

Strategic Hypocrisy and the Standing to Display Blame

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Peter and Laurie are both college students, and unfortunately, they have both cheated on their last midterm exam. Laurie knows that Peter has cheated, though Peter does not know that she knows this. One night, Laurie, Peter, and a few other friends are chatting in the common room, and Laurie confesses that she cheated on her exam. Peter excoriates her, going so far as to suggest that Laurie doesn't belong in college if she can't live up to its rigorous academic standards. Understandably, Laurie responds with equal indignation. She tells Peter that he has *no right* to blame her for cheating, as she knows he too cheated. Peter staunchly denies the claim even as Laurie presents strong testimonial evidence. In the end, the person whose moral reputation diminished the most in the eyes of the others in the common room that night was Peter, not Laurie.

A great deal of interesting recent work in the ethics of blame has attempted to provide a justification for the “No-hypocrisy condition”: for any two agents *R* and *S* and any action or omission *A*, *R* has the standing to blame *S* on account of *A* only if *R*'s blame would not be hypocritical.¹ Less often appreciated, however, is the significance to questions of standing of the fact that the hypocrite is not a single psychological type, that different psychological profiles can manifest hypocrisy.² I argue for sorting hypocrites into two broad types, distinguished by their

¹ Informative recent discussions of this condition can be found in Cohen (2006), Smith (2007), Wallace (2010), Duff (2010), Radzik (2011), King (2015), Fritz and Miller (2015), Todd (2017), Isserow and Klein (2018), and Roadevin (2018).

² Bell (2013) is an important exception as is, perhaps, Wallace (2010).

commitment or lack thereof to the norm with respect to which they are hypocritical: thus, there are ‘committed’ hypocrites and ‘uncommitted’ hypocrites. Almost all of the recent literature on hypocrisy’s effect on the standing to blame focuses on committed hypocrites. This is perhaps not surprising, as these types are distinguished from the uncommitted hypocrites partly by their tendency to genuinely *blame* others; the latter, when he does blame, tends to blame *insincerely* or *falsely*. For this reason, there are good grounds to think that the question of the strategic hypocrite’s standing to *genuinely* blame others—which is the subject of most recent work—is otiose or irrelevant.

Nevertheless, it would be too hasty to conclude from this that there is no interesting question to be asked about the relation between strategic hypocrisy and the standing to blame. The key, I argue, is to understand the insincere blame characteristic of the strategic hypocritical blamer as part of a larger category of what I call *blame displays*: actions or doings that, through various pragmatic and semantic mechanisms, represent the blamer as *genuinely* blaming others. Insincere displays of blame raise some of the same kinds of ethical issue as genuine, outwardly-expressed blame; for this reason, we can cogently talk about a person’s standing to *display blame* concerning others. Hence, despite the important differences between the various types of hypocrite, we need an account of strategic hypocrisy’s effect on the standing to *display blame*. One way to approach this issue is to develop a *general* account of the conditions for possessing the standing to display blame. The second major aim of this paper is to develop such an account and defend it against objections.

The Variety of Hypocrites

In earlier work, I proposed an account of hypocrisy that I called the Commitment Account. According to this view,

Commitment Account of Hypocrisy (CAH): R is hypocritical with respect to norm, good, or ideal N iff R is responsible for failing to respond appropriately to N; R is, without good reason, not disposed to accept blame from others for failing to respond appropriately to N; and either R is committed to N or R communicates commitment to N.

Since the concept of commitment to a moral norm will play a crucial role in everything that follows, I will now unpack the notion in greater detail. My aim here is to sketch a picture of commitment that is substantive but broadly consistent with a number of conceptions of moral commitment. As an initial gloss, R is “committed” to N just in case (a) R endorses N as a moral principle and (b) is to some degree motivated to deliberate and act in accordance with N. Each of these conditions bears further scrutiny. To endorse N as a moral principle is to accept N as possessing the characteristic features of moral principles. Moral norms are commonly taken to command the acceptance of all rational persons; they are understood to be *universal* as well as *impartial* in that they apply *in the same way* to all morally responsible agents under the same generic circumstances; they are taken to be *overriding* in that they have normative precedence over many, if not all, non-moral considerations that bear on the circumstances; and violations of the norms are taken to *warrant certain characteristic responses*, including blame and punitive action. Thus, to endorse a moral norm as such is to judge that the norm possesses these features.³ *Motivation* to deliberate and act in accordance with N involves the disposition to suitably—e.g.,

³ It may be objected that this way of cashing out endorsement is unduly intellectualist: cannot those who lack the concepts of *overridingness* and *universality* endorse moral norms as such? Surely, those who don’t know the meaning of the terms “overridingness” and “universality” can endorse moral norms as such, but I would insist that those who do not at least dispositionally judge that some moral norm is overriding or universal do not endorse that norm as a moral norm. Most college undergraduates do not come into an introduction to ethics course knowing what “overriding” means, but they recognize the *concept* associated with it quite readily.

consistently with the features of overridingness and universality— apply the norm in one’s practical deliberation, and the motivation, commensurate with its normative weight under the circumstances, to act in accordance with *N*. As this account makes clear, *commitment* to moral norms is, to some extent, a matter of degree, and is subject to some vagueness. In particular, to count as committed to the relevant norm, it may not be sufficient to have *some* degree of motivation to act in accordance with norms or be only *somewhat* disposed to use them in deliberation. Exactly what strength of motivation or disposition is required is probably impossible to pin down with precision.

Peter the cheater is also a hypocrite as defined by the CAH: he has violated a norm forbidding cheating; is unjustifiably not disposed to accept blame for cheating, as evidenced by his initial denial of the charge; and he expresses commitment to the norm forbidding cheating by blaming Laurie. However, a crucial question is whether or not Peter is actually *committed* to the norm with respect to which he is hypocritical; whether, in other words, he is a ‘committed’ or ‘uncommitted’ hypocrite. The ‘uncommitted’ hypocrite is a hypocrite who lacks genuine commitment to the norm he violates and expresses commitment to. Since ‘commitment,’ as I have defined it, has two singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, hypocrites of this kind can vary in the nature of their lack of commitment.⁴ Some hypocrites of this type do not endorse the norm as a moral principle and are not motivated to adhere to it. Still other uncommitted hypocrites do not endorse the norm as a moral principle, but are motivated to adhere to it. Call these two kinds of uncommitted hypocrite “non-endorsing uncommitted” hypocrites. Finally, the third type of uncommitted hypocrite, while endorsing the norm as a moral principle, is mostly or entirely unmotivated by it. Call this kind an “endorsing uncommitted” hypocrite.

⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, I am folding in the disposition to use the norm in practical deliberation under the broader motivation requirement.

The first “non-endorsing” uncommitted hypocrite neither endorses the relevant norm as a moral principle, nor is motivated by it. The second kind does not endorse the moral norm as a principle, but *is* motivated to adhere to it. One important kind of hypocrite that falls within either of these categories is the ‘strategic’ hypocrite; the reasons for this label will become clear presently. This sort of hypocrite is the most cynical, since his public avowals of commitment, which sometimes take the form of blaming others, entirely serve his ulterior purposes—typically, a desire to *seem* virtuous in the eyes of others or to exact revenge on the target of blame. Moreover, because the strategic hypocrite does not endorse the relevant norm, he is not able to muster *genuine* blame attitudes in response to perceived violations. And if he chooses to avow his commitment to the norm *by* blaming others overtly, these displays of condemnation are empty and hollow. The only difference between the two types—strategic hypocrites who are motivated to adhere to the norm and those who are not—is that, while the first is not motivated to adhere to the relevant norm and regularly violates it, the second is reliably motivated to adhere to it, and may often comply with it, perhaps because he sees more profit for himself in doing so than in being a frequent offender.

The “committed” hypocrite, by contrast, is committed to the norm with respect to which he is hypocritical. Although clearly lacking in appropriate motivation at the time of his past violation of the norm, he is often enough appropriately motivated to adhere to the norm. (In this respect, he is like many of us: committed, say, to the norm of truth-telling, but occasionally non-compliant and not appropriately motivated). However, for a variety of reasons, this type of hypocrite is not disposed to accept blame from others for his violations. Most importantly, since this hypocrite endorses the norm in question, his blaming of others, like that of endorsing *uncommitted* hypocrites, is typically genuine. This marks a key difference between this type of

hypocrite and the strategic hypocrite. Unlike the latter, the committed hypocrite characteristically musters genuine blame attitudes in response to violations of the norms with respect to which he is hypocritical. Hence, his outwardly expressed blame typically reflects genuine blaming attitudes, and is thus itself genuine.

Strategic Hypocrisy and the Standing to Display Blame

I have argued that there are two types of hypocrite, distinguished by their commitment or lack thereof to the norm with respect to which they are hypocritical; within the uncommitted category, I have distinguished between those hypocrites who endorse the relevant norm and those who do not; and within the category of non-endorsing uncommitted hypocrites, I have highlighted the strategic hypocrite. The characteristic feature of the strategic hypocrite is that he does not experience genuine blame attitudes with respect to violations of the relevant norm; because of this, his expressions of blame are hollow, and they are typically aimed at promoting some self-regarding desire. At this point, the perceptive reader may have noticed an important consequence that follows from my characterization of strategic hypocrisy together with a widely accepted account of blame. According to this account, which we can call the Hostile Attitudes Account (HAA), blaming is constituted by a complex collection of attitudes. Roughly, where *R* and *S* are agents and *A* is an action or omission, *R* blames *S* for *A*-ing if and only if:⁵

- 1) *R* believes *S* is an agent of *A*.
- 2) *R* believes that *S*'s *A*-ing is wrong or bad.
- 3) *R* believes that *S* is blameworthy for *A*-ing.⁶
- 4) *R* experiences negative emotions (indignation, resentment, contempt, guilt) on account of (1), (2), and (3).⁷

⁵ This conception of blame combines cognitive and emotional elements along lines similar to Fritz and Miller (2015), Bell (2013), Scanlon (2008), and Wallace (1994). Unlike Bell, I do not build into my account of blame the requirement that the blame is “overt” or communicated. For an account of blame that emphasizes conative states, see Sher (2006). For a functionalist account, see McKenna (2012).

⁶ This condition can be satisfied if *R* does not believe that *S* is excused or exempted from blame for *A*-ing.

⁷ Some, but not all, of these emotions are examples of what Strawson calls “reactive attitudes.”

Notice that the strategic hypocrite who *appears* to blame others never experiences (1)-(4). Because the strategic hypocrite is unable to mobilize genuine blaming attitudes towards violators of norms with respect to which she is hypocritical, and given that, according to the HAA, blame is constituted by these attitudes, it follows that the strategic hypocrite does not, as such, blame others. What she does when she outwardly condemns others is not *blame*, but *false blame*—a mere pretense of blame. But this naturally raises the question whether we can claim that strategic hypocrisy undermines a person's standing to *blame* others. Since the strategic hypocrite does not, as such, blame others, it would appear that the issue of her standing to blame is otiose. Is there, then, no interesting question to be asked about the strategic hypocrite's entitlement to blame others?

I think the answer is no. The case for this requires that I distinguish among four concepts: *private blame*, *overt blame*, *false blame*, and *displays of blame*. Private blame is exactly what it sounds like: it is the possession of the attitudes enumerated by the HAA, unaccompanied by any outward expression of these attitudes. Overt blame is the expression of these attitudes in verbal or non-verbal ways, where the concept of *expression* at play has the following logical feature: if you *express* attitude *A*, then you possess *A*. It follows from this characterization that only those who privately blame can overtly blame. By contrast, I will define *false blame* as those actions and doings that *falsely represent* the agent as genuinely blaming others, through various semantic and pragmatic mechanisms. Whereas overt blame requires private blame, false blame excludes private blame. Finally, *displays of blame* are those actions and doings that represent the agent as blaming others, through various semantic and pragmatic mechanisms. Both overt and false

blamers produce blame displays; the difference, of course, is that whereas the blame displays of overt blamers involve true representations, those of false blamers involve false ones.

With this distinction in hand, we can cogently ask questions about a person's standing to *display blame*, and the possible effect of strategic hypocrisy on this standing. The question of a person's standing to display blame has ethical significance primarily because of the effects of such displays. In this respect displays of blame, even if false, raise the same ethical issues as overt blame. Our task, then, is to delineate the conditions under which a person has the right to display blame.

According to Patrick Todd (2017), *R* has standing to blame *S* for violations of *N* if and only if *R* is committed to *N*; his gloss on "commitment" is essentially my own. Todd's account seems intended to cover the standing to genuinely blame others, not the standing to display blame. I will presently argue, however, that Todd's account fails to provide a sufficient condition of the standing to display blame *or* the standing to genuinely blame.

Recall that committed hypocrites are, by definition, committed to the norms with respect to which they are hypocritical: they endorse these norms as moral norms; are disposed to use them in practical deliberation; and are motivated to act in accordance with them, at least to some extent. Their problem is not lack of commitment but a failure to apply these norms consistently: for example, some committed hypocrites tend to find specious justification or excuse for their own violations. Yet according to Todd's account, those committed to the norms that condemn the wrongdoing they blame have standing to blame. Thus, Todd's account, construed either as an account of the standing to blame or the standing to display blame, faces the problem that it seems unable to account for committed hypocrites' lack of either kind of standing.

Of course, the conception of commitment Todd and I share is partially stipulative and, in Todd's case, only partly analyzed; it is open to Todd to suggest modifications that would allow his commitment condition to account for committed hypocrites' lack of standing. Thus, in reply to my criticism, Todd might choose to strengthen his commitment requirement, claiming that commitment to a norm requires some degree of compliance with the norm in one's own case along with motivation and endorsement. But committed hypocrites need not exhibit zero compliance to the norm they violate in order for their standing to be jeopardized; in fact, they may exhibit strong compliance and still suffer a loss of standing. Suppose Peter the cheater is a committed hypocrite and has never cheated on an exam *except* on a couple of previous occasions; nevertheless, he fails to acknowledge or make amends for this wrongdoing as he blames Laurie for cheating, and he is not willing to do so if challenged. In this case, it seems that Peter's entitlement to blame is undermined despite strong compliance entailing appropriate motivation to uphold the no-cheating norm and endorsement of that norm. Alternatively, Todd may claim that his commitment condition requires a *sufficient degree* of commitment to the relevant norm, and that committed hypocrites as such do not meet this threshold of commitment. However, that committed hypocrites can exhibit high levels of compliance to the relevant norm suggests that it is implausible to claim that committed hypocrites lack sufficient motivation to meet the commitment condition. Finally, I am confident that Todd would not insist on perfect compliance as a criterion of commitment to a norm, since this would likely mean that most people do not have standing to blame—clearly an undesirable consequence, and one that Todd himself repudiates in his discussion of Wallace's view (Todd 2017, 21). In essence, Todd faces a dilemma: if he insists on perfect compliance as a condition of commitment, then he will deprive most of us of standing. On the other hand, if he allows less-than-perfect compliance, then there

will be committed hypocrites whose plausible lack of standing will be inconsistent with the commitment condition. Thus, Todd's account of standing either to genuinely blame or to display blame fails to provide a sufficient condition: it is possible to be committed to the relevant norm and lack standing, and this actually occurs with some frequency in the form of committed hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, it seems plausible that commitment to the relevant norm is a *necessary* condition on the standing to display blame, and this would entail that strategic hypocrites lack the standing to do so. However, a further problem with the commitment condition comes as a consequence of a fact we have earlier noted: since commitment is a complex attitude, an agent can fail to be committed in a number of ways. Recall that there are three ways to be uncommitted: one can endorse a norm as such without being motivated to adhere to it, fail to endorse the norm as such or be motivated to adhere to it, or fail to endorse the norm as such but be motivated to adhere to it. So, consider Jane, a serial adulterer, and the various ways in which she may not be committed to the prohibition on marital cheating:

Jane₁: Endorses the no-cheating norm as such, but is not motivated to adhere to it.

Jane₂: Does not endorse the no-cheating norm and is not motivated to adhere to it.

Jane₃: Does not endorse the no-cheating norm and is motivated to adhere to it.

Do all of these Janes clearly lack standing to display blame? I contend that the answer is no; Jane₂ and Jane₃ lack standing, but we can't conclude that Jane₁ lacks standing without further information. Specifically, we need to know whether Jane₁ is *willing to accept blame* for her violation of the no-cheating norm, where by *willing to accept blame* I mean roughly what R.A. Duff means by being "prepared to answer for" norm violations: "explaining it, justifying it, or apologizing for it" (Duff 2010, 128). That bit of information is already available to us in the cases of Jane₂ and Jane₃: since they don't *endorse* the no-cheating norm, they cannot seriously

engage in *answering for* violating it. But since Jane₁ endorses the norm, it is quite possible that she is willing to accept blame for her violations, even if she lacks any or sufficient motivation to adhere to it. Suppose that Jane₁'s husband John confides in her that he, too, cheated, and Jane₁ condemns him for it. John retorts by condemning Jane₁'s condemnation, calling her a hypocrite because he knows she, too, has cheated on him. Rather than denying the charge, Jane₁ instantly owns up to it; she admits she cheated, and suggests that they are *both* blameworthy. If she is willing to do this, then she has standing—despite lacking commitment. True, it might have been better if Jane₁ had owned up to cheating *before* blaming John. But as long as she is willing to accept blame from John, to answer for what she has done, her standing is not undermined (Cf. Duff 2010, 128). Furthermore, continual lapses of compliance in *non-hypocritical* agents—for example, certain weak-willed agents—are generally not sufficient to establish lack of standing even if they plausibly undermine these agents' claims to commitment to the relevant norms.

The foregoing discussion suggests the following “acceptance” condition on standing to display blame: *R* has standing to display blame concerning *S*'s violations of *N* if and only if *R* is willing to accept blame for her violations of *N*. By “willing to accept blame,” I mean that *R* is prepared to sincerely engage in the self-scrutiny, acknowledgement of her own wrongdoing, apology, and whatever other compensatory acts are *appropriately* demanded of her on account of her violations of *N*. The ground of the acceptance condition is as follows. By displaying blame concerning others, one is asserting one's membership in a certain moral community and one's entitlement to hold others to account for their violations of certain moral norms. A moral community is composed of those who endorse certain moral norms as such, and it is constituted by this shared endorsement combined with an economy of moral opprobrium and approval governed by distributive principles whereby, roughly, violators of the norms accumulate the

opprobrium of others—and in the most serious cases, may be banished from the community—and upholders of norms accumulate the approval of others. This economy is open only to those who are willing to sincerely engage in the process whereby the fitting allotment of opprobrium and approval is judged—the process of explanation, justification, excuse-making, and apology or compensation. If a person is not willing to engage in this process, or she is only willing to engage in it inappropriately, then she loses her standing in that community to hold others to account for violations of the norms with respect to which she is so disposed.

This explanation has some relativistic consequences for standing. To see this, consider Kittay's example of Franck, a German Jew under Nazi occupation who, in order to be accepted as Aryan German, must sometimes profess mildly anti-Semitic attitudes he does not hold. We can imagine these professions sometimes include displays of blame, for example directed at Jewish critics of the regime. Kittay labels this "Victim hypocrisy," and she thinks it is justified in some instances. I do not think that this counts as hypocrisy (see below), but I agree with her that it is justified in some circumstances—another example of *false* blame that is all-things-considered morally permissible. Suppose Franck were accused of violating Nazi anti-Semitic norms, say by covertly assisting Jews in hiding. Depending upon the context in which this accusation took place, Franck might not *sincerely* accept blame—he might disingenuously admit to his "wrongdoing" in the hope of relatively lenient treatment—or he might not *appropriately* accept blame, at least by the lights of the norms endorsed by the Nazi moral community. So, Franck is neither willing to sincerely accept blame nor to appropriately accept blame, where this notion of appropriateness is *relative* to Nazi norms. But it is this *relativistic* notion of appropriateness that is operative in the concept of standing, since standing is something one has only *with respect to some community*. In other words, the relativism of standing itself—the fact

that standing is something one has with respect to some community—means that the concept of *appropriateness* that figures in the acceptance condition is also relative to a moral community and its moral standards. Thus, it is correct to say that Franck lacks standing to display blame for violations of Nazi norms. It follows from this that a person can lack standing to display blame, yet be (objectively) all-things-considered morally permitted to do so.

The CAH requires that the hypocrite be unjustifiably unwilling to accept blame, and it follows from this that all hypocritical would-be blamers lack willingness to appropriately accept blame in the sense required for standing to display blame. Nevertheless, the case of Kittay’s “Victim Hypocrite” shows that these are not quite equivalent “unwillingnesses.” A person may be *justified* in being unwilling to accept blame—Franck certainly is, since Nazi norms are not objectively true or valid and he believes this—yet still count as unwilling to *appropriately*, relative to a moral community, accept blame. Two things follow from this: first, the fact that someone lacks standing does not necessarily imply any objective moral failing; second, someone might *not* be a hypocrite, yet lack standing. Franck is an example of both points.⁸

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that hypocrites come in many varieties. A major distinction is between hypocrites who are committed to the norms with respect to which they are hypocritical, and those are not so committed. One important kind of uncommitted hypocrite is the strategic

⁸ Indeed, I think we would ordinarily refrain from using the label “hypocrite” with respect to people like Franck. That is because, on my view, “hypocrisy” is always a term of opprobrium, analytically implying some moral failing. Yet under the circumstances, Franck exhibits no moral failing in hiding his true moral commitments. Since standing is a relativistic notion, someone’s “lacking standing” does not necessarily imply a moral failing. It *does* imply a moral failing only when the moral community relative to which the person lacks standing endorses objectively true or valid moral norms.

hypocrite. This type is a largely ignored figure in recent discussions of hypocrisy and the standing to blame, and there is good reason for this: according to a plausible account of blame, the strategic hypocrite does not actually blame people. However, I argued that because displays of blame, whether genuine or insincere, have ethical significance, it is cogent to inquire after the standing of the strategic hypocrite to display blame. I approached this question by considering two putative conditions on standing: the commitment condition, and the acceptance condition. I argued that only the acceptance condition survives scrutiny. Further reflection on the grounds of this condition suggest that standing is a relativistic notion, so that someone's lack of standing need not imply any objective moral failing. Finally, strategic hypocrites, and indeed all (but not only) hypocrites, fail to meet the acceptance condition. I conclude, therefore, that strategic hypocrites lack the standing to display blame.