

# **The Standing to Blame as the Right to Shut Up**

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Master's Thesis Applied Ethics  
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Word count: 16 292

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## 1. Abstract

In this paper, I interpret the recently proposed concept of the ‘standing to blame’ as a ‘right to shut up’ and argue on two grounds that a victim of ‘hypocritical blame’ cannot, despite a possible loss of standing on the part of the hypocrite, dodge the hypocrite’s blame (i.e., shut up the hypocrite). First, the literature considers hypocritical blame to undermine standing because it violates the equality of persons, but I argue that shutting up a hypocrite does the same, and therefore annuls the dodge: neither party can escape blame. Secondly, I argue that establishing hypocrisy is exceedingly difficult because of possible differences between the hypocrite and the blamee in the magnitude of norm-violation, in the specificity of the norm-violation, and because the hypocrite needs to agree that she is in fact violating the same norm. Together, these arguments establish that the blamee has to engage with the content of the hypocrite’s blame despite the (possible) hypocrisy. This constitutes a rejection of the standing to blame, at least in the case of hypocrisy as laid out in the literature. Finally, I interpret the reason for this rejection from a broader perspective by considering the importance of blame to uphold our moral system.

## 2. Introduction

Although the phrase ‘who are *you* to say this?!’, or one of its many variants, is probably one of the most used responses to moral criticism, it was long considered to be no more than a logical fallacy.<sup>1</sup> After all, the actions or beliefs of the person uttering criticism are of no significance to the moral status of the actions or beliefs of the person being criticized. The justification of moral blame was therefore sought only in the ‘blameworthiness’ of the subject. If, and only if, someone has indeed done wrong, and so is blameworthy for a certain action, then another person’s criticism is in order. This has changed in recent years with the introduction of the idea of the need of a certain ‘standing’ to blame.<sup>2</sup> For this, blame and blameworthiness have been pulled apart. If someone has done wrong (and is therefore blameworthy) he or she might be *deserving* of blame, but actually blaming that person might still be *inappropriate* if the person uttering the blame lacks a certain standing. This means that in some cases, *even though* you are blameworthy for a certain action, I cannot blame you for that action if I lack the standing to engage in blame. With this concept in hand, we can explain

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<sup>1</sup> Govier, Trudy., ‘Worries About Tu Quoque as a Fallacy’, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Todd, Patrick., ‘A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame’, 1.

why, sometimes, even though we know that we have done wrong, we cannot *stand* to hear the criticism of someone: not because we cannot stomach the criticism, but because we feel that this particular person is not allowed to criticize us. This intuition of (not) being allowed to criticize, to have ‘the right’, is captured in the idea of a standing to blame.

One of the criteria considered relevant for having the standing to blame is the condition of non-hypocrisy. If I want to blame you for a certain norm-violation *N*, then I cannot be a hypocrite with regard to norm-violations of type *N*.<sup>3</sup> This makes great intuitive sense: often the reason we cannot stand having someone blame us is precisely because they have committed the same, or similar, wrongs. A great deal of attention in the literature has been paid to what exactly makes this the case, why hypocrisy should be considered a meaningful (moral) fault, and why it undermines the standing to blame. The focus, in other words, is on (facts about) the hypocrite. However, no one has considered the other side of the coin: can the hypocrite’s ‘victim’—the blamee—avoid the blame he deserves, by invoking the hypocrite’s lack of standing?<sup>4</sup> In a moral debate, the standing to blame in effect functions as a right to shut up, allowing for a situation in which, by charging me with hypocrisy, you are able to evade the moral opprobrium (i.e. disapproval, condemnation) you deserve for committing a moral wrong. You go free unless I atone. This cannot be right. If hypocritical moral blame is considered annoying and wrong, then evading blame that one deserves by yelling ‘hypocrisy!’ comes a good second. Therefore, in this paper, I will analyze the standing to blame as the right to shut up: is it possible to evade moral criticism by charging the blamer with hypocrisy? I will argue that, even though I can sympathize with the intuition that some people should not be allowed to blame us, we need to reject the standing to blame in its present interpretation—at least in the case of hypocrisy as laid out in the literature. I will do so by means of two arguments: one conceptual, the other practical. On the conceptual side, I will argue that the standing to blame as currently construed backfires: if the hypocrite is not allowed to blame her victim for his moral faults because her standing to blame is undermined by her hypocrisy, then the victim is not allowed to evade the hypocrite’s moral opprobrium, because the reason hypocrisy is considered to undermine standing also holds in the case of *evading* opprobrium by charging the blamer with hypocrisy. On the practical side, I will argue

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<sup>3</sup> What ‘being a hypocrite’ entails exactly, I will get to later. For now we can do with the intuitive sense of hypocrisy.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid having to use ‘he or she’ all the time, I have chosen to assign ‘she’ to ‘the hypocrite’, to improve readability without perpetuating patriarchal norms. Wherever a sidekick to the hypocrite pops up, her ‘victim’ or ‘blamee’, I will use ‘he’. Of course, this exposes me to the critique of who *I* am, as a man, to assign to a hypocrite the female pronoun, but I hope to cast some doubt on the potency of that accusation in this paper.

that it is too difficult to establish who is in fact a hypocrite in the relevant sense to be able to use the charge to avoid moral critique. This leaves us in an awkward situation in which, even though the hypocrite was supposed to lack the standing to blame, her victim still has to take her criticism to heart. These arguments, combined with the important role that blame plays to uphold our moral system, will give us reason to reject the concept of a standing to blame, at least in the case of hypocrisy as currently laid out in the literature. Instead of pointing at others, we should focus on ourselves, acknowledging the blame we deserve.

In sections 3.1 and 3.2, I will outline what kind of hypocrisy we are dealing with in this paper, and its connection to blame. In sections 3.3 and 3.4 I will discuss what renders hypocrisy, combined with blame, morally problematic: hypocritical blame is thought to be a denial of the *equality of persons*. Subsequently, in section 3.5, I will discuss how this is thought to cause the hypocrite to lose her *standing to blame*. I will then argue that even if the hypocrite has lost standing in this way, the blamee will not be able to ignore what the hypocrite says—the blamee cannot shut up the hypocrite. In section 4 I will do so by arguing that the standing to blame as currently construed backfires. In section 5 I will discuss some practical problems with the current account of hypocrisy that make it difficult to establish who is in fact a hypocrite, impeding the possibility of silencing the hypocrite. In section 6 I will interpret my arguments within a wider picture, arguing why it makes sense to reject the standing to blame in light of the importance of blame to uphold our moral system. In section 8 I will end with some practical suggestions on how to counter a charge of hypocrisy.

### **3. What is wrong with hypocrisy?**

#### **3.1. What is hypocrisy?**

Let me first discuss what hypocrisy consists of for the purpose of this paper. In general, hypocrisy is regarded as a form of play-acting or deception, seen as an inconsistency between a person's actions and her attitudes and other behavior.<sup>5</sup> Even though the hypocrite *believes* she should act, or *wants* to act, as-Y, she *actually* acts as-Z. An element of publicness is crucial: the hypocrite tries to induce in other people the idea that not only she acts as-Z, but also *believes* that she should act as-Z, even though she actually believes that she should act as-

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace, 'Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons', 307.

Y. Politicians make for a rewarding subject here, for the charge of hypocrisy is probably nowhere as ubiquitous as it is in the political arena. Striking examples that spring to mind are the leftist politician who promotes income equality but leaves politics for a fat check in business, or the conservative politician who publicly stresses restrained sexual morals while secretly having a lover. The first important distinction we can draw here is between hypocritical *actions* and hypocritical *persons*. Although both should probably be regarded as forming a continuum—a person is, after all, considered a hypocrite in virtue of her actions—I will here take the more narrow focus of the ethics of hypocritical *actions*. The broader perspective of ‘the person’ would open the discussion to considerations of virtues of character, which exceeds the current scope. In terms of character, the hypocrite is, for example, thought of as wanting to reap the social fruits of acting morally, without *actually* acting moral.<sup>6</sup> Or one could think of politicians simply having to be hypocritical up to a certain level to function as politicians in the first place.<sup>7</sup> This opens up the debate to the ‘virtue of hypocrisy’, i.e., “when is it good to be a little bad?”<sup>8</sup> We will not deal with those questions here; I will however come back to the topic of hypocrisy in politics at the end of this paper, but from a different angle.

For now, I will stick to the more straightforward cases of hypocritical actions, which better expose the moral salience of hypocrisy. We can distinguish between roughly two variants. First are the actions of the weak-willed hypocrite who, even though she believes that she should act as-Y, lacks the ‘psychological strength’ to actually do so. She is unable to bear the costs (of whatever kind they may be) that are associated with acting as-Y. An example would be the person who believes that eating meat is morally wrong, but cannot prevent herself from indulging in large quantities of spareribs when the opportunity arises. Even though she would invite a charge of being a hypocrite, her action does not seem to be a very severe moral violation. All of us can probably relate to this kind of weakness of will, and do not feel like she has to be criticized very strongly for it. After all, no one can always impeccably observe all moral norms. What seems to make this kind of hypocrisy even less of a problem is that the hypocrite actually endorses the moral norm regarding meat-eating; she is just unable to follow through with it. If confronted, she would probably express remorse and acknowledge that she ought to do better.

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<sup>6</sup> Batson, Daniel et al., ‘Doing Business After the Fall: The Virtue of Moral Hypocrisy’.

<sup>7</sup> Because, as Judith Shklar puts it, “no one lives up to a collective ideal”. Some form of play-acting on the part of the politician will be necessary. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Grant, Ruth., *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics*.

This brings us to the second variant of hypocrisy, the one that will be the focus of this paper: the exception-seeking hypocrite. This kind of hypocrite, as opposed to the meat-eater above, would not express remorse when confronted with her offense. Instead, even though she would clearly be blameworthy for her action, she would consider herself excused. To get our moral intuitions firing, we can imagine how during a barbecue, this hypocrite, gravy dripping from her chin and barely audible because her mouth was stuffed with spareribs, would happily pursue blaming other people for eating meat. She would clearly endorse the moral norm of ‘one ought not to eat meat’, because she calls other people to account with respect to this norm. But she shows, through her actions, that she does not think it applies to her equally. One can imagine the disbelief and revulsion about so much obtuseness on the faces of her victims, and feeling anger rising to the surface: how dare *this person* criticizes *me* for meat-eating! She has no right! That is the sort of strong moral intuition we are after here. Precisely because of its intensity, this is the sort of hypocrisy that best lends itself to an ethical analysis. In the following part we will be concerned with the question: what, if anything, is morally wrong with this kind of exception-seeking?

### **3.2. *Blame and the connection to hypocrisy***

To answer that question, we have to look at hypocrisy in connection to another important element of common morality that has received a great deal of attention in recent years: the moral practice of ‘blaming’.<sup>9</sup> Because of its omnipresence in everyday moral life, we have a good intuitive grasp of what it means to blame someone; but in what way it should be construed philosophically is a matter of contention. Different accounts regard different elements as essential to blame. Most common seem to be the ones drawing on the reactive emotions (‘to blame is to be emotionally exercised about some wrongdoing’) and those that regard blame as involving a belief-desire pair (a belief that some wrong has been committed, and a desire that it did not).<sup>10</sup> Personally, I think that emotions are fundamental to blame and therefore feel most attracted to accounts that put these central, but for this paper the precise interpretation of blame does not matter.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned in the preface, what is important for this paper is the introduction of the idea of a *standing* to blame. Whereas blameworthiness used to be the only criterion

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview, see: D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Coates, ‘The Contours of Blame’, 8-15.

<sup>11</sup> I will also deal only with the act of openly expressing blame, and not with blaming *attitudes*, or privately felt blame.

considered relevant in connection to blame, now facts about the blamer (i.e., the blamer's standing) also determine whether blaming would be *appropriate*.<sup>12</sup> Three different conditions that determine standing have been distinguished: conditions of blameworthiness, jurisdiction, and procedure.<sup>13</sup> The condition of blameworthiness determines whether the receiver of blame in fact *deserves* the blame: has he or she indeed committed a moral wrong, which merits blame? I will not be concerned with questions of blameworthiness here; for the remainder of this paper I will assume that the receivers of blame have indeed done wrong, unless stated otherwise. The condition of jurisdiction is another way of phrasing the standing to blame: does the blame fall within the jurisdiction of the blamer, i.e. does the blamer have the right to blame this particular person? The condition of procedure is about whether, even though the blamer has proper jurisdiction, the blame is *carried out* properly. I might have the standing to blame you for breaking a promise, and you might in fact be blameworthy, but that does not mean that I can, say, kill you. Or haunt you for the rest of your life. That is to say, the blame has to fit the transgression. Also, if I have reasons to doubt whether you are in fact blameworthy, my blame might be inappropriate if I do not assign my doubt its proper weight.<sup>14</sup> This last condition will figure indirectly, but the focus of this paper is on the condition of jurisdiction: the standing to blame.

To determine whether someone has the standing to blame, we can differentiate between four different conditions that must be true of the blamer: the business condition, the temporary condition, the non-complicity condition, and the non-hypocrisy condition.<sup>15</sup> The business condition states that the moral wrong must be the blamer's business, which makes sense of the receiver's retort '*shut up, this is none of your business!*' According to the temporary condition, both blamer and blamee need to inhabit the same moral community; think, for example, of the alleged impossibility to blame historical actors for engaging in slavery. The non-complicity condition states that the blamer cannot be complicit in the moral wrong; if the blamer shares responsibility, it is not appropriate for him to blame others.<sup>16</sup> The fourth condition is the focus of this paper: the condition of 'non-hypocrisy'.

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<sup>12</sup> Coates, Justin and Neal Tognazzini., 'The Contours of Blame', 19.

<sup>13</sup> Coates, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Coates, 18-23.

<sup>15</sup> Bell, 'The Standing to Blame: A Critique', 269-277.

<sup>16</sup> Someone who reserves a large role for complicity is G.A. Cohen, in his beautiful exposition of why Israeli Ambassador Dr. Zvi Shtauber could not condemn Palestinian terrorism. Cohen, G.A., 'Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can't, Condemn the Terrorists?', especially 127-133.



That is where the moral significance of hypocrisy lies: its absence is seen as a necessary condition for the standing to blame. The idea is that if you are hypocritical with respect to a certain action, it is not appropriate for you to blame another person for a relevantly similar action. Even though there exist forms of hypocrisy that do not involve blame, the forms that do are the most morally salient. Consider for example an instance of hypocrisy involving *advice*:

Dad: son, you should not smoke, it is bad for your health.

Son: but dad, you smoke yourself. Who are you to say this to me?<sup>17</sup>

Although this sort of conversation is probably omnipresent in daily life, it is unclear whether the son has a point at all: does the inconsistency between the dad's belief what ought to be the case, and his actual actions, undermine his standing to give *advice*?<sup>18</sup> Would he not, for instance, be in a perfect position to know the negative consequences of smoking very well—which we might even consider an *improvement* to his standing to give advice?<sup>19</sup> Consider instead this example:

Dad: son, cheating is bad. You should not have cheated on your girlfriend.

Son: but dad, you have cheated on mum yourself. Who are you to say this to me?

Here, the son seems to have a much stronger point. Our moral intuitions are triggered more strongly in the case of hypocritical *blame*, than they are in the case of hypocritical *advice*. Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, I will discuss hypocrisy in connection to (the standing to) blame.

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<sup>17</sup> I borrow this example from Moti Mizrahi. If the dad would answer: you shouldn't smoke *because I say so*, this would constitute an 'appeal to authority' and might as such be legitimately rebutted, on Mizrahi's account, by a charge of hypocrisy. However, it is unclear whether this has any bearing on the *moral* argument against hypocrisy. I will not pursue this line here. Mizrahi, 'Take My Advice—I Am Not Following It: *Ad Hominem* Arguments as Legitimate Rebuttals to Appeals to Authority'.

<sup>18</sup> As Mizrahi mentions, there might of course be reasons of *prudency* not to smoke; smoking is bad regardless of the father's hypocrisy.

<sup>19</sup> Aikin, 'Tu Quoque Arguments', 167. The argument that hypocrisy *strengthens* the content of the advice given hypocritically is what Aikin calls a 'tu quoque judo'. He uses it to counter the charge of hypocrisy in the case of Al Gore: if *even* Al Gore, with all his wealth and power, cannot live an emission-free life, then this just shows how exceedingly hard it is to do this—and therefore, how much work we still have to do.

### 3.3. Wallace's 'hypocritical moral address'

To find out what is morally wrong with hypocritical blame, we will take a look at the two most insightful and nuanced accounts of hypocrisy of recent date, those by R. Jay Wallace and Kyle G. Fritz & Daniel Miller. Wallace starts his paper with a debunking of general sentiments about what is wrong with hypocrisy that is worth reiterating, to prevent our intuitions getting in the way of understanding. To begin with, there is the 'inconsistency-view', according to which the wrongness of hypocrisy can be explained in terms of the *inconsistency* between a person's actions and attitudes. If we blame someone for hypocrisy, we blame her for not following up on her attitudes or beliefs the way that consistency requires. If she overtly denounces using airplanes out of climate considerations, we also expect her to abstain from other actions that would harm the climate. If she fails to adhere to her own standards (due to weakness of will, for example), we can imagine her to be blamed for hypocrisy of the inconsistency-variant. But Wallace asks: what precisely is *morally* wrong with being inconsistent in one's actions? Why should we care, in a moral sense, about people being consistent?<sup>20</sup> After all, in the above example, the 'hypocrite' would be both inconsistent *and* actively doing good by abstaining from using airplanes. Is she doing *wrong* by failing in other domains, such as riding the bus or eating meat? She would at least, setting aside other reasons, not be wrong in virtue of an *inconsistency*. We might say she is acting wrongly because she harms the climate in those other domains as well, but then the wrongness would be explained by the environmental harm, and not by the inconsistency.

Instead, to determine what is morally wrong with hypocrisy, Wallace looks for a violation of a *value* or *moral norm*. His first candidate is 'authenticity'. The idea here is that our 'private selves' (as opposed to our 'public selves') are our '*true selves*', and every deviation from that true self means that one is being *inauthentic*. But, Wallace argues, our system of morality cannot function properly without some of the play-acting that would be construed as inauthentic on this account. Doing the right thing sometimes entails *not* sharing one's private thoughts or feelings. Moreover, no one can be forced to constantly share one's inner world without violating that person's right to privacy. And, just like with consistency, it is unclear why we should care about authenticity in a *moral* sense. Authenticity, Wallace

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<sup>20</sup> Wallace, 310.

notes, seems to be a *personal* value at best—an ideal to live up to, not a standard to be held accountable to.<sup>21</sup>

The second suggestion for a moral norm being violated by hypocrisy, closely related to authenticity, is ‘honesty’.<sup>22</sup> Whereas inauthenticity is about lying to yourself, dishonesty is about lying to another person. This creates a stronger basis for a distinctively *moral* complaint, because unlike inauthenticity, being dishonest entails wronging *other* people (the idea being that wronging yourself could hardly be called a *moral* wrong). The idea is that the hypocrite is making false representations of herself, and that this deception is what makes hypocrisy morally problematic. Wallace agrees that there might be something to say for this point, but that it cannot be the whole story, nor isolate what is most problematic about hypocrisy. For example, politicians who criticize behavior in which they have engaged themselves might not be deliberately trying to deceive at all, instead considering it unavoidable in their line of work.<sup>23</sup> However, despite the lack of deception, we might still feel there is something wrong with their criticism. Another example not fitting the dishonesty-account would be the perfectly sincere hypocrite, who has forgotten about or is blind to her own similar faults.<sup>24</sup> So, instead of dishonesty, Wallace proposes an alternative account of the wrongness of hypocrisy: hypocrites engage in an activity they do not have the *standing* to engage in—they are not entitled, or do not have the right, to blame others when they are hypocritical with regard to that activity.

### **3.4. Violation of the equality of persons**

Wallace understands blame as “a way of being exercised about immorality that shows that one cares about the values that morality protects and enables”.<sup>25</sup> So when one loses the standing to blame, one forfeits the right to be exercised in this way about moral faults of others. The question is: how does the hypocrite forfeit this right? The first thing to establish is that, according to Wallace, to blame someone brings with it an *obligation to self-scrutiny*.<sup>26</sup> To blame someone for actions that one has engaged in oneself is not in itself necessarily objectionable; what is morally problematic is failing to live up to the commitment to

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<sup>21</sup> Wallace, 313.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace, 313-317.

<sup>23</sup> Because, as mentioned before, “no one lives up to a collective ideal”. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Wallace, 315.

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, 324.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace, 326.

scrutinize one's own behavior *as well*—a commitment taken up by blaming someone else. Wallace fails to argue what it is about the act of blaming that brings with it a commitment to self-scrutiny, but it does make intuitive sense. The person who blames others for meat-eating while stuffing her mouth with spareribs seems morally at fault in precisely this sense: she fails to engage in sufficient self-blame—in whatever way this commitment to self-blame is further grounded. ('You blame me but not yourself?!')

Nevertheless, Wallace could hardly hold that a mere intuition about what constitutes proper blaming practices grounds the moral norm that is being violated by hypocrites. Instead, what is being violated according to Wallace is the *equality of persons*.<sup>27</sup> He argues that we all have an equal interest in being protected from social disapproval and moral opprobrium. Morality functions as a 'shield' against this, because we can prevent opprobrium by acting morally. Acting immorally, however, opens up the possibility of being the target of moral criticism. And this is how the hypocrite violates the equality of persons: by blaming another without engaging in self-blame, she shows, through her actions, that she attaches more importance to her own interest in being free from moral opprobrium than to the blamee's similar and equal interest. This violation of the equality of persons is what makes hypocrisy morally wrong, and as long as the hypocrite fails to engage in self-blame, she forfeits her standing to blame.

This is the moral fault that is at work in the paradigmatic case of the sparerib-stuffed blamer of meat-eaters. But importantly, Wallace argues that we can criticize other, non-paradigmatic forms of hypocrisy in the same way, most notably the person who criticizes others, but whose "behavior is in lesser ways not beyond reproach"<sup>28</sup>. As Wallace notes, this is the situation in which we will find ourselves most of the time, since no one is entirely without moral lapses. It is not the case, says Wallace, that we need to be a moral saint before we can criticize others. Nevertheless, "there is something unseemly about resentment and indignation of others if they do not go together with a willingness to acknowledge publicly your own moral shortcomings and to make amends for them, to the extent it is possible for

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Wallace denies that this is about the obligation to value moral norms or mistakes equally across the moral playing field. Valuing, according to Wallace, is "of its nature a somewhat inconstant activity, and there is nothing necessarily problematic about failing to care equally about all items that one takes to instantiate evaluative properties of a given type" (327). I will draw on this in the last part of this paper about how to deal with charges of hypocrisy.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace, 336.

you to do so.”<sup>29</sup> This leads to counterintuitive conclusions that I will take up later, but we will first discuss another account of hypocrisy that addresses a hole in Wallace’s argumentation.

### 3.5. *The relation between the equality of persons and the standing to blame*

Wallace’s account shows one gap: it is unclear how, even if hypocritical blame is morally *wrong* because it violates the equality of persons, this establishes that the hypocrite has also lost the *standing* to blame. This gap was pointed out by Macalester Bell in ‘The Standing to Blame: A Critique’.<sup>30</sup> She has argued that the wrongness of hypocritical blame does not, in and of itself, necessarily entail a loss of the standing to blame. People might evince many more moral faults through their blame. Apart from being hypocritical, their blame might be petty, arrogant, mean, etc. It is unclear how this would compromise one’s standing: it might be wrong and annoying, but why something that is wrong and annoying entails a loss of standing Wallace has not argued for. Moreover, if even meanness and arrogance cause the blamer to lose standing, one has to be a moral saint before being allowed to criticize others. That would be a huge impairment of common morality, because blame will not be able to fulfill its function in preserving good moral conduct, a cause that Wallace himself actually endorses. Bell notes that even if the hypocrite shows through her blame that she considers herself above her moral peers and therefore violates the equality of persons, she may just be *mistaken* about the moral status of her action, or that of herself. The sparerib-eating hypocrite that considers herself excused from the norm is, in absence of a good reason, merely self-deceived (and probably obtuse and hard-headed), but she has every right to blame others. We are justified in getting morally exercised about this; we might say that the hypocrite *ought to* know that her exception-making is unjustified and consider her unfair and inequalitarian, but this does nothing whatsoever to establish that the hypocrite has lost the *standing* to blame.<sup>31</sup>

Fritz & Miller have taken up this challenge in their article ‘Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame’. They agree with Wallace that the wrongness of hypocrisy lies in the hypocrite’s violation of the equality of persons, but they interpret this equality slightly differently. Whereas Wallace holds that the equality of persons manifests itself in the equal interest moral agents have in being shielded from moral opprobrium, for Fritz and Miller

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<sup>29</sup> Wallace, 336.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, Macalester., ‘The Standing to Blame: A Critique’, in: D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford 2013) 263-281.

<sup>31</sup> Bell, 275-276.

equality is about the ‘equal distribution of the norms governing blame’.<sup>32</sup> That is to say: relevantly similar moral agents ought to be blamed equally for relevantly similar actions. The exception-seeking hypocrite violates the equality of persons in this sense because she fails to blame herself for the breaking of a norm she otherwise clearly endorses. Her exception-making is unjustified and therefore unfair.

Fritz & Miller explicate this unfairness in terms of dispositions. What is unfair about hypocrisy is not necessarily the unjustified exception-making in itself, but the *disposition* to make unjustified exceptions. They call it having a ‘differential blaming disposition’. In this regard, they differ from Wallace, who focuses on the action of hypocritical blame itself. Fritz & Miller do so because they seem to want to address another difficulty regarding hypocrisy, that of ‘being’ a hypocrite: is someone who has made an unjustified exception of herself with regard to a certain morally wrong action (say, a lie) *only once*, still a hypocrite? Or if she has lied ten years ago many times, but does not do so anymore? Can we shut her up by charging her with hypocrisy? To circumvent having to establish the precise conditions for hypocrisy (‘ten years ago but not eleven’), Fritz & Miller introduce the differential blaming disposition: if the person is still *disposed* to blame others for being dishonest while exempting herself, she has a differential blaming disposition, is a hypocrite and therefore morally blameworthy. Unjustified exception-making in the past can give us reason to *believe* that someone in fact still has a differential blaming disposition, but it does not establish it.<sup>33</sup>

So far so good, but we still have not heard why a violation of the equality of persons entails losing the standing to blame. Fritz & Miller argue that there is something special about the hypocritical blamer that fails to hold in the case of the petty or arrogant blamer: the violation of the equality of persons is not only *wrong* (in the same way that pettiness or arrogance can be wrong); the equality of persons also *grounds* the standing to blame. This is the explication of the relationship between the standing to blame and the equality of persons that we were looking for: the latter is thought to be the *foundation* of the former. That means that the hypocrite’s denial of the equality of persons also entails the denial of her own standing to blame. She has, so to speak, thrown away the ground on which she stands. The question is: how exactly does the equality of persons ground the standing to blame? Fritz & Miller provide the following detailed and subtle account, crucial to their argument:

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<sup>32</sup> According to them, Wallace’s account is restricted to instances of ‘overt blame’, where someone is openly and publicly being blamed for a moral wrong. But blame can be private as well; you can resent people without actually letting them know. Fritz & Miller want their account to incorporate both forms of blame.

<sup>33</sup> Whether they succeed in shielding themselves from this criticism, we will get to later.

We take it as a plausible assumption that every moral agent has certain fundamental rights and obligations, among them the right to expect certain behavior of other moral agents and the right to blame others for violations of moral norms (when they are blameworthy for doing so). In addition, each moral agent is subject to the moral norms governing blame, and so each moral agent may be deserving of blame for violating a moral obligation. We are on par with each other with respect to these fundamental rights, obligations, and norms; they are distributed and apply to us *equally*. Whatever explains why this is so, then, must explain the parity of their distribution and application. We think that the best candidate for this is simply the fact that we are all *persons*. With respect to our personhood, we are equal, and whatever more fundamental facts explain why some beings are persons (while others are not) will further support this claim, since there must be some features that we all have in common and which explain why we are all persons. Those features ground our personhood, and in turn our shared (i.e. equal) personhood grounds the equal distribution and application of fundamental rights, obligations, and norms.

In having a differential blaming disposition with respect to violations of N, the hypocrite regards herself as though the norms governing blame (with respect to violations of N) do not apply to her equally as they do to everyone else. The hypocrite's differential blaming disposition, therefore, involves at least an implicit rejection of the equality of persons with respect to violations of N, because the equality of persons grounds the equal application of the moral norms governing blame. But the equality of persons also grounds the right to blame others for violations of moral norms, so in rejecting the equal application of the moral norms governing blame, R is rejecting what grounds R's right to blame.<sup>34</sup>

So, their point is: as *moral agents*, we have certain fundamental rights and obligations, with among them the right to blame others. Moreover, we are all subject to the norms governing blame. These rights and obligations are distributed to us equally—we are 'on par' with respect to them. This is what constitutes the equality of persons.

Now the hypocrite's differential blaming disposition entails 'at least an implicit rejection' of the equality of persons, because she considers herself exempt from moral norms that otherwise apply equally. And together with the equality of persons, the hypocrite has thrown her right to blame out the window. In essence, she wants to have it both ways: she wants to take part as moral agent in the system of morality as long as it enables her to blame others, but step out of it once she finds herself on the receiving end. The fact that she is disposed to do this *in conjunction*—to blame others while failing to blame herself—generates a sort of logical inconsistency: she cannot at the same time take part in the moral system (blame

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<sup>34</sup> Fritz & Miller, 9.

others) and *not* take part (fail to blame herself). This constitutes her forfeiture of the standing to blame.

#### 4. The standing to blame as the right to shut up

So, we have seen how Fritz & Miller justify the exception-seeking hypocrite's loss of standing: by violating the equality of persons, she has forfeited the foundation on which she stands. What they do not recognize, however, is what this entails for the other party involved, the 'victim' of hypocrisy. On their account, this 'victim'—the blamee—is enabled to escape blame, despite being blameworthy, by charging his interlocutor with hypocrisy. What Wallace and Fritz & Miller's account of hypocrisy amounts to from the standpoint of the hypocrite's victim is a legitimization of escaping merited blame.<sup>35</sup> Even though the victim is blameworthy, he can escape opprobrium by charging his interlocutor with hypocrisy: 'you cannot blame me, for you are a hypocrite!' That is what the standing to blame is all about: it is meant to flesh out the intuition that some people cannot blame us, even though we are blameworthy, because they lack the right to do so. This intuition is a strong one, and often passionately felt. (Just think of being blamed by the sparerib-eating hypocrite). It is therefore tempting to give it ethical teeth by theoretically fleshing it out.<sup>36</sup> However, we should not lose track of the consequences. Intuitions, however heartfelt, may also be rejected. The legitimization of avoiding merited blame facilitates something that is just as frustrating as being the victim of hypocritical blame: being hushed on account of one's purported hypocrisy. This is what I have called the right to shut up; i.e. the blamee who can evade moral opprobrium by invoking the hypocrite's loss of standing. In this section I will argue that, even though the concept of a 'standing to blame' makes sense as an analysis of our intuitions regarding hypocrisy, we have reasons to reject it, and that we should resist the intuition that it purports to legitimize. I will do so by analyzing the concept from the viewpoint of the hypocrite's victim, instead of focusing on what facts about the blamer either do or do not constitute her loss of standing, like Wallace and Fritz & Miller did.

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<sup>35</sup> Note that my account does not depend on the good or bad consequences of an act of blame ('an act of blame prevented the murder'). Fritz & Miller criticize Bell for failing to observe the difference between the standing to blame, which is about facts about the blamer, and the value of blame, which is about the consequences of blame. Both are logically separate. However, what I say is that what the standing to blame *amounts to* from the standpoint of the victim, is an escape of justified blame. This is the standing to blame in another light, independent of the consequences of blame.

<sup>36</sup> No pun intended.



To analyze the right to shut up, we will consider these examples:

1. Leonardo DiCaprio blames people for using fossil fuels and emitting CO2. The world tells DiCaprio to shut up, because he himself flies a private jet.<sup>37</sup>
2. My roommate blames me for never taking out the trashcans. I tell him to shut up, because he has failed to do it yesterday.
3. When confronted with Nazi violence at the Charlottesville demonstrations, President Trump answered: but what about the ‘alt-left’?, in an attempt to hush the criticism.<sup>38</sup>

Many things can and will be said about these examples, but for now let us just observe that our intuitions about the standing to blame are not as clear-cut as they are in the example of the sparerib-stuffed meat-blamer that we have been using so far. Instead, they are situations in which we may feel that the ‘hypocrites’ (DiCaprio, my roommate, the media) seem to have a point in wanting their audience to engage with the content of their blame, instead of silencing them.<sup>39</sup> However, under the current account of hypocrisy, the accused would first have to regain their standing to blame by engaging in self-blame. DiCaprio would have to publicly atone (and perhaps get rid of his jet); my roommate would have to acknowledge that he has failed to do take out the trashcan yesterday, and the media have to admit that the other side’s violence was bad as well. In the meantime, the blamees go free. I find this questionable. I do not think that the people in these examples lack a standing to blame and have to atone, before they are allowed to blame others—for reasons we will discuss below. What I think we would want to say in these cases is that the hypocrisy might be *wrong*, and that the hypocrites would *do well* to consider their own lapses too, but that this does not mean their audience can *ignore* them. Neither party should be allowed to escape merited blame. Instead of hushing the hypocrite, the accused ought to focus on the content of the blame: the world has to stop using

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<sup>37</sup> One could not open a webpage discussing DiCaprio’s movie about climate change without coming across this as the top comment.

<sup>38</sup> Informally also known as ‘whataboutism’. <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-the-alt-left-2017-8?international=true&r=US&IR=T> checked at 29-11-2017.

<sup>39</sup> This is why Fritz & Miller speak of ‘forfeiting’ the right to blame: the hypocrite might *desire* his victim to listen to him, but one can forfeit something in spite of desiring it. However, my point here is that in the examples above, the hypocrite might be *justified* in desiring his audience to listen.

fossil fuels, I have to start taking out the trashcans, and Trump has to condemn Nazi violence.<sup>40</sup> That is what I will establish in the coming sections.

Nevertheless, the idea of a standing to blame makes intuitive sense, and Wallace and Fritz & Miller make a good case, with which we will have to engage. What we need to establish is how we can hold on to their illuminating and valuable account of why hypocrisy is wrong, but reject the idea that it also allows for an escape of justified blame. I will below defend the idea that under the current interpretation of hypocrisy, the standing to blame cannot function as a right to shut up. I will do so by making a conceptual and a practical point. Conceptually, it turns out that the blamee who shuts up the hypocrite *also* violates the equality of persons. Practically, it is unclear how to establish who is in fact a hypocrite in the relevant sense. Both points will dictate that people need to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame, *even if* she is a hypocrite in the relevant sense.

#### **4.1. The standing to blame backfires**

The first reason for not being allowed to hush a hypocrite is that evading justified blame (where justified blame is being blamed when one is indeed blameworthy) is wrong for the same reasons as hypocritical blame itself. This means that the standing to blame, from the perspective of the hypocrite's victim, backfires: it was meant to justify the intuition that he can silence the hypocrite, but it ends up forcing him to heed the hypocrite's words all the same.

The standing to blame backfires because the principle of the equality of persons grounds *too much*: not just the standing to blame, but also the standing to *be* blamed. As Fritz & Miller say, "each moral agent is subject to the moral norms governing blame, and so each moral agent may be deserving of blame for violating a moral obligation."<sup>41</sup> To blame is to subscribe to the norms governing that blame; i.e. the blamer can only blame another person for a violation of a norm that the blamer actually endorses.<sup>42</sup> This is what makes hypocrisy morally problematic: by blaming another the hypocrite shows that she endorses the relevant norm (she has to, otherwise she would not be *blaming* in any sense of the word), while

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<sup>40</sup> What 'engaging with the content of blame' means exactly can be interpreted differently according to what the reader finds the most plausible rendering of what blame's *aim* is. I am attracted to the view that to blame is always to *demand* something (hence my examples here), but my account does not depend on a specific interpretation. For the demand-view, see: Macnamara, Coleen., 'Taking Demands Out of Blame', 141-161.

<sup>41</sup> Fritz & Miller, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Sher, *In Praise of Blame*, 124.

simultaneously failing to apply it to herself. However, we can just as easily turn this around and apply it to the case of *deserving* blame: to seriously endorse a moral norm is to be prohibited from avoiding deserved blame (i.e. to be blamed when one agrees to being blameworthy for violating that same norm<sup>43</sup>) by pointing to similar wrongdoings by the blamer ('look who is talking'). Under the principle of the equality of persons, the person deserving blame is not allowed to endorse the norm while evading the blame.

Of course, violating the equality of persons is not *just* about evading blame when one is blameworthy: for a proper violation one has to simultaneously blame another person for similar wrongdoings.<sup>44</sup> But this is precisely what the blamee does by charging his interlocutor with hypocrisy: blaming the hypocrite for having engaged in similar wrongdoings.<sup>45</sup> To elaborate, let us pick the DiCaprio-example and, for simplicity, reduce 'the people' to one person; say, Frank. We end up with two people being blameworthy for the same offense: emitting CO<sub>2</sub>. Both DiCaprio and Frank are blameworthy: both are 'deserving of blame for violating a moral obligation', under the 'norms governing blame', 'distributed equally' to both. However, as it stands, Frank can invoke DiCaprio's standing to blame, and deny DiCaprio the right to blame him as long as DiCaprio fails to blame himself. Frank frees himself of deserved blame, leaving only one person with moral opprobrium—where two were blameworthy. What this amounts to from the standpoint of Frank, is wanting to have it both ways, in a similar vein as the hypocrite: he wants to bring morality to bear on DiCaprio for being a hypocrite, i.e. for having committed the same wrongs, but also avoid having to take responsibility for his own faults, even though that is what the equality of persons requires: Frank is deserving of blame if he is blameworthy for violating a moral obligation, in the same way as DiCaprio. If he avoids the blame that he deserves, but also wants to charge DiCaprio with hypocrisy, he is violating the equality of persons in just the same way as the hypocrite. Invoking the standing to blame backfires.

Here the point might be pressed that Frank is not asserting that he is not *blameworthy* for his actions, but only that DiCaprio cannot be the one to blame him. Frank might actually already blame himself. This is unlike the hypocrite in Wallace and Fritz & Miller's account,

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<sup>43</sup> We will later discuss what it means for the parties to *disagree* about being blameworthy. For now we assume that the hypocrite's victim holds that he may be blameworthy, but that the hypocrite cannot blame him.

<sup>44</sup> Fritz & Miller, 6.

<sup>45</sup> We might think that the victim is not actually *blaming* the hypocrite for engaging in similar wrongdoings, but merely making a *logical* point: 'you have done the same thing'. This may partly depend on the reader's desired account of blame, but it cannot be *just* a logical point: for the criticism to have moral import at all, it must have some moral content as well (indignation about the hypocrisy, for example). This is enough, as we will see below.

who *fails* to engage in self-blame. That seems to be a much stronger denial of the equality of persons: for similar actions, DiCaprio blames Frank, but not himself. In the case of evading justified blame, Frank ‘only’ denies DiCaprio’s right to point out his wrongs. Frank might say: ‘I do know that I have committed a moral wrong, but your words about it do not carry any weight, because you lack the standing to blame me. I will atone for my sins, but not because you told me.’

However, even if this statement is theoretically open to Frank, it only works because it gives a distorted interpretation of our blaming practices. If Frank already knows he is acting wrongly and tries to better his life, DiCaprio’s blame would simply miss the mark. Frank would not need to deny him the right to blame; he could simply defuse his accusation. He could say: ‘you do not need to blame me, I know I have done wrong and try to better my life. Please do observe that as it stands, you are a hypocrite because you have committed the same wrong, and you will have to blame yourself and better your life, too.’ There is no need for a detour via the standing to blame. And if, on the other hand, Frank earnestly believes he is *not blameworthy*, he would also have no need to deny DiCaprio the right to blame him, but could just engage with the accusation itself and oppose its content. He would not say: ‘who are you to blame me?’ but: ‘I do not drive a car or eat meat, so my carbon footprint is already quite low’—or something of the sorts. This leaves us with only one reason for the detour via the standing to blame: an attempt to *evade* justified blame. However, as we have seen above, this route is not open to Frank. Evading justified blame by charging DiCaprio with hypocrisy is rendered ‘impossible’ because it violates the equality of persons, in the same way as hypocrisy does. Frank cannot avoid the blame that he deserves by employing the concept of the standing to blame.

So, we end up in the awkward situation in which, *even though* DiCaprio’s status as a hypocrite in the relevant sense forfeits his right to blame (in a sense he has rendered it ‘impossible’ for himself to blame), Frank nevertheless has to take the content of his blame to heart. Frank can still blame DiCaprio for being a hypocrite, i.e. for only selectively applying morality by failing to blame himself, for being unfair, but Frank cannot therefore *ignore* what DiCaprio says. If he does (in fact he cannot), he is guilty of the same offense as DiCaprio: simultaneously denying DiCaprio the right to blame him from within the moral system, but stepping out of it once he has to draw conclusions about his own behavior. Frank cannot invoke the equality of persons to deny DiCaprio the right to blame him without having it

backfire. Under this interpretation, *neither* party is allowed to escape blame, whether it be self-blame or someone else's.<sup>46</sup>

## 5. Shutting up the hypocrite: practical problems

The second reason for nevertheless having to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame is the difficulty in establishing who is *in fact* a hypocrite on Wallace's and Fritz & Miller's account. Unlike the point in the previous section, this is not a purely *conceptual* but a *practical* issue, which comes to the fore if we think about the way in which the hypocrite's victim might invoke the hypocrite's standing to blame.<sup>47</sup> I will argue that even if someone *is* a hypocrite in the relevant sense, the blamee will have no sure way to establish this, and will therefore have to engage with the content of her blame anyway. I will argue for this on three grounds. First, it is unclear how general or specific the norm-violation needs to be. This means we do not know whether people have in fact violated the same norm. Secondly, even if we somehow establish that both have violated the same norm, Wallace and Fritz & Miller cannot deal with different magnitudes of norm-violations. This means that even very minor offenders will lose the standing to blame wholesale—an implausible situation. Thirdly, I will argue that the hypocrite needs to *agree* that she is violating the same norm, before she can be denied the right to blame. This cannot be established unless the hypocrite admits as much.

Until now, we joined Wallace and Fritz & Miller in assuming that the hypocrite's exception-making was indeed unjustified. In the section above, we have seen that even if this is the case, the blamee will still have to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame, because invoking the standing to blame to shut up the hypocrite backfires. In this section, however, we will assume that the unjustifiedness of the exception-making has yet to be established. We stay close to everyday morality by imagining a situation in which we are blamed by someone else, and want to charge her with hypocrisy on account of her

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<sup>46</sup> It has been pointed out to me that I seem to commit myself to some strong form of agent-independent truth of the content of moral blame, because I disconnect the content of blame from the utterer of blame. This is not the case. I do not say that the blamee has to listen to the hypocrite *because* the content of her accusation is, in some sense, objectively true, despite her lack of standing. I am merely arguing that the blamee cannot invoke the hypocrite's lack of standing, construed as a violation of the equality of persons, to shut up the hypocrite without having it backfire. The blamee cannot ignore the blame's content, independent of the truth or falsity of that content.

<sup>47</sup> Because the issues discussed in this section are not wholly epistemic, I have chosen the broader concept of 'practical' problems. The difficulties in establishing hypocrisy lie both with the account itself and the blamee's way of knowing whether his interlocutor is a hypocrite.

unjustifiably exempting herself from the same norm, without this already being, in some objective sense, 'the case'. We still need to make the charge of hypocrisy stick; we need to provide reasons in order to silence the hypocrite. We will see that this is nigh impossible.

The assumption that the hypocrite's exception-making is unjustified was unproblematic for Wallace and Fritz & Miller to the extent that it helped them to determine what is morally wrong with hypocrisy: 'if we assume both parties have violated the same norm, what is it that makes the hypocrite's blame morally problematic?' Their answer, as we know by now: 'a violation of the equality of persons'. However, it was meant to justify not just what is morally problematic about hypocrisy, but also why that constitutes a loss of the standing to blame. And there the assumption becomes dubious, because as we have seen, the standing to blame essentially involves a second party, and their account is insufficient for this person to deny someone the right to blame him. From the blamee's viewpoint, an appeal to the hypocrite's loss of standing amounts to shutting her up. So what we want to know is: how can the blamee establish that the hypocrite's purported exception-making is in fact unjustified? That is, how can the blamee establish that he is in fact dealing with a hypocrite in the relevant sense, so that he can justifiably shut her up? Here, Wallace and Fritz & Miller's assumption gets in the way: to say that the hypocrite must have unjustifiably exempted herself is to beg the question: we want to know how the blamee can establish this. Seen from this perspective, the current account of hypocrisy runs into all sorts of trouble.

### ***5.1. Specificity of the norm***

One of those problems is the specificity of the norm. Fritz & Miller speak of a violation of the 'same norm', but it is unclear what this entails exactly. Say that I have slapped a child, and you have cheated on your partner. I blame you for cheating, and you answer: 'Both of us have done harm. You slapped a kid, I cheated on my wife. You cannot blame me for a norm-violation you have committed yourself. You hypocrite'. I might object that my action falls under a different norm altogether, but on what grounds? I can hardly deny that I have done harm as well. In this way, someone can always think of a very general norm that covers both our actions, and in this way deny us the standing to blame. Fritz & Miller's 'violation of the *same* norm' was probably meant to circumvent this, but in absence of a further specification of how to establish whether both actions are covered by this norm, they provide the hypocrite's victim with unlimited ammunition to shut up the hypocrite. 'You should not have cheated on your tax form.' 'You cannot blame me, for you have stolen candy. Hypocrite.'

In general, we might say there is an underappreciated difficulty in identifying instances of hypocrisy. Because we have no agreed upon standards for assessing whether two act tokens in fact fall under the same act-type, determining whether an act counts towards hypocrisy is far from straightforward. By sticking to the simple ‘acts have to violate a similar norm’, Fritz & Miller give us no help in handling this problem.

## 5.2. *Magnitude of norm-violation*

And even if both parties agree that their actions are relevantly similar, the magnitude of their norm-violation might differ. So far, we have either left out the magnitude of the norm-violation or assumed that it was equally significant. But we do not have to. It is probably never indisputably the case in any actual situation. Suppose I have never taken out the trashcans in my life, but my roommate has forgotten about it once, yesterday. The day after, he blames me for never doing it, and I answer: ‘you cannot blame me, for you failed to do it as well, yesterday. You hypocrite.’ Under the current account of hypocrisy, my roommate would have to blame himself *first* to regain the standing to blame, answering something like: ‘you are right, I failed to do it as well, sorry for that.’ Only after admitting his own fault can he start expressing his indignation about my much more severe norm-violation. This is a consequence that both Wallace and Fritz & Miller must accept, although Wallace seems a bit hesitant about having waived the right to blame wholesale in this way. He writes:

Consider next the different situation in which we find ourselves blaming others for their serious moral failings, despite the fact that our own behavior is in lesser ways not beyond reproach. Since nobody is morally perfect, this is presumably the generic situation that all moral critics find themselves in, to one degree or another. Even here, I think, we can see the commitment at work that figures in my analysis of hypocritical moral address. It is not that you lose your entitlement to resent someone who has wronged you unless you first identify and apologize for all of your own less serious moral faults and failings. But there is something unseemly about resentment and indignation of others if they do not go together with a willingness to acknowledge publicly your own moral shortcomings and to make amends for them, to the extent it is possible for you to do so.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Wallace, 336. Note that Wallace for this example has let go of the assumption that the norm-breaking is equally significant, and also of the assumption that the participants are in fact breaking the same norm. That might explain why Wallace is hesitant about explicitly drawing the conclusion that this person has waived the right to blame: it would mean that barely anyone ever would have the requisite standing. However, on Fritz & Miller’s interpretation, there is no grey area: either the ‘something unseemly’ is a violation of the equality of persons which entails a loss of standing, or the unseemliness comes from something else, which might be something morally problematic but does not entail a loss of standing.

We might agree with Wallace that there is ‘something unseemly’ about this situation. But as Fritz & Miller have shown us, if what is unseemly about this situation is the violation of the equality of persons—and that is what Wallace is on to—then the hypocrite failure to blame herself has forfeited her right to blame, for she has renounced the ground on which she stands.

The question is: is my roommate’s failure to blame himself a case of unjustified exception-making, if his norm-breaking is so much less severe? Fritz & Miller cannot help us, because they give us no tools to establish this. However, I find this deeply disingenuous towards my roommate: he should not have to blame himself for similar, but relatively minor, mistakes before he is allowed to blame me. He could be excused for saying: ‘my violation of the same norm pales in comparison with yours. I refuse to blame myself first in order to blame you.’ The reason the current account of hypocrisy forces him to, is that the equality of persons cannot be violated in degrees; one either violates it or not. How severe the case of norm-breaking is does not play a role. As long as the same norm is broken, one forfeits the standing to blame unless one engages in self-blame. However, this leaves us with some pretty implausible cases: if my roommate has failed to take out the trash cans one year ago (or two years, twenty years) without blaming himself in the meantime, he would still be violating the equality of persons.

Fritz & Miller anticipated this critique and try to immunize their account from it. As we have seen, according to them, what violates the equality of persons is the *disposition* to blame differentially. The fact that my roommate has failed to take out the trashcans twenty years ago is not in itself a violation of the equality of persons. However, if he failed to blame himself then and is still *disposed* to blame others (me) but not himself, this differential blaming disposition forfeits his right to blame. The fact that he failed to take out the trash cans twenty years ago might merely give us a reason to *believe* that he is a hypocrite, but it is the disposition that makes him one. Although an interesting point, it does not help us much further in our present predicament: the conclusion would still be that my roommate has to blame himself for failing to take out the trashcans, to shed his differential blaming disposition and therefore regain the standing to blame me. This, however, leaves us in a frustrating and impractical situation: the hypocrite would always be losing the standing to blame wholesale, even if she has only committed a very minor norm-violation. Of course, we might still consider her lack of self-blame to be morally problematic, but we would not say that we can silence her for it (i.e., ignore the content of her blame and go free ourselves).



The magnitude-problem emerges even more viciously in the abovementioned example of President Trump. When confronted with Nazi violence at the Charlottesville demonstrations, Trump answered: but what about the ‘alt-left’?, in an attempt to hush the criticism. We can interpret that example as a sort of ‘third party’ hypocrisy-charge: Trump, who himself is (I presume) not involved in Nazi practices, determines from a third party-viewpoint which people have the standing to blame Nazis, and who do not. He contends that the media he is targeting do not, for they blame Nazis without blaming the ‘alt-left’. He is, in essence, accusing them of what Fritz & Miller call ‘inconsistence blame’: a disposition to blame A but not B, even though both are blameworthy, e.g. the mother who is disposed to blame one son for wrongdoing, but not the other. According to Fritz & Miller, the inconsistent blamer has in this way violated the equality of persons just like the exception-seeking hypocrite, and has therefore lost the standing to blame.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the media can be accused of rejecting the impartiality of morality by failing to blame the ‘alt-left’. It is not at all clear what Trump meant by the ‘alt-left’, or what he thinks they did wrong exactly, but for the argument from the standing to blame to work, it is enough that they did *something* similarly wrong.<sup>50</sup> Here we see how the standing to blame in its current construal overshoots: it does not matter if the media consider one party’s violence a worse norm-violation than the other party’s, for the magnitude of norm-violation does not matter—and neither does the ideology from which the norm-violation originates. The media are not free to say, for example, ‘*maybe* the ‘alt-left’ did something wrong as well, and *maybe* we are somehow wrong by not blaming them too, but today, right now, we are blaming Nazi practices, and we want you, President Trump, to condemn those as well’.<sup>51</sup> Instead, on the current account, they have lost the standing to blame wholesale, and can only regain it by blaming the other side too—whatever the magnitude of *their* norm-violation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Fritz & Miller, 15.

<sup>50</sup> As Trump said: “But what about the alt-left, that came charging at—as you say—the alt-right. Do they have any *semblance* of guilt? What about the fact that they came charging with clubs in their hands, swinging clubs; do they have any problem?” from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-the-alt-left-2017-8?international=true&r=US&IR=T> checked at 29-11-2017.

<sup>51</sup> This is a variation on Patrick Todd’s terrorist-argument in ‘A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame’, 23.

<sup>52</sup> The frustrating and permanent pseudo-debate that this generates I will discuss in section 6, ‘why reject the intuition of a ‘right’ to blame?’.

### 5.3. *The hypocrite has to agree about having violated the same norm*

The third reason for having to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame emerges from considering in more detail the situation in which the blamee finds himself if he wants to charge his interlocutor with hypocrisy. The crucial thing for him to establish is that the hypocrite's lack of self-blame is in fact an instance of unjustified exception-making. However, as said above, we have let go of the assumption that the hypocrite's exception-making is somehow, 'in fact', already unjustified. So the blamee finds himself being blamed by someone he considers to be a hypocrite, and he wants to provide a reason for his belief that this person's lack of self-blame makes her a hypocrite and causes her to lose standing. Stereotypically and most interestingly for the current account of hypocrisy, he would say: 'you have done the same!' ('*tu quoque!*'), 'and you fail to blame yourself for the same deed. You are therefore a hypocrite and lack the standing to blame me for this mistake'. But would this be enough for him to silence the hypocrite? For Wallace and Fritz & Miller, working under the assumption that the hypocrite's exception-making is already indeed unjustified, it would be. However, I will argue that it is not, because for the hypocrite's lack of self-blame to be an instance of unjustified exception-making, she would first *have to agree* that she has in fact violated the same norm. That is to say, hypocrisy cannot be established one-sided, and the hypocrite therefore cannot be shut up just by exclaiming 'you too'. This difficulty in establishing hypocrisy will be my final reason for having to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame, instead of being able to shut her up. It will also lead us naturally into the next section. Because hypocrisy cannot be established one-sided, and there is room for the hypocrite to disagree, a debate will always be required about whether the hypocrite in fact had the standing to utter her blame. This, I will argue, is a reason to reject the standing to blame as currently construed, because it obscures the *actual* moral debate. But that is for the next section.

A great deal of the strength of Wallace and Fritz & Miller's account of hypocrisy derives from the assumption that the hypocrite's exception-making is indeed unjustified. That assumption renders the hypocrite's failure to engage in self-blame while simultaneously blaming other people vicious through-and-through: for similar actions, the hypocrite blames others but not herself. However, this feeling of viciousness vanishes if the hypocrite *disagrees* about her actions in fact being relevantly similar: if the hypocrite would consciously hold instead that her actions fall in a different category altogether, her lack of self-blame would not automatically be a violation of the equality of persons anymore, or so I contend. If the

hypocrite earnestly believes she is not guilty of a violation of the relevant norm and she does not blame herself for that reason, that can hardly be considered a disposition to blame differentially. She must consider both actions to fall under the same norm while simultaneously failing to engage in self-blame—by ignoring her own faults, or by fabricating exceptions that she knows to be unjustified. This is the sort of conscious (self-)deception that makes hypocrisy such a nasty vice.

Fritz & Miller disagree. They hold that the hypocrite does not need to agree that she is violating the equality of persons for the blamee to be able to shut her up. The hypocrite's lack of self-blame may violate the equality of persons even if she does not intend to. The hypocrite's differential blaming disposition constitutes 'at least an *implicit* rejection' of the equality of persons, i.e. the hypocrite can unknowingly violate the equality of persons 'in practice'. She does not have to agree that this is what she is doing. Wallace concurs when he says that his account also holds for the perfectly sincere hypocrite who is blind to, or forgetful about, her own moral lapses: the hypocrite needs not agree that she is attaching more importance to her own interests to be shielded from moral opprobrium (i.e., violating the equality of persons by failing to blame herself) to be *in fact* doing this.<sup>53</sup> That means that the difference between a conscious deceiver and a sincere hypocrite is one of degree, not of kind. The hypocrite who consciously blames someone for something she *agrees* she has done as well is simply committing a worse moral offense than someone who has forgotten about her own norm-violations she is now blaming others for—but the latter would still be a hypocrite.<sup>54</sup> Both can be hushed simply by pointing out their similar offenses.

However, I think the hypocrite's agreement is crucial for the blamee to be able to shut her up. To see this, we first need to distinguish between two things the hypocrite can agree with. On the one hand, she can agree about violating the equality of persons. Wallace and Fritz & Miller hold that the hypocrite does not consciously need to be doing this in order for her to be in fact violating the equality of persons. A dumb or unreflective person could also do it. I agree on a general level; I can violate a moral norm without knowing or intending it. I can kill someone with my car without feeling it. I can perpetuate a lie without intending to. I can set a whole neighborhood ablaze by forgetting to blow out the candles before going on holiday. On the other hand, however, we have the question whether the hypocrite agrees about

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<sup>53</sup> Wallace, 315, 328 (footnote 36), 333.

<sup>54</sup> Although we might of course wonder in what way that offense would be 'worse': what makes hypocrisy wrong is a violation of the equality of persons, which cannot be done in degrees. But I will not pursue this point here.

her action being relevantly similar to the one she blames her victim for. About this, Wallace and Fritz & Miller are mute, but we can draw out the importance of agreement by further analyzing the idea of a ‘perfectly sincere hypocrite’. When shut up by the blamee, the response of the sincere hypocrite would be crucial. If her similar wrongdoings were pointed out to her (*‘tu quoque!’*) and she would respond with recognition and shame, this means that she always already agreed that her actions violated the same norm—she just forgot about them, or was blind to them. Her blame would indeed have been uttered standingless. If, however, she would argue that she had a good reason for her actions, or that she disagrees about her actions being relevantly similar, would her lack of self-blame nevertheless already be a violation of the equality of persons, and cause her to lose the standing to blame? Can the blamee simply point to the hypocrite’s past actions and say: ‘look, I do not care whether you agree, *I* consider your actions to be a violation of the same norm, and therefore, your lack of self-blame causes you to lose standing’?

The case of the hypocrite is special in the sense that normally, a person being blamed does not have to agree that he has done something wrong for the blame to stick. Even if the blamee disagrees about being blameworthy, we can still blame him if we believe he has indeed done wrong. We can imagine the following statement by the blamer: ‘I do not care whether you agree about having done something wrong, *I* consider your actions to be wrong, and I think you should too.’ However, in the case of hypocrisy, the hypocrite is reproached not *just* for her past actions but for her *lack of self-blame* about those past actions, and denied standing on account of this lack of self-blame. But if the hypocrite earnestly considers her actions to be such that she does not have to blame herself for them, how could we nevertheless deny her right to blame us until she does? The equivalent to the above statement would sound terribly off: ‘I do not care whether you agree about having committed a similar wrongdoing, *I* think you have, and until you blame yourself for your actions, you cannot blame me for mine.’ This would be a free ticket for indefinite exemption from moral opprobrium.<sup>55</sup>

If we want to avoid that situation, the hypocrite’s agreement about having violated the same norm is crucial for the blamee to be able to shut up the hypocrite. You might want to say that what is needed for the charge of hypocrisy to stick is that the hypocrite has *in fact* done some similar wrong. But this is precisely what is at stake when someone is charged with hypocrisy. Is flying a private jet relevantly similar to cutting Amazonian trees? Is driving a

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<sup>55</sup> And indeed, this seems to be how the charge of hypocrisy is often used in everyday morality.

car? Is failing to take out the trash cans *once* relevantly similar to *never* doing it? As we have seen above, Wallace and Fritz & Miller's account of hypocrisy does not help us to establish this. DiCaprio might disagree about being a hypocrite and say: I do not agree about my actions being a violation of the same norm, for I have a good reason for flying my jet. It helps me spread the story of climate change, thereby hopefully inspiring people to change their lifestyle. However, without positing the hypocrite's agreement as a condition for being able to silence the hypocrite, DiCaprio could still be silenced one-sided by someone who drives a gas-guzzling SUV just because he likes it. I would be inclined to that DiCaprio does not have to blame himself for flying a jet before he has the standing to criticize others, because his blame serves a good purpose.<sup>56</sup> However, Fritz & Miller ask us to leave the *consequences* of blame out of the picture, for the standing to blame is solely determined by facts about the blamer.<sup>57</sup> So the SUV-driver might say to DiCaprio: 'look, you cannot blame me, for you are guilty of violating the same norm', and happily continue driving his SUV. This cannot be right.

So the hypocrite's agreement about having violated the same norm is crucial for the blamee to be able to shut up the hypocrite. This suggests a subtly different—but as I see it, more accurate—account of the exception-seeking hypocrite. On this account, the exception-seeking consists of the hypocrite's denial that her action falls under the relevant norm. Whether this is unjustified, and therefore a violation of the equality of persons, is up for debate. She might or might not be right, but her lack of self-blame does not automatically already entail a violation of the equality of persons (and therefore a loss of standing): she does not necessarily agree that her action falls under the relevant norm while simultaneously blaming another person for violating that same norm—without blaming herself. She *might*, of course, and I would agree that this differential blaming disposition of 'wanting to have your cake and eat it' constitutes a violation of the equality of persons, and therefore a loss of the standing to blame in Fritz & Miller's sense. However, the blamee cannot establish this simply by pointing out similar actions and go free.

This creates a difficulty for denying someone the standing to blame using a charge of hypocrisy. As we know, moral norms are not such that we can simply, from a neutral standpoint, establish whether the hypocrite's own actions in fact constitute a violation of the

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<sup>56</sup> You might think it does not serve a good purpose, but the point is: under the current account, DiCaprio can be silenced before the reasons for or consequences of his blame are even considered at all.

<sup>57</sup> Fritz & Miller, 11. "The consequences of blame are altogether irrelevant to whether one has the standing to blame, as the former concerns value, while the latter concerns rights. So the fact that an instance of blame is valuable does not prevent hypocrisy from undermining one's standing to blame."

relevant norm, without there being any room left for the hypocrite to disagree ('I disagree about flying a private jet being relevantly similar to cutting Amazonian trees'). But, as we have seen above, to be able to silence the hypocrite it is crucial for her to simultaneously consider her action a violation of the relevant norm *and* fail to engage in self-blame. However, unless one is committed to an overly objectivistic account of morality, the blamee is unable to establish that the hypocrite's lack of self-blame is in fact vicious in this way. The blamee cannot know whether 1. the hypocrite considers herself excused while agreeing that her actions fall under the relevant norm, 2. disagrees that her actions fall under the relevant norm or 3. is simply mistaken about whether her actions violate the relevant norm. In absence of this knowledge, it would be inappropriate to deny her the right to blame. Instead, the blamee should engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame. Of course, what makes hypocritical blame so frustrating is that we often suspect people to know *very well* that they have violated the same norm. That is what the exception-seeking is all about. However, in absence of a sure way to establish this, we would do well to engage with the content of their blame anyway.

It might be objected that difficulty in establishing whether someone has in fact done wrong in the relevant sense cannot be, as such, a reason for not denying someone the right to blame. After all, we engage in uncertain blame all the time. If a mother blames her daughter for staining her new clothes, she probably has a reasonable suspicion that the daughter is in fact blameworthy. However, it might turn out to have been the neighbor kid who threw dirt. Or the dog jumped her. Should these possibilities count against the appropriateness of the mother's blame? Well, at the very least, we might say that it is *admirable* for the mother to withhold blame until she is absolutely sure that it was the daughter's fault. If, however, the mother had seen herself that the daughter's reckless actions caused the stains, or the daughter admitted as much, these difficulties would disappear. But in the case of hypocrisy, the equivalent of 'seeing yourself' does not exist. We can never know beyond any doubt whether someone is in fact a hypocrite in the relevant sense, because for the hypocrite's blame to constitute a violation of the equality of persons, it has to go together with a recognition that her own action falls under the relevant norm as well. This we cannot establish merely by pointing to the hypocrite's action (*'tu quoque!'*), unlike the mother who sees her daughter staining her own clothes. Therefore, refraining from denying someone the right to blame by yelling 'hypocrisy!' is not just admirable; it is inescapable.

To summarize: what Wallace and Fritz & Miller's account of hypocrisy and the loss of the standing to blame amounts to from the viewpoint of the blamee, is a legitimization of avoiding merited blame: the blamee is allowed to shut up the hypocrite by charging her with (exception-seeking) hypocrisy ('you too!'). This is an uneasy consequence that follows from the standing to blame. However, we have seen that, if the blamee wants to capitalize on this consequence, he runs into all sorts of problems. It is exceedingly difficult for him to establish that he is in fact dealing with a hypocrite in the relevant sense, due to possible differences in norm-violation, in the magnitude of norm-violation, and due to the fact that the hypocrite has to agree before she can be hushed. The blamee cannot simply exclaim 'you too!' and go free until the hypocrite blames herself. This means that, even if the hypocrite has lost standing, her victim will still have to engage with the content of her blame. This can be considered a rejection of the standing to blame as currently construed, for the standing to blame was meant to justify the intuition that some people cannot blame us even if we are blameworthy—but what, if anything, is left of that justification if we have to engage with their blame anyway?

## **6. Why reject the intuition of a 'right' to blame?**

You may wonder: why go to such lengths to establish that the victim of hypocrisy must nevertheless engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame? Is not the violation of the equality of persons a great interpretation of the idea that for some people, it is deeply inappropriate to blame us—'who are *they* to say this?!' Let me emphasize that I can relate to the feeling of frustration when being blamed by a hypocrite. The discomfort of openly getting your wrongs pointed out renders a counterattack tempting. However, by interpreting the hypocrite's standing to blame from the perspective of the blamee, I have shown how the standing to blame facilitates something that might even be more frustrating than hypocritical blame: someone dodging your justified blame by charging you with hypocrisy. What we would want to say is not that the blamee can ignore the hypocrite's blame until she blames herself as well, but that the blamee has to take the blame's content to heart *even if* the blamer is a hypocrite. If both are blameworthy, neither should be able to escape blame.

But why is this important? The answer I wish to suggest is that blame is crucial for a functioning moral system. It might even be among the most fundamental constituting

elements of it.<sup>58</sup> We need only consider the situation in which a loved one gets murdered for no reason in front of our eyes (gruesome, I admit). What would morality amount to if this did not summon some kind of blaming response in us? If we would grieve about our loss, but have no inclination to blame the murderer? If norm violations like these did not trigger blaming responses in us, would we even recognize that as a moral system at all? Blame, and maybe praise, seem to be the currency of the moral economy: if you do well, the system shields you from moral opprobrium (and maybe rewards you with praise), but if you break norms, you get paid what you are due. The strong emotions that go together with moral opprobrium make sure that people are motivated to refrain from breaking norms. That is why we want to avoid excluding people from the blame-game: exclude too many, and the system collapses.

This is a concern Wallace shares, and one of the reasons he finds hypocritical blame so exceptionally problematic: it erodes the moral system *from within*. The hypocrite first endorses the moral norms she brings to bear on her victim, only to subsequently undermine the moral system she makes use of by failing to apply the same norms to herself. For Wallace, this erosion from within is what sets apart hypocritical blame from other violations of the equality of persons, such as racism and sexism. Even though we have an interest in upholding the practices of blame, because they are constitutive of a functioning moral system and keep people in line with moral norms, *hypocritical* blame should be rejected out of hand.<sup>59</sup>

However, as argued in section 4.1, we might say that the person evading justified blame by capitalizing on this rejection does exactly the same: rejecting the hypocrite's right to blame from within the moral system but stepping out of it once he has to draw conclusions about himself. Moreover, we have seen that it is difficult to establish whether one's interlocutor is in fact a hypocrite in the relevant sense, and in absence of this knowledge, one would be unjustified in shutting up the hypocrite to evade blame. Therefore, we might wonder if not Wallace's justification of the hypocrite's loss of standing itself undermines the moral system: it allows for blameworthy people to avoid their merited blame. On my account, on the other hand, *neither* person is allowed to escape blame. The blamee needs to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame, and may respond: 'you have done a similar wrong, so I am not the only one who has to atone'.

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<sup>58</sup> Even being considered, for example, *prior* to free will. See Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', in: John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza., *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*, 45-66.

<sup>59</sup> Wallace, 335.



Keeping people in the blame-game in this way is not just a negative undertaking, in the sense of preventing the moral system from collapsing. Not allowing for escaping blame also facilitates proper moral *improvement*. In Wallace and Fritz & Miller's universe, it is morally preferable for the hypocrite *not* to call someone to account with respect to moral norms. That presents us with a situation in which *no* standards are better than *imperfect* standards: the hypocrite did not stick by them in the first place, and the blamee cannot be bothered to as long as the hypocrite does not. Awaiting the answer to who has standing and who has not, the status quo becomes morally preferable. We saw this clearly in the Trump-example above: as long as the media do not blame everyone involved, they had better not blame at all. Better not to condemn Nazi violence than to condemn it without standing. If we adopt my critique, we force *both* parties to engage with each other's blame in possible instances of hypocrisy. This opens up the possibility of actual moral improvement, because both the hypocrite and her victim will have to reflect on their moral lapses. Both might still disagree that they have done something wrong, of course, but this means that they have at least dealt with the blame's content, instead of denying having to consider it *at all*.

There is another problem with the standing to blame considered from the perspective of the blamee: it entails a shift in the moral debate towards the question of whether or not the hypocrite has got the right to engage in blame. This means that the content of the blame—the *actual* moral wrong, which might be much worse than the offense of hypocrisy—fades into the background. Before acknowledging blame, we first need to establish that the blamer actually had the standing to engage in blame. As argued above, this is not easy; it might not even be established at all. This means that as long as standing has not been determined, it stands in the way of moral debate: the discussion will not deal with the moral content of the accusation, but with whether the moral conditions to engage in discussion at all have been satisfied.

This also explains why the accusation of hypocrisy is so pervasive: it allows for moral criticism without sharing basic values, or having to debate those in the first place. This can be beautifully illustrated by an example from Judith Shklar's book *Ordinary Vices*. In her analysis of hypocrisy she discusses different sexual mores, as they are endorsed by the abstinent 'Victorian' and the promiscuous 'liberated'. Shklar holds a view of hypocrisy closer to 'insincerity' and/or 'dishonesty', such as the one partly dismissed by Wallace above, but her account can nevertheless help us see why the shift from content to standing is so

problematic. She shows how the liberated can accuse the Victorian of hypocrisy, because the liberated holds that monogamy cannot be sincere in light of our sexually unrestricted inner lives. The Victorian

may be peculiarly vulnerable to these charges because he also believes in sincerity, and he may well pretend to feelings he cannot summon up. He might, in addition, be self-repressing and complacent. He therefore half agrees with his tormentors, who have done everything to undermine his self-confidence and nothing to show that he has injured or wronged anyone. In response, he will accuse the liberated of unfeeling and joyless promiscuity and of threatening the familial order. The liberated do not care about the latter complaint, so they are not disturbed and may not even answer it. The indirect charge of hypocrisy is the only one that can touch them, for they do insist on the sincerity of their affections, even if they be fleeting, or at the very least claim to be having a very good time. In principle, a funless hedonist and an unfeeling experimenter are hypocritical, at least if they advertise the happy emotional openness of their style of life. Such extremes of sexual attitude are too remote from each other to be touched by direct moral attack; but to insinuate that someone is hypocritical is to collapse his self-image, and that has an effect. That is why the rigid and the liberated can so easily wound without altering one another. Each one feels threatened by sexual opinions that he can neither share nor completely reject.<sup>60</sup>

Shklar shows how in a world rife with fundamental moral disagreement, hypocrisy is the only stick left with which to beat your opponent. This is more glaring on the insincere-interpretation of hypocrisy, but we can still see the same mechanism at work in the exception-seeking case. As you will remember, the insincere form of hypocrisy is about (publicly) making false representations of yourself. As a personal standard of authenticity this is not obviously morally problematic, but when publicly deceiving other people the hypocrite may be violating a norm of honesty. This charge of hypocrisy is also available when no other fundamental values are shared, because the only thing needed for it to work is the hypocrite's endorsement of the sincerity of his views—and very few people would contest this. What we end up with is a discussion about whether someone is a hypocrite, instead of debating whether someone has actually violated a norm: “[the hypocrite's accusers] have done everything to undermine his self-confidence and nothing to show that he has injured or wronged anyone.”

The case of the exception-seeking hypocrite is a bit different, because this hypocrite is charged with *endorsing* the norm which she is berating others for, while failing to apply it to herself. However, having allowed for disagreement on the part of the hypocrite, we can see

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<sup>60</sup> Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 63.

the same mechanism at work: the debate shifts to whether the hypocrite's disagreement is justified, i.e. whether that person has the standing to engage in blame in the first place, instead of debating the moral content of the accusation. Just as in the case of hypocrisy-as-insincerity, this allows for criticism in absence of shared values. That is what we see happening in the DiCaprio-case: people can question whether he has the standing to engage in blame on climate change even if they do not share his values about climate change—or at least, do not want to reflect about the moral import of them. They can shut him up without having to reflect on their own lapses.

We might even fear that this mechanism undermines the proper functioning of a democracy. If there is one place that teems with fundamental value disputes, it is the political arena. If we allow for the intuition of a standing to blame, we run the risk of a permanent pseudo-debate about whether politicians are allowed to engage in their subjects at all. Of course, you might object that the account of hypocrisy under discussion is intended to make sense of hypocritical blame, and politicians do more than just blaming. But it is not hard to rephrase the politician's principal job—preaching values, sketching the future—in blaming-terminology. Political statements that we should do more to save the climate, that marriage is sacred, that tax avoidance should be illegal, might not as such be forms of blame, but can very easily be interpreted as such by the people who do not obey them. That opens up the possibility of hypocrisy-charges on the part of the accused: if the politicians are not irreproachable with respect to these norms, who are they to point out their wrongs? The perpetual search for personal failings by politicians this encourages—in a bid to deny them the right to blame—triggers what Shklar calls a vicious “seesaw of competitive unmaskings and remaskings” in which politics consists of no more than charges and counter-charges of hypocrisy.<sup>61</sup> Our democracy is particularly vulnerable for this vicious seesaw, because

[...]those engaged in governing must assume at the very least two roles, one of pursuing policies and another of edifying the governed in order to legitimize these plans. The more widely shared a political language and other traditions are, the easier this is. There is nevertheless a built-in tension; for the disparity between what is said and what is done remains great, and the better the speaker the larger that distance is likely to be. The gap exists in every association, not only in political units. No one lives up to a collective ideal. This is the fatality on which Machiavelli capitalized, and on which his political

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<sup>61</sup> Shklar, 65.

honesty thrived. And those, of whom there are many, who do not accept the legitimizing norms at all will use hypocrisy as their most telling accusation.<sup>62</sup>

So my critique of the standing to blame as the right to shut up is not just of theoretical significance. All these issues—the importance of blame to uphold our moral system, the tendency to lapse into pseudo-debates on who is a hypocrite, and the subversion of our democracy—show that a commitment to morality itself requires us to reject the intuition of a right to blame—at least as outlined in the case of hypocrisy.

## 7. Conclusion

By considering the standing to blame as the right to shut up from the perspective of the blamee, we have seen how the current account of hypocrisy runs into all sorts of problems. I have argued on two grounds that the victim of hypocritical blame cannot, despite a possible loss of standing on the part of the hypocrite, ignore the blame's content. First, invoking the hypocrite's loss of standing, construed as a violation of the equality of persons, backfires, because an evasion of justified blame *also* violates the equality of persons. Secondly, it turned out that establishing hypocrisy is exceedingly difficult because of possible differences between the hypocrite and her victim in the magnitude of norm-violation, in the specificity of the norm-violation, and because the hypocrite needs to agree that she is in fact violating the same norm. This means that a mere pointing to similar actions by the hypocrite will not do. Together, these arguments establish that the hypocrite's victim has to engage with the content of the hypocrite's blame despite her hypocrisy, which can be considered a rejection of the standing to blame, at least in the case of hypocrisy as laid out here. Finally, I placed the reason for this rejection in a broader perspective by considering the importance of blame to uphold our moral system. By not allowing for a denial of people's right to blame, we open up a possibility for proper moral improvement, and our moral (and political) discussions do not perpetually collapse into pseudo-debates on who can say what.

Here, I would like to stress once more that I realize how (emotionally) difficult it is to put my theory into practice. Several proofreaders have commented that they feel unease about the prospect of not being able to avoid hypocritical blame by invoking the hypocrite's lack of

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<sup>62</sup> Shklar, 76.

standing. I empathize with this unease. What I would like to call to mind, therefore, is that my paper does not exclude the possibility of blaming the hypocrite for hypocrisy, and for the wrong she has committed. I am only excluding the possibility of ignoring her blame's content. The blamee is, however, not required to passively undergo this blame. The blamee might retort: 'I am sorry for my mistake. Are you for yours?', because on my account, *neither* party can avoid merited blame. And this is, I think, nothing to feel uneasy about: unconditionally acknowledging blame you deserve demonstrates outstanding moral character.

### **7.1. Limitations and further reading**

I have shown how the charge of a violation of the equality of persons cannot be used to silence the hypocrite. I focused on this because it is the current position of the literature on hypocrisy and the standing to blame. But in the future, other accounts of the wrongness of hypocrisy and the loss of standing may be proposed, which do not backfire in this way. I have also limited myself to *overt* blame, leaving aside the question of whether *private* blame is problematic in the same way (are you allowed to 'hush' the hypocrite privately, while overtly engaging with her blame?). Also, I have considered the standing to blame in connection to hypocrisy, which leaves open other, non-hypocritical, ways of losing standing. Here, I think the condition of 'non-complicity' looms large: you cannot blame someone for a wrong if you are complicit in causing that wrong. Think, for example, of the resident of Rome who complained about the stinking, growing pile of public waste in the streets, while dumping his own rubbish bag on top.<sup>63</sup> An interesting paper on this is G.A. Cohen's, who reserves a large role for non-complicity in: Cohen, G.A., 'Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can't, Condemn the Terrorists?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 58 (2006) 113-136. There may also be other forms of hypocrisy besides the exception-seeking variant that are morally problematic in such a way that they entail a loss of standing. I have not had the chance to discuss all possible variants; however, I do believe I have refuted the strongest one.<sup>64</sup> For a more general (and lucid) account of hypocrisy, see: Shklar, Judith., *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge 1984) 45-86. In general I think that, whatever the account of hypocrisy, we should be wary of the switch in moral debates from content to standing, for reasons discussed above (i.e., the importance of blame). An interesting further strengthening of this importance

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<sup>63</sup> Taken from <https://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/de-grootste-natie-ter-wereld-is-verworden-tot-een-volk-met-blauwe-vuilniszakjes~a4544191/>, checked on 12-12-2017.

<sup>64</sup> For this kind of exception-seeking triggers such a strong moral response.

of blame, that I have been unable to discuss but propose here as a further reading, is the connection between blame and moral responsibility: being responsible as a form of normative competence instead of having free will, as discussed in Wallace, R. Jay., *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Harvard 1994). For further reading on blame, see Coates, D. Justin and Neal A. Tognazzini., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford 2013).

## **8. Appendix: How to deal with accusations of hypocrisy?**

Theoretically rejecting an intuition unfortunately does not entail an elimination of its practice in daily life. The charge of hypocrisy is and will remain a common escape route to circumvent merited blame. Therefore, building on the topics and arguments that have been discussed above, I will try to construct some rhetorically persuasive answers that can be applied in practice in case one is charged with hypocrisy. I hope this helps avoid being dumbfounded and help to prevent people from escaping your (justified) blame. Because people do not restrict their hypocrisy-charges to the relatively narrow cases of exception-seeking hypocritical blame, I will here discuss a broader range of attacks and possible defenses against them. I have chosen to draw up statements that condense a specific hypocrisy-argument—as a sort of paradigm cases—and how to answer them. Real life is of course much messier, but I believe that the gist of these answers can be weaved together and expanded to deal with more complicated cases as well. Having to be rhetorically persuasive, the answers cannot be too academically delicate, but for their academic justification I either refer to the rest of this paper, or, where necessary, to other papers.

1. You are charged with giving hypocritical *advice*: ‘look who is criticizing me for smoking! You are a smoker yourself.’

I am not criticizing you, I am giving you advice: you should stop smoking, it is bad for your health. Why would I not have the right to give you advice? I am actually in a perfect position for it: as a smoker myself, I know very well why you should stop.

2. You are charged with hypocritical inconsistency / with double standards: ‘you mourn the victims of terrorism in Paris, but not those in Beirut!’

Would you prefer mourning neither, out of consistency? I cannot be obliged to mourn everybody equally. Valuing in general is of its nature a somewhat inconstant activity.<sup>65</sup> You would mourn someone you are closer to more than you would mourn a stranger. Now, whether I am justified in thinking French people are closer to me than Lebanese people is another matter. But inconsistency as such is not enough to establish hypocrisy.

‘You think you are such a climate do-gooder by not eating meat, but you are still flying airplanes. You cannot blame me for harming the environment.’

So according to you, it is better to be perfectly bad than imperfectly good, out of consistency? Better to let two die than save one, if you cannot save both? I am not perfect, but that gives you no right to ignore me.

3. You are charged with unjustified exception-making: ‘you cannot ask me to stop driving my car, while flying a private jet yourself!’”

*You agree about the unjustifiedness of the exception-making:*

You are right, I am not perfect either. However, I am trying. What about you though? You seem to agree that you have done wrong, for otherwise you would have had no reason to try to silence me. What are you going to do about it?

*You disagree about the unjustifiedness of the exception-making:*

For hypocrisy to be undermining in any way, my exception-making needs to be unjustified. It is not. As opposed to you, I have a good reason for breaking the norm: I use my private jet to reach otherwise uninformed people and teach them about climate change. You, on the other hand, drive a SUV because you like it.

4. You are charged with what you consider to be different norms: ‘you cannot be the one to criticize me for lying on my test, you cheated on your wife!’

In order for your charge of hypocrisy to work at all, we would first need to establish that

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<sup>65</sup> Wallace, 327.

lying on a test is sufficiently similar to cheating on your wife. That we are not going to do now, because whatever the outcome, you cannot avoid answering my criticism: your lying on your test.

5. You are charged with what you consider to be different magnitudes of norm-violation: ‘you cannot blame me for lying to you, you have lied to me as well!’

I have lied to you once, yes. But the supposed wrongness of my hypocritical blame pales in comparison to your constant lying. You cannot hide behind my hypocrisy to avoid answering for what you did.

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