

## Comments on Benjamin Rossi's "Strategic Hypocrisy and the Standing to Display Blame"

Rossi's paper is thought-provoking and I learned a great deal from it, I myself not being entirely familiar with the literature he references on standing to display blame. As such, my questions will undoubtedly be 'naïve', though such questions often give philosophers the opportunity to spell out their projects more fully.

I have two questions in particular that I hope prompt Rossi to say a bit more about both the specific nature of the acceptance condition and also about what he takes to be the practical import of conceptions of standing to display blame. The first question concerns a possible counterexample to the claim that willingness to accept blame is a sufficient condition of standing to display blame. The other question concerns the extent to which the concept of standing to display blame is normative, i.e. an action-guiding concept, and in particular whether relativistic accounts of standing to display blame are in fact accounts of standing to display blame.

### **First Question: What to do with apparent counterexamples to the claim that the acceptance condition (coupled with endorsement of the norm in question) is sufficient for standing to display blame for violations of that norm?**

Let's consider Jane<sup>1</sup>, the serial adulterer from Rossi's paper, who endorses a no-cheating norm, but is not motivated to adhere to it. We know that Jane fails to respond appropriately to the no-cheating norm she endorses (i.e. she cheats), displays blame of others for cheating, and, let us suppose, is quite willing to explain, justify, and apologize for her cheating (in addition to any to other reasonable compensation for her acts). Thus, Jane is a non-strategic hypocrite in Rossi's sense, one who apparently meets the acceptance condition and is, therefore, in possession of standing to display blame.

But suppose further that Jane is willing to accept blame for cheating iff

- (1) The person blaming her has plausible epistemic grounds for displaying blame. Suppose that Jane's sister suspected her infidelity on grounds of an email from a coworker with whom Jane was not cheating. Because the sister's blame was not based on adequate evidence, Jane withholds willingness to accept blame until there are plausible grounds for blame. Though Jane is here willing to accept blame, she is willing to do so only if there are plausible grounds for her accusers to suspect she is cheating.

Or

- (2) Suppose that Jane's sister has plausible epistemic grounds for blame, but those grounds are such that they are not publicly demonstrable. Suppose that Jane's sister sees the
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overall flirtatious quality of interaction between Jane and her coworker and she takes this fact, coupled with knowledge of Jane's past infidelities, as grounds to blame Jane for infidelity. While Jane acknowledges this basis of blame as epistemically plausible, she intends to accept blame only when accusations of infidelity can be demonstrated conclusively to key members of the moral community such as her husband.

Or

- (3) Suppose Jane is quite willing to accept blame with only minimal epistemic status (i.e. any blame that refers to violations of norms she has committed), but does all she can to avoid being blamed, including hiding and destroying all factors that would cause someone to level blame.

Or

- (4) Suppose Jane is blamed, accepts blame for non-compliance, and then post-blame continues to be an endorsing, unmotivated hypocrite who is willing to accept blame with respect to the norm in question.

These four scenarios raise the question whether endorsement of a norm and willingness to accept blame for violations of that norm are sufficient for standing to blame. One may have plausible intuitions that not just any form of blame acceptance will do, especially if hypocrites withhold willingness to accept blame until plausible or publicly demonstrable grounds for blame can be shown, if they do all that is within their power to hide or destroy evidence that could help blamers meet plausible or publicly demonstrable epistemic grounds, or if they remain unmotivated to adhere to the norm in question despite previous acceptances of blame. Any of these facts about an agent singly or in combination might potentially undermine their standing to blame despite their endorsement of the norm in question and willingness to accept blame for its violation.

I am inclined to wonder on these grounds whether willingness to accept blame is a necessary but insufficient condition of standing to blame. It appears that more needs to be said about the sort of will—about the sort of motivation—which underlies an agent's willingness to accept blame before it can be established that the agent possesses standing to display blame.

Rossi may claim that what we are engaged in here is reflection on a thick conception of the acceptance condition and that these more substantive issues of interpretation should be left to the specific moral communities in question—i.e. that there is only a thin universal norm which demands that non-strategic hypocrites be willing to accept blame before having standing to display blame and that the details of these requirements will need to be worked out in local settings. If so, he may be right and it would be interesting to hear him speak more fully about the philosophical basis of this claim.

This leads to my second question.

**Second Question: Is the implication of a relativistic account of standing to display blame—one detached from the moral truth of the norms in question and instead specified in terms of an agent's commitment to (i.e. endorsement of and motivation to adhere to) the norms of any moral community—that the concept of standing to blame can neither provide strong reasons for gaining standing to blame nor establish a threshold for who does and does not possess standing to blame?**

It plainly follows from Rossi's account that an agent's standing to blame says nothing definitive about that agent's moral achievement. Franck's lack of standing to blame among the Nazis is a mark of his ethical virtue, not of any ethical failure. Similarly, since Franck had good moral reasons to display blame of those who violated Nazi norms, despite his lacking standing to blame Nazis.

As such, it is not clear in what sense standing to blame is supposed to be a normative category since it defines neither a moral/ethical achievement—recall, bringing oneself in line with requirements of standing to display blame is just as likely to be a process of ethical/moral decay as of progress—nor a threshold for determining who can and cannot display blame since lack of standing to display blame is not sufficient reason to avoid displaying blame.

In legal settings, to have 'standing' means one has met sufficient conditions to become a participant in a case or judicial proceedings. When one hears the phrase 'standing to display blame', one might think we should get an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions which distinguish those who are permitted to display blame from those who are not. We do not get this account from Rossi because on his account having or lacking standing to blame does not provide sufficient reasons for deciding whether to display or not display blame.

More generally, it seems to me that once the account of standing to blame is conceived as a matter of the internal relations between a subject and a moral community, one is no longer offering a conception of standing to blame but simply some important considerations about how an agent's commitment to norms might be one among many reasons relevant to deciding whether an agent has standing to display blame.