


ARTICLE

# Why Does Possessing Standing to Blame Matter?

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## Abstract

I argue that moral dialogue concerning an agent’s standing to blame facilitates moral understanding about the purported wrongdoing that her blame targets. Challenges to a blamer’s standing serve a communicative function: they initiate dialogue or reflection meant to align the moral understanding of the blamer and challenger. On standard accounts of standing to blame, challenges to standing facilitate shared moral understanding about the blamer herself: it matters per se whether the blamer has a stake in the purported wrongdoing at issue, is blaming hypocritically, or is complicit in the wrongdoing at issue. In contrast, I argue that three widely recognized conditions on standing to blame—the business, non-hypocrisy, and non-complicity conditions—serve as epistemically tractable proxies through which we evaluate the accuracy and proportionality of blame. Standing matters because, and to the extent that, it indirectly informs our understanding of the purported wrongdoing that an act of blaming targets.

**Keywords:** Blame; Hypocrisy; Complicity; Meddlesome blame; Moral understanding; Standing; Ethics of blame

## 1. Introduction

Why is it important to us that, when we are blamed for a purported wrongdoing, the person who is blaming us possesses standing to do so? Why, in the absence of such standing, do we often charge blame as inappropriate?<sup>1</sup> These challenges are a familiar part of moral life:

“Who are you to blame me?”

“Who am I to judge?”

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”

One approach to this question is to provide an analysis of what standing itself is—for instance, a normative power to hold an agent responsible—in order to illuminate the feature of moral life that challenges to standing invoke (e.g. Edwards, 2019). Another approach to this question is to identify the specific conditions in which those who blame are said to lack standing—for instance, when one blames hypocritically—and explain the moral significance of these conditions (e.g. Todd, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup>I follow Coates and Tognazzini in using appropriateness as a broad normative evaluation of blame: “We use the word ‘appropriate’ at this juncture to cover a wide range of normative terms, since we may ask when blame is good, or permissible, or fair, and so on, each of which may raise distinct issues” (2013, 17 fn 37). I take appropriateness to also encompass evaluative questions such whether blame is fitting or justified. I adopt appropriateness in this broad sense as the salient evaluative term in order to maximize sensitivity to the potential normative significance of standing.

Whereas these approaches seek to explain the moral significance of standing to blame through an analysis of what standing consists in, I propose an alternative, which begins from the observation that challenges to a blamer's standing are typically embedded in moral dialogue spurred by the act of blame itself: my challenge to your standing is one way of responding to your challenge that I have done wrong. Turning our attention to a person's standing is a way of continuing a conversation spurred by concern about a purported wrongdoing. We grasp the significance of standing to blame, I contend, by understanding how such challenges continue this conversation.

My thesis is that in light of the dialogical role that standing challenges serve in the ordinary moral life, standing matters to the ethics of blame *epistemically* (i.e., it guides our normative assessment of an act of blaming) rather than *metaphysically* (i.e., it is part of what makes an act of blaming appropriate or inappropriate). In particular, standing is an epistemically tractable proxy through which we indirectly assess whether blame is *accurate* or *proportionate*: assessing a person's standing to blame is a way of assessing whether her judgment about a purported wrongdoing is warranted, or whether the force of her blame reflects the impact of a wrongdoing. The evaluation of standing is especially salient in circumstances where the accuracy or proportionality of blame is themselves uncertain or contested. The upshot is that a person's standing to blame matters not for its own sake, but insofar as dialogue concerning a person's standing can yield a greater understanding of the purported wrongdoing that an act of blame targets.

I argue for my thesis by demonstrating that when three widely recognized conditions on standing to blame are invoked as challenges to the appropriateness of blame, they ultimately raise considerations that bear on our understanding of the putative wrongdoing at issue, rather than distinct facts about the blamer herself. These three conditions are:

**Business Condition:** If one does not have a stake in the wrongdoing at issue, then one's blame is inappropriate.

**Non-Hypocrisy Condition:** If one has evinced a type of moral fault relevant to the wrongdoing at issue, and has not made adequate efforts to rectify this fault, then one's blame is inappropriate.<sup>2</sup>

**Non-Complicity Condition:** If one is complicit in the wrongdoing at issue, and has not made adequate efforts to rectify one's complicity, then one's blame is inappropriate.<sup>3</sup>

For each of these conditions, I will advance two claims: (1) When the standing condition is violated, we have reason to think that the blame expressed is also inaccurate or disproportionate to the wrongdoing; (2) If we stipulate that the blame expressed is both accurate and proportionate to the

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<sup>2</sup>(Lippert-Rasmussen, 2023, 112–16) distinguishes hypocrisy, which concerns an agent's belief that they exhibit the same moral fault for which they blame someone else, from *tu quoque*, which concerns the fact that an agent exhibits the same moral fault for which they blame someone else. But Lippert–Rasmussen does take both hypocrisy and *tu quoque* to undermine one's standing to blame.

<sup>3</sup>These are the three most commonly referenced conditions in the philosophical literature on standing and blame, but there is not consensus that all three are necessary or sufficient conditions for possessing standing to blame. (Todd, 2019), for instance, argues that the business condition is not an element of moral standing to blame, and that the non-complicity condition reduces to the non-hypocrisy condition. Moreover, (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2023) suggests other candidate varieties of standingless blame, such as uninformed blame (135–43), uncommitted blame (144–49), and excessive blame (150). I do not aim to defend a particular account of the necessary and sufficient conditions on possessing standing to blame. For this reason, I take the paper's arguments to strongly motivate, rather than prove, the claim that standing matters epistemically rather than metaphysically in the ethics of blame. (I note, in passing, that blame's being uninformed or uncommitted plausibly bears on its accuracy, while blame's being excessive plausibly bears on its proportionality, and for this reason it is plausible that challenging blame as uninformed, uncommitted, or excessive likewise raises considerations that bear on our understanding of the putative wrongdoing at issue, rather than distinct facts about the blamer herself.) I thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussion on this point.

wrongdoing but the standing condition is violated, it is unclear how a challenge to one's standing has the potential to foster further shared moral understanding—the communicative function of a challenge to blame's appropriateness. From (1), it follows that an assertion that one lacks standing to blame opens a discussion about the putative wrongdoing at issue for the sake of facilitating moral understanding between the blamer and the agent challenging her standing to blame. From (2), it follows that what is at stake in the discussion over an agent's standing is the accuracy and proportionality of the blame she expresses.

In [Section 2](#), I pinpoint the foil for my position on why possessing standing to blame matters. While many accounts of standing hold that standing preempt other considerations in evaluating blame's appropriateness—such that if one lacks standing, one's blame is necessarily inappropriate—I show that the core commitment of such views is that standing picks out a distinct class of considerations that determine whether the blame is appropriate. My thesis denies that standing picks out any such distinct class of considerations.

In [Section 3](#), I explicate the function of the normative evaluation of blame in ordinary moral dialogue. These evaluations facilitate shared moral understanding. In moral dialogue about the accuracy or proportionality of blame, the shared moral understanding that is facilitated ultimately concerns the underlying wrongdoing that the blame is about. Our question about why standing to blame matters thus becomes: do challenges to a blamer's standing, like other evaluations of blame's appropriateness, function to facilitate shared understanding about the putative wrongdoing at issue, or do challenges to standing function to facilitate shared understanding about the blamer for its own sake?

In [Section 4](#), I argue for the paper's core thesis by demonstrating that three widely accepted conditions on an agent's standing to blame—the business condition, the non-hypocrisy condition, and the non-complicity condition—bear on the accuracy and proportionality of blame. Where one of these conditions on standing is violated, we have reason to think that the agent has misjudged whether a wrongdoing occurred or a wrongdoing's severity. But when we stipulate that an agent who lacks standing blames appropriately and proportionately, we lack a clear intuition that her blame is inappropriate.

Finally, [Section 5](#) spells out the normative upshots of the argument: moral dialogue that invokes the conditions traditionally associated with standing is useful insofar as it can facilitate shared moral understanding about the wrongdoings that expressions of blame target, but talk of standing can be counterproductive insofar as it leads parties to fixate on the question a blamer's standing for its own sake.

## 2. The Core Commitment of the Standard Account

My thesis challenges what Macalester Bell calls the *standard account* of standing's role in the normative evaluation of acts of blame (2013). On the standard account, "blame is morally appropriate only when the blamer has standing" (Bell, 2013, 263). If someone lacks standing to blame in a given circumstance, that fact suffices to render her expression of blame inappropriate. G.A. Cohen, for instance, asserts that an apt challenge to someone's standing to blame another for a wrongdoing "achieves its effect without confronting the *content* of her critic's judgment" (Cohen, 2006, 18).<sup>4</sup> On the standard account, standing plays a preemptive role in assessing the appropriateness of blame. If I lack standing to blame, then it does not matter whether I accurately judge that the agent being blamed is morally culpable or whether my response reflects the severity of her wrongdoing. Lack of standing alone suffices to render blame inappropriate.

<sup>4</sup>For related claims that standing is preemptive, see (Friedman, 2013, 278), (Wertheimer, 1998, 499), and (Wallace, 2010, 317–323).

In her critique of the standard account, Bell challenges the claim that standing preempts other considerations in the normative evaluation of blame. Bell argues that when one violates any of the widely accepted conditions on standing to blame, one evinces a moral fault. But one can evince moral fault without blaming inappropriately: “[b]lamers may evince all sorts of moral faults in their critical interventions, but these faults need not undermine the moral appropriateness of reproach in every instance” (2013, 271). Perhaps my friend’s reproach for my failure to stick to a new exercise regimen evinces overbearingness; even so, her blame may still be appropriate to the extent that it expresses her care for me and recognition that my health is important to me. In essence, Bell denies that standing is a preempting factor in evaluating whether an act of blame is appropriate.

Yet it is possible to preserve the spirit of the standard account while accepting Bell’s critique of it. The core claim of the standard account is that whether an agent possesses standing to blame is a distinctive and important factor in determining whether blame is appropriate. The version of the standard account that Bell challenges casts standing as so important that blame cannot be appropriate unless an agent possesses it—it preempts other factors. But it is possible to maintain that standing is a distinctive and important, yet not necessarily overriding, factor in determining whether blame is appropriate. Fritz and Miller articulate this position explicitly in “Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame”:

The fact that *R* lacks the standing to blame *S* for violations of *N* is a consideration that weighs heavily against the appropriateness of *R*’s blaming *S* for violations of *N*. But because standing is only one consideration in the ethics of blame, the fact that *R* does not have the standing to blame *S* for violations of *N* does not entail that it would be inappropriate for *R* to blame *S* for violations of *N*. (2018, 119).

Whether an agent possesses standing to blame may not be the last word, in Fritz and Miller’s view, concerning the appropriateness of her blame, but it is a weighty and distinctive element of what makes an act of blame appropriate or not.

I challenge this core claim of the standard account. I contend that standing does not pick out a *distinct* class of considerations in our normative evaluation blame. Lack of standing renders blame inappropriate *only* to the extent that it gives us reason to think that the blamer’s judgment of wrongdoing is inaccurate or that her condemnation is disproportionate to the wrongdoing. What makes the conditions traditionally associated with standing important is that they offer a distinctive type of evidence for assessing the core factors that determine whether blame is appropriate (i.e., accuracy and proportionality); standing does not pick out a distinctive element of what makes blame appropriate.

### 3. The Communicative Function of Evaluating Blame

An assertion that someone lacks standing to blame is a way of asserting that her blame is inappropriate. In order to provide an account of what it means to assert that someone lacks standing to blame, we first need an account of what we are doing when we tell others their blame is inappropriate more generally. To this end, I contend that we can adapt Miranda Fricker’s account of the communicative function of blame itself in “What is the Point of Blame? A Paradigm-Based Explanation.” For Fricker, paradigmatic instances of blame serve a specific communicative purpose, to effect an alignment in the moral understanding of the wrongdoer and blamer by “inspir[ing] remorse in the wrongdoer, where remorse is understood as a pained moral perception of the wrong one has done” (2016, 167). In paradigmatic cases of blame, the wrongdoer has failed to recognize, or fully acknowledge the extent of, her wrongdoing. Blame, on Fricker’s account, aims to bring the wrongdoer back into the moral community by attuning her to the moral reasons that make what she has done wrong.

Assertions that an expression of blame is appropriate or inappropriate, I contend, serve this same overarching communicative function: to align the moral understanding of the blamer and the agent evaluating the expression of blame. As in Fricker's paradigm-based approach to blame itself, I take the paradigmatic cases of the assertion that blame is inappropriate to take an I-thou structure: I am telling you that the blame you express is inappropriate.<sup>5</sup> The specific shift in moral understanding that a challenge to blame's appropriateness aims to effect depends on the type of reason provided for the assertion that blame is inappropriate. We can divide challenges to blame's appropriateness into three categories: those that concern blame's *accuracy*, those that concern blame's *proportionality*, and those that concern the blamer's *standing*.

Blame is *accurate* if and only if it correctly (1) identifies an act as a wrongdoing, (2) identifies the agent(s) that performed or participated in the act, and (3) attributes moral responsibility to that/those agent(s). It is clearly inappropriate to blame someone for an act that was not wrong, or for an act which she did not perform. Moreover, even if someone performed a wrongdoing, it is inappropriate to blame her if she was, for instance, coerced into performing it. When we tell someone that her blame is inappropriate because it is inaccurate, we aim to bring her to recognize that one of these conditions is not met—that she is mistaken about the putative wrongdoing or wrongdoer.

For the argument in the following section, it is important to note that we sometimes assess the accuracy of blame indirectly, on the basis of what a given agent is in a position to know or justifiably believe. Coates defends an epistemic norm of blame, on which an agent's blame is inappropriate if it is not reasonable to believe that the blamee is morally responsible for a purported wrongdoing (Coates, 2016). As Todd observes, such challenges to the epistemic position of a blamer can be addressed by marshaling evidence that the target of blame is in fact morally responsible. For this reason, what is ultimately at stake in such challenges is the blamer's epistemic position is the accuracy of her blame (Todd, 2019, 350–51).<sup>6</sup>

Blame is *proportionate* if and only if it (1) identifies the party or parties impacted by the wrongdoing, (2) issues a demand for apology or reparations that reflects the severity of the wrongdoing, (3) is attuned to relevant aggravating or mitigating contextual factors. Blame imposes a demand on its target in the sense that it calls the target to account. The way in which the target is called to account is open-ended: typically, the blamer expects an apology, but it may also be appropriate for the target to respond by making reparations or committing to act differently in the future. What's important for our purposes is that this open-ended calling-to-account can render blame inappropriate if it demands a response that is incommensurate with the wrongdoing. A demand for you to make me whole for defrauding my friend is inappropriate because it fails to identify the party impacted by the wrongdoing. Similarly, blame that demands a groveling apology for a minor social faux pas is inappropriate because it does not reflect the severity of the wrongdoing itself. And the wider context of a wrongdoing can inform the character of blame's calling-to-account: someone's demeaning comment towards a female colleague may warrant a more severe response if it is made in an environment rife with sexism. When we tell someone that her blame is inappropriate because it is disproportionate, we aim to bring her to recognize that one of these conditions is not met—that she is mistaken about the (contextualized) severity of the wrongdoing or the party that it impacts.

For the argument in the following section, it will be important to note that I take our judgments about the proportionality of blame to be coarse-grained and to manifest in different ways in different agents. For these reasons, what often matters in such judgments is comparative

<sup>5</sup>While I am sympathetic to Fricker's analysis of blame's communicative function, my argument about standing in this paper does not, strictly speaking, depend on accepting her communicative account of blame; Fricker's analysis is an instructive parallel. My claim is that normative evaluations of blame (paradigmatically) serve a communicative function, just as Fricker claims that blame itself (paradigmatically) serves a communicative function.

<sup>6</sup>I thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussion on this point.

consistency. We typically characterize the severity of wrongdoings in coarse-grained terms: a “minor slight” or an “awful betrayal,” such that blame is proportionate if it issues a demand commensurate with the coarsely ‘minor’ or ‘awful’ character of the wrongdoing itself. Moreover, different agents express demands reflective of the severity of wrongdoing in different ways: in response to similar wrongdoing, you may be disposed to a more reserved expression of anger, whereas I may be disposed to more animated indignation. While there are certainly extreme responses that are decidedly disproportionate to wrongdoing in any given case, we often think that an array of emotions or demands may proportionately reflect the severity of wrongdoing.

For these reasons, we often think about the severity of wrongdoings, and the proportionality of blame, in comparative terms. When we want to get a more precise grip on the severity of wrongdoing, we often compare it to other specific cases: my sustained deceit of my friend warrants a deeper apology than your small lie to yours. In assessing an agent’s response to a given wrongdoing, we may compare it to their response to other wrongdoings: there may not be one precise level of anger that everyone ought to feel in response to a given insult, but an agent ought to feel and express greater anger at more severe insults than less severe ones. The primary goal in issuing blame proportionality is comparative consistency—that an agent treats more severe wrongdoings as such in comparison to those that are less severe.

Finally, we sometimes assert that the blame someone’s issues is inappropriate because the blamer lacks *standing* to blame. In the philosophical literature on standing, we find three main conditions on the basis of which someone can lack standing to blame: (1) because the putative wrongdoing at issue is none of the blamer’s *business*; (2) because the blamer is being *hypocritical* in faulting the putative wrongdoer for her action; or (3) because the blamer was *complicit* in the wrongdoing. If accuracy concerns the verdict of blame (i.e., its judgment of blameworthiness), and proportionality concerns blame’s sentence (i.e., the degree of apology or reparation it demands), then standing is typically understood to concern the blamer’s jurisdiction over the purported wrongdoing: whether she is in a position to make any judgment or issue any demand for apology or reparation (Coates & Tognazzini, 2013, 17–23).

An assertion that blame is inappropriate is not typically a unilateral adjudication, but rather a conversation starter. Alignment of moral understanding is realized through dialogue. There will typically be disagreement about the character of the purported wrongdoing between the blamer and the person asserting her blame is inappropriate: the blamer will, for instance, take herself to have accurately assessed that an action was wrong and that the person she blamed was responsible for it. An assertion that her blame is inaccurate will—if it is successful at promoting its communicative aim—prompt the blamer to further reflection concerning her judgment of blameworthiness, through dialogue with others or herself. This reflects Fricker’s characterization of the communicative aim of blame itself: “Accusations of blame... initiate a moral conversation of a kind designed to shift different moral understandings into increased alignment” (2016, 178–79). Likewise, the moral understanding that is realized through an assertion that blame is inappropriate is not simply transmitted unilaterally, but through an exchange prompted by the assertion. (Indeed, moral understanding may be aligned in the other direction, where the person who issued the initial assertion comes to realize that the blame was in fact (e.g.) accurate.)

This paradigm-based analysis for assertions that blame is inappropriate enables us to make our initial question—what is at stake in a challenge to someone’s standing to blame?—more precise. The goal of paradigmatic challenges that one lacks standing to blame is to align moral understanding between the party who issues the challenge and the party who has expressed blame. When the challenge is to the accuracy or proportionality of blame, the goal is to achieve a shared understanding about the purported wrongdoing at which the blame is directed. (e.g., Is the person blamed in fact morally responsible for the action at issue? Does the scale of apology or reparation demanded by the blamer reflect the severity of the wrongdoing?) The question is if challenges to the blamer’s standing also aim to achieve shared understanding about the purported wrongdoing at which the



blame is directed, or if such challenges aim to achieve shared understanding concerning some distinct fact(s) about the blamer.

Standard accounts of standing to blame adopt the latter view. What the parties learn through discussion about an agent's standing to blame is distinct from what the parties would learn through discussion about the accuracy or proportionality of blame. By "distinct," I mean that, on the standard account, the facts relevant to assessing the blamer's standing do not bear on the accuracy of a judgment of blameworthiness or proportionality of the demand for reparation. For this reason, on the standard account, challenges to a blamer's standing are given a different analysis than challenges to blame's accuracy or proportionality. Justin Snedegar, for example, casts challenges to a blamer's standing as *dismissals* of blame, which reject the blamer's demand that the blamed party express remorse to the blamer (2023, 2024). Dismissal in this sense contrasts with rejection of blame, where the blamed party challenges their blameworthiness (2024, 469). Rejection of blame engages the blamer on her terms, raising a challenge that concerns the purported wrongdoing made at issue by the blame she expresses. In such challenges to blame's appropriateness, the parties are seeking to determine something about the purported wrongdoing at issue. Challenges to the blamer's standing, on the standard account, instead change the topic of conversation: they direct discussion away from the nature of the purported wrongdoing toward the status of the blamer herself. The standard account holds that the parties in dialogue about the blamer's standing are seeking to determine something about the moral status of the blamer.

It is worth noting that even some critics of the standard account adopt this analysis of the function of standing challenges in moral dialogue. Matt King contends that an accusation that one's blame is meddlesome or hypocritical does not entail that one lacks the right to blame; it at most entails that one is unjustified in blaming, given the balance of reasons in a particular set of circumstances. Yet, King argues, when we invoke one of these conditions typically associated with standing to blame, we are redirecting the blamer's attention away from the purported wrongdoing that her blame targets to a more salient or important aspect of her situation (2019, 2020). For instance, on King's account, in charging a habitually late friend with hypocrisy when she blames you for your belated appearance at a coffee date, you are communicating that your friend ought to attend to her own tardy habit, and the lack of respect for her friends it expresses, rather than your minor fault in this particular instance.

In contrast, on the account that I will defend in the following section, the communicative function of challenging a blamer's standing is ultimately to facilitate the blamer's understanding about the purported wrongdoing that her initial blame targets. Moral dialogue concerning an agent's standing to blame is a way of talking about the accuracy or proportionality of her blame. Challenging a blamer's standing is a way of enriching the conversation about the purported wrongdoing that spurred her to blame, rather than a means of changing the subject.

Before turning to this argument, I want to address a variety of blame that might seem troublesome for my account: private blame. Private blame is blame that is wholly unexpressed by the blamer to the blamee or any other party. Certainly, one can blame others for a moral fault she herself exhibits without remorse, or for a putative wrongdoing in which she has no stake, without expressing it, and it seems plausible to say that her blame is inappropriate in each case precisely for this reason. One might worry that an explanation of why standing matters that focuses on the communicative function of challenges to standing cannot account for this, since we cannot challenge the standing of people who we do not know are blaming us (because they do so privately).<sup>7</sup>

My account can address the significance of standing in private blame. In cases of standingless private blame, were the blamee to discover that the blamer harbored this attitude toward her, she could reasonably challenge the blamer's hypocrisy (or meddlesomeness or complicity, depending on the case). Suppose, after days of holding my resentful feelings in, I finally tell my spouse that I am

<sup>7</sup>I thank two anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to address the issue of private blame.

angry with her for neglecting household chores for her work—something that I myself am regularly at fault for. When she challenges my blame by calling out my hypocrisy, she can reasonably say: “I can’t believe you’ve been angry at me all week for this—you of all people!” challenging not only my standing to express blame, but my standing to harbor blame privately. The communicative function of challenges to standing sheds light on the significance of standing in private blame, because these challenges can be a reasonable response when to private blame if it becomes public, and such challenges can target the appropriateness of the blame even when it was private.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Business, Non-Hypocrisy, and Non-Complicity Conditions on Standing to Blame

In this section, I argue that three main candidate conditions on an agent’s standing to blame—the *Business*, *Non-Hypocrisy*, and *Non-Complicity* Conditions—matter insofar as their absence gives us reason to doubt the accuracy or proportionality of the blame an agent has issued. On the one hand, when an agent has violated one of these conditions, we typically have reason to think that their blame is inaccurate or disproportionate. On the other hand, when we stipulate that an agent who has violated one of these conditions has in fact blamed accurately and proportionately, we lack a clear intuition about the communicative function of challenging their standing to blame.

##### 4.1. Business condition

In order to blame appropriately, we sometimes say that an agent ought to *have a stake* in the purported wrongdoing at issue. When we have a stake in a purported wrongdoing, we are able to tell a story about how the purported wronging has impacted us: perhaps that the action affected us directly, or it affected someone to whom we bear a commitment or relationship. When we think that an agent issuing blame does not have a stake in purported wrongdoing, we sometimes challenge her by saying that the wrongdoing is “none of her business” or that her blame is “meddlesome.” On the standard account, it matters *per se* whether the blamer has a stake in the purported wrongdoing at issue, independently of whether her blame is accurate or proportionate: the fact that the blamer lacks a stake in the wrongdoing at issue is itself a reason that can render her blame inappropriate (McKiernan, 2016; Radzik, 2012; Smith, 2007).

When the business condition is violated, it gives us reason to doubt that an agent’s blame is in fact accurate or proportionate. Sometimes, when we assert that a purported wrongdoing is none of the blamer’s business, we call into question her ability to issue an accurate judgment of blameworthiness. If I interject in the middle of a dispute between my married neighbors, declaring from my porch that one spouse and not the other is at fault for failing to take the trash to the curb before collection that morning, and the blamed spouse retorts that it is none of my business, she may be impeaching the epistemic position from which I judge her, and not the other, blameworthy: I know nothing about their household chore arrangements, the particular details of that morning, or perhaps even whether the trash was taken out or not. In cases like this, I may not be in a good position to judge who is blameworthy because I do not know the relevant facts of the situation. But then my not having a stake in the purported wrongdoing calls into question the accuracy of my blame, by highlighting the deficiencies in the epistemic position from which I make a judgment of blameworthiness.

By indirectly calling the accuracy of my blame into question, an assertion that the purported wrongdoing at issue is none of my business can thus spur discussion about the accuracy of my judgment. In some cases, the discussion will focus directly on the facts of the purported wrongdoing at issue. In such cases, it is clear that a challenge to a blamer’s standing bears on the parties’ understanding of the putative wrongdoing at issue.

<sup>8</sup>For a similar approach to standing and private blame, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2023, 45–47).



In other cases, the discussion will focus solely on the epistemic position of the blamer. A party directly connected to putative wrongdoing might respond with assertions such as: “you know nothing about this situation” or “there’s a whole context and backstory that you are missing.” The party may do so without ever offering up any of the facts that the blamer is said to lack; other rights or obligations, such as that of privacy, might impinge upon their ability to do so. Yet, the intended impact of such assertions on the blamer is to bring her to recognize that her judgment about the putative wrongdoing may be mistaken. This is to say that what is at issue in such cases is whether the blamer reasonably believes that her blame is accurate—Coates’s epistemic norm on blame. But, as we saw in the prior section, the epistemic norm ultimately matters to us because it matters to us that when we blame, we do so accurately.

In other situations, when we assert that a wrongdoing is none of the blamer’s business, we are challenging the blamer’s entitlement to call the wrongdoer to account in the way that she does. Often, challenging a blamer’s stake in a wrongdoing amounts to challenging whether she herself was directly harmed by the wrongdoing, and thus whether her demand for an apology or reparations is appropriate: “You have no stake in this. I don’t owe you anything.” But the discussion spurred by such a challenge concerns the identification of the parties impacted by the wrongdoing—an element of blame’s proportionality. If I demand that you apologize to me for wrongdoing that did not affect me, my blame is disproportionate to the wrongdoing. Productive discussion about the appropriateness of my blame would facilitate our shared understanding of the nature of the wrongdoing at issue—namely, about who was harmed by the wrongdoing.

Even if the parties agree that a blamer was not herself directly harmed by a wrongdoing, issues of proportionality can still arise in challenging her stake in the wider context of the wrongdoing. For example, if I demand an apology for your insult to a mutual friend, you might rightly respond: “I don’t owe *you* an apology—it’s none of your business. I insulted her, not you.” Here a proponent of the standard account might respond: in an example like this, you are telling me that, because you lack a direct stake in the wrongdoing, you cannot blame me appropriately; this is a question separate from whether your blame is proportionate.

But this response frames the question of proportionality too narrowly. The fact that there is no demand that I can impose on you through blame to make amends *to me* does not entail that there is no demand I can impose on you to make *to someone*. It may be appropriate for me to demand that you owe my friend an apology, even if I myself have not been wronged by your actions. An assertion like the above can spur discussion about what demand it would be appropriate for the blamer to impose upon the wrongdoer, or it may prompt the blamer to reconsider and reformulate the demand she imposes on the wrongdoer.

Whether one’s blame is proportionate can depend on what stake the blamer has in the wrongdoing at issue. The anger that it is appropriate for me to express toward you when you have wronged my colleague may be different (e.g., in degree) from what it would be appropriate for me to express if you had wronged me. This is not to say that one’s stake in a wrongdoing determines a precise degree of anger or depth of apology that is uniquely proportionate to the wrongdoing. Rather, our judgments here are typically comparative: we take an agent to appropriately express her demands more strongly where she has a greater stake in wrongdoing than a lesser one. But recognizing this point is not to concede that there is a further factor, beyond proportionality, that determines whether the blame is appropriate: whenever we learn something about a blamer by interrogating her stake in wrongdoing at issue, we at the same time learn something about the wrongdoing itself, about who was impacted by the wrongdoing and how.

The above cases give us reason to think that whenever we learn about an agent’s stake in a wrongdoing, we also learn something about the wrongdoing itself. Let us now assume that there are cases in which the business condition is violated—someone expresses blame for a wrongdoing in which they have no stake—but the blame is both accurate and proportionate. Perhaps, as a student of political science, I became deeply familiar with the inner workings of a political party in another nation and fixated on a controversy in which the party’s leader unfairly denied a popular member a

prestigious position. Let us further stipulate that I have no stake in this matter: the policy and political consequences of the controversy will not affect me or anyone with whom I interact. Still, I blame the party leader for this unfair treatment of her members through my internationally popular social media accounts, leveraging my mass following to capture the attention of the leader's communications staff and pressure a response.

It is not obvious to me in such a case that the blame I express is inappropriate, even though it violates the business condition. There are modifications of the case that would clearly render my blame inappropriate. Perhaps, at a distance from the political context, I do not know the reason the party leader made this decision—but this would call into doubt the accuracy of my blame. Or perhaps I demand that the party leader make herself directly accountable to myself and other international social media critics—but this would call into doubt the proportionality of my blame, in virtue of my tenuous relationship to the situation (the party leader, if compelled to respond, would rightly declare she is not accountable to us). Yet if I am able to take for granted that my blame is in fact accurate and proportionate, there is nothing further for me to learn from the challenge that I have no stake in the wrongdoing at issue.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the obvious response is to hold that I learn simply that I have no stake in the wrongdoing at issue, that it is thus none of my business. But given the stipulations that my blame is accurate and proportionate, it is unclear how discussion over whether I in fact have a stake could proceed, without making reference to factors related to the accuracy or proportionality of my blame. In the absence of the potential for such discussion, it is unclear what kind of shared moral understanding could be fostered by challenging my standing. Such a challenge to my standing would not serve its paradigmatic communicative function.

#### **4.2. Non-hypocrisy condition**

Sometimes we claim that an agent is not in a position to blame someone for a (purported) wrongdoing through a challenge of the form “You’re one to judge!,” because the blamer has committed a similar wrongdoing without remorse. In such cases, we charge the blamer with hypocrisy. On the standard account, the blamer’s hypocrisy—her disposition to blame others, but not herself, for violations of some moral norm—renders her blame inappropriate. Some versions of the standard account treat hypocrisy itself as the fact about the blamer that renders her blame inappropriate; other versions maintain that a blamer’s hypocrisy entails some further fact about the blamer (e.g. she fails to respect the moral equality of other persons) that renders her blame inappropriate. On all versions of the standard account, however, it is a fact about the blamer that renders hypocritical blame inappropriate (Fritz & Miller, 2018, 2019; Piovarchy, 2020; Todd, 2019; Wallace, 2010).

It is worth noting that, in the literature on the relationship between hypocrisy and blame, it is often assumed that when I blame hypocritically, the act for which I blame you and the act that I myself have performed are in fact wrong. But this assumption is not always warranted. Sometimes, it might be unclear to the parties whether the act in question is in fact wrong. In such cases, the inconsistency between the blamer’s judgment and past actions calls her blame into question. But the inconsistency itself does not tell us whether her past actions or her current judgment were wrong. For example, a parent might blame her child for taking a year off from university to travel: “After everything we’ve done for you, I cannot believe you are failing to take your education seriously.” But if the parent had done the same thing herself when she was at university, it may be reasonable for her

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<sup>9</sup>What if we modify the case to concern a matter in the politician’s private life that the politician might rightfully say is ‘none of my business?’ I think that in such a case, what is plausibly at issue is not the appropriateness of my blame directly, but whether I have rightful access to the facts upon which I base my judgment of blameworthiness. My meddlesomeness seems to be grounded in my efforts to learn facts that violate the privacy of another, regardless of what moral judgment, if any, I come to on the basis of this effort. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this modified case.

child to insist that she has done nothing wrong—that, like her mother would have said years ago, she’s taking her personal development seriously in a wider sense. This may in turn spur discussion over their differing perspectives on the value a university education in one’s personal development. When we do not assume that the blamer’s salient past actions were wrong, her inconsistency can cast doubt on the accuracy of her judgment and reshape the parties’ understanding of the purported wrongdoing at issue.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there are many cases of hypocrisy in which we rightly assume that the blamer’s past actions were wrong, and that her current judgment is not mistaken. But in such cases, we can see the charge of hypocrisy as challenging the proportionality of the demand the blamer is imposing upon the wrongdoer. For example, if I violate a mutual pact with my partner to stop smoking, after she has violated it without remorse, I rightly charge her with hypocrisy if she demands a deeply remorseful apology from me. In such a case, I am challenging the way in which my partner is calling me to account—in other words, the proportionality of her blame. My accusation of hypocrisy might spur my partner to modify her expression of blame, without leading her to immediately rectify her hypocrisy: “You’re right. I’m overwhelmed at the moment and struggling to care about my health. That is no excuse, but I have to admit that I don’t regret starting smoking again, or that I broke my commitment to you. Still, the commitment you made to me matters to me, because I care about your health—I care about *you*—and you owe it to me to care for yourself.” This response does not rectify my partner’s hypocrisy: she is not yet remorseful for violating our pact, nor has she taken actions to address her violation of it. And yet she persists in holding me to account for my violation of the pact. I may respond in turn by either accepting her demand for accountability, apologizing and taking steps to abide by the commitment. Or I may continue to resist her demand, insisting that once she violated our pact, I no longer bore such a commitment to her. But in either case, crucially, the moral dialogue spurred by my charge of hypocrisy ultimately concerns the character of the wrongdoing that her initial blame targeted—as well as, perhaps, her own violation of our pact—rather than a distinct fact about her status as a blamer *per se*.

But perhaps the charge of hypocrisy in the prior example can be interpreted as a challenge to blamer’s proportionality only because the wrong that generates the hypocrisy directly bears upon the character of the subsequent purported wrongdoing (i.e., if my partner already violated the pact, then perhaps there was no longer truly a pact for me to subsequently violate). What, then, about cases in which the blamer’s hypocrisy bears no such direct relationship to the purported wrongdoing that her blame targets? Imagine that I have a reputation for berating servers when I take my food in restaurants to be subpar—a habit that I concede to be a vice, but for which I feel no remorse. If I blame you for similarly berating a server on a single occasion while we are out together, you might reasonably respond: “You of all people have no right to blame me for that outburst!” Indeed, regretting your action, you might concede that the server, or other parties in the restaurant, could rightly express indignation or demand an apology—the issue is that I, in virtue of my hypocrisy, cannot. But, even in this case, the challenge can be interpreted as one that concerns proportionality: given that, I feel no remorse for my own pattern of berating servers, it is inconsistent for me to feel anger for your one-off wrongdoing, as this signals that I take your single action to be worse than my pattern. The accusation that ‘I have no right’ need not imply that there is in fact a distinctive moral status that I lack; it can be understood to call attention to the fact that there is no way for me to blame you for your action while maintaining comparative consistency: if I take my more severe pattern of action to warrant no remorse, I cannot consistently maintain that you ought to be remorseful for your less severe single action. This is to say that the issue that your challenge of hypocrisy raises concerns the character of your wrongdoing in comparison to mine, not a distinct fact about my status *qua* blamer.

<sup>10</sup>For a similar observation, see (Todd, 2019, 359).

As with the business condition, let us assume that there are cases in which the non-hypocrisy condition is violated, but the blame is accurate and proportionate. Imagine that I am, by my own admission, a moderate menace on the roads as a driver. While I am your passenger, you take a corner at a speed that threatens to send us into the barrier, and I chide you and demand that you exercise greater care for the rest of the trip. Even if you respond by calling attention to my own careless driving habits—“You’re one to talk!”—it is not clear in what sense this would impeach my ability to call you to account for failing to adequately care for my safety on the road. Certainly, the dialogue that ensues might involve a mutual calling-to-account, and thereby facilitate shared moral understanding both about your bad judgment in this case and my general driving vices. But to the extent that your response is a charge of hypocrisy that specifically challenges the appropriateness of my chiding, it is unclear what more I have to learn from such a charge. A proponent of the standard account will insist that what I learn is that I am a hypocrite. But, as with the business condition, it is unclear how our moral dialogue would proceed without, on the one hand, making reference to the accuracy or proportionality of my blame, or, on the other hand, shifting to a wider discussion about an aspect of my moral character that troubles my interlocutor independently of the blame I’ve expressed. In the former case, standing matters because it bears on accuracy and proportionality; in the latter case, my standing *per se* is not really what is at issue.

#### 4.3. Non-complicity condition

Finally, let us take up cases in which blame is challenged because the blamer was herself complicit in the wrongdoing her blame targets. On the standard account, an agent’s complicity in a wrongdoing is itself a distinctive fact about the blamer that renders her blame inappropriate. One might treat complicity simply as a species of hypocrisy: to blame you for the same token wrongdoing for which I am also responsible is a special case of blaming you for the same type of wrongdoing that I have committed (Todd, 2019). But some have argued that an agent’s involvement in an action itself renders her blaming others for it inappropriate (Cohen, 2006; King, 2015). For the purposes of my argument, it is useful to show that even if one denies that the non-complicity condition is a special case of the non-hypocrisy condition, the non-complicity condition still does not point to a distinct factor about the blamer, beyond accuracy and proportionality, that renders her blame inappropriate.

One response parallels the above point about hypocrisy and accuracy: the inconsistency between an agent’s performing an action and later condemning it can, in some circumstances, cast doubt on the accuracy of her condemnation. (“If you thought this was wrong, why did you participate?”) Let us, then, restrict our focus to cases in which the action at issue was in fact wrong.

Imagine that a shaken bank robber and his getaway driver have just arrived at their hideout after a heist gone wrong. The robber, in a fit of anxious inexperience, has shot a teller who she took to be moving too slowly. At their hideout, the getaway driver says to the robber “How could you shoot the teller? That was a despicable thing to do!” The robber responds: “Don’t you dare—you’re in this just as deep as I am!”

The robber who committed the murder is challenging the blame expressed by the getaway driver because of the latter’s complicity in the wrongdoing. But when we elaborate on the case, we see that this appeal to complicity may challenge the accuracy or proportionality of the getaway driver’s blame. On the one hand, we might interpret the driver’s blame as an effort to insulate herself from moral responsibility for the murder. In this case, the robber’s counter-accusation “you’re in this just as deep as I am!” functions as a challenge to the accuracy of the blame expressed by the getaway driver: while the robber, who pulled the trigger, is undoubtedly blameworthy for the murder, so too is the getaway driver (albeit to a different degree), precisely because, as we say, they are ‘partners in crime.’ On the other hand, we might interpret the driver’s blame as expressing a demand for apology or reparation. Perhaps the driver prides herself on participating in heists in which no one is hurt. In this case, the counter-accusation “you’re in this just as deep as I am!” functions to challenge the demand imposed upon the robber: the driver’s pride in performing non-violent heists does not

justify the form of apology or reparation she demands from the robber. On either way of elaborating the exchange, the challenge “you’re in this just as deep as I am!” serves as an effort to shape the moral understanding of the blamer by casting doubt on the accuracy or proportionality of her blame.

In contrast, if we stipulate that the blame expressed by the driver is accurate and proportionate, it is not clear in what further sense her complicity renders her blame inappropriate. For instance, we might imagine driver’s lamenting “It didn’t have to go down this way. You didn’t have to shoot the teller. And I shouldn’t have put you in that position—I should have been handling the heist and asked you to drive. We really screwed up.” In saying this, the driver has not extricated herself from involvement in the murder—she is still complicit in this sense.<sup>11</sup> Yet the driver (1) accurately recognizes her culpability and (2) calls both herself and the robber to account. Here the rejoinder “you’re in this just as deep as I am!” seems out of place, because the driver’s blame has already accounted for these factors. There is not anything further for the driver to learn from the robber’s charge of complicity—the charge of complicity fails to serve its communicative function.

I have argued in this section that blame that violates the Business, Non-Hypocrisy, or Non-Complicity Conditions typically gives us reason to doubt that the blame expressed is accurate or proportionate, and that such blame is inappropriate in virtue of its inaccuracy or disproportionality. A challenge that a blamer lacks a stake or is complicit in the wrongdoing at issue, or that she blames hypocritically, gives the blaming party reason to doubt, or at least reflect upon, her understanding of the purported wrongdoing at issue. Challenges to one’s standing to blame open up dialogue through which parties can align their moral understanding about purported wrongdoings.

## 5. The Value of Standing Talk

I have argued that when we challenge an agent’s standing to blame, our paradigmatic aim is to facilitate shared moral understanding about the purported wrongdoing that is the target of the agent’s blame. Challenges to standing to do this by providing an indirect reason to think that the blame expressed by the agent is either inaccurate or disproportionate to the wrongdoing. What is at stake in moral dialogue over an agent’s standing to blame is the same as what is at stake in moral dialogue about the accuracy or proportionality of an agent’s blame: both types of dialogue are ultimately concerned with facilitating shared moral understanding about the purported wrongdoing targeted by the expression of blame.

This argument provides reason to endorse eliminativism about standing to blame: we can make sense of the dynamics of moral dialogue about the appropriateness of blame in which specific conditions traditionally grouped under ‘standing’ are invoked without reference to standing as itself a metaphysical status that an agent can possess or lack. A blamer’s stake in a purported wrongdoing, their consistency in attributing a moral fault to others, and their involvement in a given action matter to us insofar as they shed light on the accuracy or proportionality of her blame. This is to say, they matter insofar as they are considerations that can ultimately facilitate our shared understanding of the purported wrongdoings that instances of blame target.

If this argument suggests that we can make sense of moral dialogue that invokes standing to blame without appealing to such standing as a distinct metaphysical status, why not press further and claim that we ought to avoid talk about standing in moral dialogue that revolves around wrongdoing and blame? Here I think it is important to disambiguate what we mean by ‘standing talk.’ ‘Standing talk’ can refer to the specific conditions that are invoked in challenging blame’s appropriateness—the Business Condition, the Non-Hypocrisy Condition, or the Non-Complicity

<sup>11</sup>The robber’s remark might render her blame non-hypocritical, as she is taking responsibility for her fault in the wrongdoing. The important point here, for the purposes of my argument, is that even if one thinks that complicity raises issues for the appropriateness of blame distinct from those raised by hypocrisy, they are not ultimately distinct from the fundamental factors of accuracy and proportionality.

Condition. My argument does not provide a reason to do away with talking about these conditions; indeed, my argument depends upon the point that talking about these conditions is a useful feature of moral dialogue because the conditions help us to assess the accuracy or proportionality of blame.

Assessing the accuracy and proportionality of blame, and thereby the nature of the purported wrongdoing at issue is often anything but a straightforward matter. As bystanders, or even as victims, we are often unaware of all the morally relevant details surrounding an act, rendering our judgment that the act was wrong, or that the agent who performed it was morally responsible, *uncertain*. The appropriate force of blame's calling to account is frequently a matter of *contestation*: the blamer and blamee, or the blamer and other parties, often disagree about what suffices as a sufficient apology or reparation for a wrongdoing. Accuracy and proportionality, as characterized above, are metaphysically illuminating criteria: they tell us a great deal about what it means for blame to be appropriate. But they are often not epistemically illuminating criteria: they do not provide robust guidance about how to assess whether a purported wrongdoer is morally responsible, or whether a particular demand for reparation is warranted.

Assessing whether an agent is issuing blame hypocritically, for a wrongdoing in which she has no stake, or a wrongdoing in which she herself is complicit, is sometimes a determination that we can make even if there is uncertainty or disagreement about the accuracy or proportionality of an expression of blame. For instance, when a dispute over whether a particular action was wrong appears intractable, we can still observe that the agent issuing blame is doing so in spite of unrepentantly performing similar actions in the past, and cast doubt on their judgment that the act was a wrongdoing in light of this. Considerations of standing can make our evaluation of blame more tractable in the messiness of everyday moral life. To be clear, my view is not that an agent's standing is always a more tractable question than the accuracy or proportionality of her blame. Having both avenues of moral dialogue available to us enhances our efforts in the pursuit of shared moral understanding.

Alternatively, 'standing talk' can refer to dialogue that focuses explicitly on whether an agent possesses standing to blame. My argument does caution against a potential danger of such talk: it can lead parties to fixate on the debate about a blamer's standing for its own sake, losing sight of the purported wrongdoing at issue. In such cases, the parties sever the connection between their understanding of the appropriateness of blame and the character of the purported wrongdoing with which blame is concerned. My account cautions us against fracturing the elements of moral life in this way, in light of the aims internal to our moral practices. If moral life involves generating a shared understanding of our actions and their impact upon one another, then we should keep in view the ways in which our various moral practices—such as challenges to standing to blame and blame itself—converge to facilitate such understanding.

**Acknowledgments.** For helpful comments and conversations at various stages of this project, I thank J. Colin Bradley, Miranda Fricker, Yarran Hominh, Justin Horn, Gil Hersch, Jordan MacKenzie, Emma Rodman, Andrew Richmond, William McCarthy, and Shivani Radhakrishnan. I am especially grateful for the insightful and constructive comments of the editor at the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* and several anonymous reviewers at this journal and elsewhere.

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