from her. So he should be willing to do the same in return.

I would like to turn now to consider a more general objection raised by Bell (2013) and King (2015). Bell worries that the occasions in which all conditions on standing will be met are very rare.16 If that is the case, and if it is true that a lack of standing undermines the justification of blame, then on this account it follows that we can seldom blame our wrongdoers. And this surely must be wrong, since we shall be eliminating blame altogether, as only moral saints would be justified in their blame. Consider the hypocrisy condition. Nearly all of us have at some point lied to another, cheated on our partners, disappointed our parents, and so on. Does this mean we are never entitled to engage in moral criticism of another who is at fault just because we have engaged in similar wrongdoing in the past?

Similarly, King argues that surely I can blame a careless taxi driver who puts my life at risk even if I am not a model driver myself. To assume that blame is appropriate only when we have not engaged in similar wrongdoing “would arguably make the whole business of appropriate blame impossible” (King 2015, 7).

My answer to both worries is that one can blame another even if she is guilty of the very conduct for which she is blaming others, with the condition that she is not a hypocrite about it. Certainly, blame is not unjustified simply because I have myself been a careless driver in the past. What makes me a hypocrite is the fact that I am not willing to admit that I am a careless driver myself. If I am a reckless driver who constantly puts people in danger, then I am a hypocrite and I have no standing to blame the careless taxi driver. I do not have to be a model driver in order to be justified in morally condemning another

16 Bell discusses four conditions that might undermine X’s standing to blame Y for some action: (1) “Y’s wrongdoing is X’s business.” (2) X and Y inhabit the same moral community. (3) The blamer should not be a hypocrite. (4) X should not be complicit in Y’s wrongdoing.
driver. But at least I need to care about my own driving and about not putting other people in danger when I drive in order to be entitled to accuse others of being bad drivers. If I ask the taxi driver to answer to me for his bad driving, then I must also be ready to answer for my own mistakes and take my own actions seriously. Hypocrisy is unfair, and it renders blame inappropriate even if it turns out we can never blame another person for her mistakes. The good news is that we can always regain our standing to blame (and we do not need to be moral saints for that to happen) when we are ready to admit we were wrong and apologize for what we did. Hence it is not true that asking people not to be hypocrites “would make the whole business” of blame impossible.

Department of Philosophy
University of Sheffield
45 Victoria Street
Sheffield S3 7QB
United Kingdom
c.roadevin@sheffield.ac.uk

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