



ARTICLES

# The Good and the Wrong of Hypocritical Blaming

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## Abstract

Provided we blame others accurately, is blaming them morally right even if we are guilty of similar wrongdoing ourselves? On the one hand, hypocrisy seems to render blame morally wrong, and unjustified; but on the other, even hypocritical blaming seems better than silence. I develop an account of the wrongness of hypocritical blaming which resolves this apparent dilemma. When holding others accountable for their moral failings, we ought to be willing to reason, together with them, about our own, similar failings. Hypocrisy undermines this process of *mutual deliberation*. Thus, even if better than silence, hypocritical blaming is second-best, and that is why it is wrong.

**Keywords:** hypocrisy; agency; accountability; blame; deliberation

In paradigmatic cases of hypocritical blaming, a blamer calls out a blamee for something that is similar, in moral respects, to the blamer's own conduct. For example, some who take their partners to task for infidelity are guilty of the same. Some who hold others accountable for one kind of climate usurpation, such as carnivorousness, muddy their own carbon footprints through another kind, such as unnecessary air travel. And some who are guilty of one kind of prejudicial abuse – e.g. sexist or casteist slurs – blame those they witness committing another kind – e.g. a racist insult. That sort of hypocrisy attracts a great deal of public opprobrium. It seems wrong, not least when the blamer shows little recognition of their own, comparable, faults. But why is this wrong? After all, blaming people hypocritically may be valuable in many of the ways that accountability practices are in general valuable. The blame may be accurate, proportionate in tone and force, and issued to an appropriate target who is responsible for wrongdoing. It may encourage that person, and others, to focus on their moral failing; to reflect on and understand its seriousness; to explain themselves, apologise, and otherwise make proper amends. Thus, hypocritical blaming often seems better than not blaming at all – better, at least, than *silence* on these serious matters.<sup>1</sup> However, I will argue that it is nonetheless morally wrong.

<sup>1</sup>Another problem in this ballpark, Smilansky's 'paradox of moral complaint', has received careful attention in this journal (Shaham 2011; Smilansky 2006, 2013; Piovarchy 2021). Smilansky's problem emerges from a judgement about a feature of moral standards – violations of these standards ought to admit of © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

The worry that accurate hypocritical blaming seems better than silence has garnered three responses. First, that the worry is ultimately unsound – that it is worse, in general, for a hypocrite to blame with accuracy and proportion rather than keeping quiet.<sup>2</sup> Second, that accurate hypocritical blaming is not a moral wrong at all.<sup>3</sup> And third, that it is a *justified wrong* – while there is something wrong with it, the fact that it is better than nothing renders it permissible and vindicated overall.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that we should reject each of these responses. We have just seen that accurate hypocritical blaming need not negate much of the good that blaming in general can achieve. Where this is so, it is difficult to think that silence would be better. The second, sceptical response is also unattractive, as it denies a judgement that is widely and deeply held. Even those who have expressed doubts to me about the wrongness of hypocritical blaming tend to get worked up about it. Even the sceptics take exception to instances that they come across, are wary of blaming hypocritically themselves, are apologetic when shown to be doing so, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Nor, lastly, is hypocritical blaming something that can be vindicated simply by comparing it with moral mutism. Accuracy and proportionality may make blaming someone worthwhile; but to my mind, those features of blame are inapt to justify the particular way in which a hypocritical blamer opts to interact with a blamee.

I defend a view which better explains both the good and the wrong of hypocritical blaming. The practice can be wrong, and unjustified, not because it is worse than nothing, but because it is second-best.

Here is an outline of the core idea, to be developed further below. When we engage each other in response to wrongdoing, we ought to allow people who face similar moral circumstances to reason about these circumstances, and the appropriate responses to them, together. Let us call this process of reasoning together, described in more detail in Section 1, *mutual deliberation*. Mutual deliberation is a valuable form of normative interaction, as I argue in Section 2. It is also a particularly appropriate form of blaming; yet one which requires us, when guilty of similar wrongdoing ourselves, to hold others accountable in a non-hypocritical way (Section 3). Furthermore, there is scant moral justification for choosing to blame someone hypocritically rather than blaming them in a non-hypocritical, mutually deliberative way (Section 4). Thus, even when better than nothing, hypocritical blaming is not as good as it could be, and ought to be. That is why it is wrong.

This account – call it the *Mutuality Account* (*Mutuality* for short) – furnishes us with a response to our original puzzle. Much hypocritical blaming turns out to be an instance of a broader phenomenon that is being increasingly explored by moral philosophers: a person does something that is better than nothing, but nonetheless acts wrongly because they ought to do something even better. Indeed, even where doing

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complaint by all victims; yet this is called into question when the complainant is a similar wrongdoer. My problem doesn't start with assumptions about the nature of moral standards. It starts with assumptions about the positive value of holding wrongdoers accountable. The task will be to reconcile those assumptions with the claim that hypocritical cases are both wrong and unjustified.

<sup>2</sup>Compare Roadevin (2018). This response may also be an implication of other accounts (see Section 5).

<sup>3</sup>Dover (2019); Bell (2013); Lang (manuscript). More general scepticism about the wrong of hypocrisy features in Runciman (2008); Swift (2004); Statman (1997) and Turner (1990).

<sup>4</sup>Fritz and Miller (2018); Lippert-Rasmussen (2013, 2018); Herstein (2020).

<sup>5</sup>Compare Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 102).

nothing is permissible, it is sometimes true that doing something better than nothing is wrong (Section 5).<sup>6</sup>

## 1. Mutuality: the process

Before proceeding to the argument, four points about its focus.

First, many varieties of hypocrisy fall beyond the scope of the discussion to come. We will not, for example, identify a general problem (if any) with failing to practice what we preach,<sup>7</sup> or with pretending to be more virtuous than we are.<sup>8</sup> Mutuality is limited to a form of hypocrisy that impairs accountability between similar wrongdoers. And the duty it aims to support is only to blame similar wrongdoers non-hypocritically rather than hypocritically.

Second, that duty is not intended as categorical – we will see that like other duties, it is subject to benefits and burdens at stake in particular cases. The point is to explain what goes wrong with accurate hypocritical blaming when it is in fact wrong – that is, when there is inadequate justification not to blame someone non-hypocritically instead.

But, third, Mutuality is not presented as the only explanation of the wrong of hypocritical blaming. Though I will highlight its advantages over alternative views, no alternative is ruled out.

Some of these alternatives concentrate on the idea that hypocrites are wrong to blame because they ‘lose standing’ to do so. However, the moral meaning of ‘losing standing’ is elusive. While some hold that losses in standing make it wrong to blame,<sup>9</sup> the same idea, often by the same people, is also explicated as a loss of entitlement,<sup>10</sup> and at other times as a loss of authority.<sup>11</sup> None of these different views is without problems.<sup>12</sup> While I think that what I say informs debates about standing, I leave those complexities aside in order to focus on the central project, which is to present the ideal of mutual deliberation between similar wrongdoers. Through understanding that ideal, I hope to illuminate a core wrongmaking feature of an important species of hypocrisy: the hypocrisy of being unwilling to reason together with those we blame about our similar faults. Let us start, then, by clarifying what the process of mutual deliberation involves.

### 1.1. Who reasons?

Mutual deliberation of the kind I will be concerned with has specific participants. I mentioned that these are similar wrongdoers, but who are they exactly?

We cannot here take up the substantive and meta-ethical questions of which wrongs are in fact similar, and why.<sup>13</sup> But a good test is whether agents find themselves in

<sup>6</sup>E.g. Horton (2017), Frick and Pummer (2017), Pummer (2016), Kagan (1989), and Parfit (1982). I develop the Mutuality Account more patiently in Upadhyaya (2021, ch. 1–4).

<sup>7</sup>Compare Lang (manuscript); Crisp and Cowton (1994); Turner (1990).

<sup>8</sup>Compare Szabados and Soifer (2004), Statman (1997), McKinnon (1991) and Kittay (1982); Tosi and Warmke (2020); Rossi (2020).

<sup>9</sup>Compare Fritz and Miller (2022); Wallace (2010); Herstein (2020: 6); Edwards (2018).

<sup>10</sup>See Fritz and Miller (2018); Todd (2017: 349–50); Bell (2013: 269–70); Cohen (2013); Lippert-Rasmussen (2013); Shaham (2011); Radzik (2011); and Duff (2010).

<sup>11</sup>Compare Piovarchy (2021); Tognazzini (2019); Lippert-Rasmussen (2022, 2013, 2018); Todd (2017); Friedman (2013: 281); Radzik (2012: 177).

<sup>12</sup>I argue against all three in Upadhyaya (manuscript). See also King (2021) and Bell (2013).

<sup>13</sup>Lippert-Rasmussen (2013) outlines a different view (2013: 303–6).

similar moral situations in the light of their misdeeds. Similar wrongdoing, we can stipulate, demands *responsive duties* of agents that are akin in character or stringency: duties to reflect on why what they did was wrong; to apologise; to compensate; to take steps to reform their ways; and so on.

It is plausible that these cases are not restricted to people who commit the very same wrong (e.g. by getting together to plan and execute a framing), or even to people who commit independent wrongs that are identical in moral worth, gravity, and kind (e.g. two separately hired assailants pursuing an innocent target). Instead, mere similarity in both the gravity and kind of wrong done seems sufficient for people to have responsive duties in common. Suppose that Amy publicly abuses someone in a way that targets that person's race, whereas Blake, unaware of Amy's act, publicly abuses someone in a way that targets that person's caste. Both Amy and Blake, as a matter of urgency, owe victims an apology. Although their faults are not the same, both must pay special attention to certain of their attitudes and dispositions. What is more, the most appropriate way to discharge these responsive duties might be similar for Blake and Amy. We might, for example, think that an apology for public prejudicial insult is best communicated in an intimate, one-to-one, setting, showing sensitivity to the prospect of further humiliation. I will assume in what follows that some such similarities hold between racist and casteist insult, but I invite readers to 'plug-in' other wrongs which by their lights place wrongdoers under similar responsive demands.

### 1.2. About what?

The above helps to isolate the content of mutual deliberation: what similar wrongdoers reason about are their similar wrongs, the responsive duties demanded of them, and how they are to do those duties. How, for example, should Amy and Blake go about ensuring that they deliver the sort of apology that duly reflects the significance of prejudicial abuse? What strategies might they take to revise aspects of themselves that may explain their behaviour? More broadly, what dispositions can they cultivate to reduce their chances of recidivism? What costs must they be prepared to bear to make sure these things are done right?

### 1.3. How to reason?

Besides having a set subject matter, the process also has a set format. To see what it takes to reason mutually, consider what we seek from both ourselves and others during a frank and agreeable conversation. We mention ideas we deem relevant to the topic at hand, expecting interlocutors to listen to and consider those ideas, and to offer any responses they might have. But we also expect more than just one-way traffic. As participants in the conversation, *we* are also ready, ourselves, to absorb, reflect on, and respond to considerations our interlocutors raise, including thoughts that they express in response to what we say. Good faith conversation is the opposite of talking to a brick wall. It's a two-way street.

Put otherwise, the format of mutual deliberation is *multi-* rather than *unilateral*. A multilateral exchange combines the normative capacities of multiple agents to reflect on a set of issues. But – observe – it also combines those capacities in a distinctive way. There is a sense in which two people can combine their capacities without any conversation at all: Blake might raise a subject with Amy and suggest that they each go home and think about it. What distinguishes open conversation from mere joint action is that it combines people's capacities through a co-responsive process; a process that directly

engages one another's agency through mutual expression, listening, and feeding back. Only then are we reasoning *together*, in the intended sense, as opposed to reasoning in isolation.

As with the content, however, this format is insufficient by itself; both are necessary. Suppose that Amy and Blake have an open conversation about Amy's racist abuse. They might combine their critical capacities on this issue, listening and responding attentively to each other. This is not enough. To deliberate mutually, Blake's casteism must also be placed on the discursive table. Like Amy's racism, his similar fault must be among the topics that the parties are willing co-responsively to examine. The question for us as mutual deliberators is, How do *we* respond to the moral situations *we* face in common? This demands that discussion be multilateral over the full range of appropriate subject matter: it must be possible to reason together about how both, and not only one of the agents, ought to respond to their wrongdoing.

## 2. Mutuality: the value

Crudely, then, what similar wrongdoers do in mutual deliberation is what people usually do in committed discussion; only this time the topic is their similar wrongs – both of their similar wrongs. I will now argue that this is a valuable interaction for wrongdoers to practice.

### 2.1. Knowledge, motivation, and proportionality

#### 2.1.1. Discussion

One obvious advantage of mutual deliberation is that it involves discussion about wrongdoing, which I take to be generally valuable. As I said, wrongdoers have duties to reflect on why what they did was wrong, and why and how to correct for having done those things. Openly discussing our wrongs involves such reflection.

Of course, beyond just thinking about responsive duties, it matters to lots of stakeholders that wrongdoers discharge those duties. Victims have interests in apology, compensation, reconciliation, and repair. Similar victims and the wider community stand to be treated better if wrongdoers reform. Wrongdoers, too, have interests in this process. Reform is part of moral flourishing in response to one's mistakes.<sup>14</sup> It also pre-empts the burdens of similar mistakes in future.

Again, accountability discussions are effective in achieving all the above. When confronted conversationally about their wrongs, wrongdoers can be exhorted to reflect on the steps they need to take, persuaded or reminded of the reasons to take those steps, and moved by the force of those reasons.

Another value of discussion is that it is *appropriate* for wrongdoers to converse with other agents about their wrongdoing. Blameworthy behaviour tends to arise from a failure in a person's moral agency: a failure to grasp or respond appropriately to certain values. Facing up to that failure through an accountability process – through interpersonal exchange about the pertinent values and their importance – is a way of addressing that problem head-on. It engages the agency that proved defective by encouraging the agent to focus their normative capacities on rectifying the defect. This seems apt in the way that it is apt to address a person's errant forehead stroke through practicing their

<sup>14</sup>Tadros (2020) defends a personal interest in not being responsible for wrongdoing, as distinct from a personal interest in avoiding adverse consequences of wrongdoing. Since it is wrong not to do one's responsive duties, the same reasoning supports a personal interest in not being responsible for failing to do those duties (cf. Pereboom 2021: ch. 4.)

forehand stroke. It would seem appropriate to address agential faults by engaging the modes of agency that underlie those faults.

### 2.1.2. *Value added*

So, mutual deliberation is valuable partly because it involves new opportunities for discussion. But this does not explain its value completely. After all, wrongdoers could discuss their wrongs with anyone. Amy could discuss her racial abuse not with Blake but with petty thief Ciara, who is guilty of a quite different wrong. She may discuss this with the saintly Djamel, who is guilty of no wrongdoing whatsoever. She could (and should) discuss what she did with her victim. There is ample reason to value such alternative discussions. What distinctive advantages, then, consist in discussion between similar wrongdoers about their similar wrongs?

One salient advantage of mutual deliberation is that it provides a platform for sharing personal, performative moral understanding. No doubt saints and other wrongdoers can share knowledge about responsive duties. But similar wrongdoers tend to have more direct experience of being responsible for wrongs of the relevant nature, and discussing their experiences helps them to convey any insights these have yielded. For example, as he is guilty of casteism, Blake may have special understanding of how someone can come to commit that type of wrong, and how to work through concomitant psychological difficulties, such as guilt, shame, and self-deception.<sup>15</sup> He may also have a first-hand understanding of how to set about correcting for prejudicial abuse – how best to approach victims, for instance, or how to avoid committing similar abuses in future.<sup>16</sup> Granted, talking about his wrongdoing is not strictly necessary to convey that knowledge: Blake could convey a lot of information to Amy while suppressing that fact, e.g. if he pretends to be talking about a friend. But being able to openly refer to one's own experience offers a way to make one's points more palpable.

Mutual deliberation also boosts prospects of *collective* gains in knowledge. Suppose both Amy and Blake have, for different reasons, failed properly to apologise to their victims. By talking through and diagnosing one another's failures together, both parties can improve their sense of how best to perform that duty. And they might in some instances be more likely jointly to acquire such understanding *because* they are similar wrongdoers: because they have special access to features of prejudicial abuses and how they occur, and because they have a special, shared need to address those issues.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from moral knowledge, mutual deliberation can build and reinforce moral motivation. For instance, it can make deliberators more sanguine about their ability to reform. Through discussing how Blake is facing or has faced a similar situation, and seeing his comfort with honest self-reflection, Amy can find inspiration and confidence in her own ability to do likewise, and in the belief that doing so is worthwhile.

Motivation to reform is one thing; motivation to first listen to criticism is another hurdle a wrongdoer often faces. But mutual deliberation can also lower that hurdle relative to non-mutual deliberation. For instance, some people get defensive when they view

<sup>15</sup>Compare Brownlee (2015: 4) on performative knowledge about wrongdoing; and Sliwa (2017); Hills (2016); and Lewis (1988) on experiential moral understanding.

<sup>16</sup>This is most likely to be the case if Blake is willing to learn from his mistakes. But that willingness is part of the process of mutual deliberation outlined earlier.

<sup>17</sup>The idea that opening more topics up for discussion promotes mutual knowledge resembles some of J. S. Mill's arguments against suppressive speech laws (Mill 1859, *On Liberty*, ch. II, esp. par. XVIII).

their critics as assuming moral high ground.<sup>18</sup> That perception is unlikely when we engage each other mutually rather than non-mutually. Taking the high ground can hardly be levelled at a critic who is willing to openly discuss their similar mistakes.

In addition, mutual deliberation can motivate us to respond proportionately to immorality. Reflecting on our faults can remind us just how serious or not they are. Blake may lose this reminder if his own wrongdoing is off the table, and in consequence may rebuke Amy with too much or too little force.

One reason we blame others with too much force is because we are trying to *grandstand*: to act as if certain wrongs are beyond us.<sup>19</sup> Mutual deliberation quells that temptation. Blake cannot hope to act as if egalitarian abuse is beyond him – not sensibly, at least – once a multilateral platform is set up to examine his casteist abuse.

So the fruits of mutual deliberation can be numerous. But let us be clear: mutual deliberation does not guarantee those fruits, and they may be achieved without it. I do suspect it will be credible to many readers, in the light of their personal trials with holding others accountable, that discussing our mistakes, concertedly and candidly, with those who have been through similar episodes, is often a helpful way to get others and ourselves thinking about these issues, and a genuine source of reformative motivation. Nonetheless, whatever the statistics may say about this hypothesis (if reliable tests can be constructed),<sup>20</sup> we must admit that mutual deliberation, like any conversation, could have negative results. It *could* lead Blake and Amy, despite concerted effort, to end up mutually rationalising their prejudicial abuses, finding villainous allies in one another.

In defective cases, it will be difficult to attribute bad outcomes to the mutual feature of an interaction. (E.g. if parties are already pre-disposed to self-rationalise, how much more promising would a non-mutual interaction have been?) But in any event, my basic contention is that agents reasoning together about their similar wrongs brings a range of good prospects compared to the same agents talking non-mutually. True, those prospects will not always materialise. But Mutuality does not require that the goods of mutual deliberation always be achievable; only that we ought to strive for them when they are.

## 2.2. Procedural value

Even if non-mutual deliberation has equally good consequences, mutual deliberation may remain preferable for other reasons, as its value is not wholly dependent on its causal contribution to reform. Beyond being an instrument to something good, a deliberative process can be valuable by being constitutive of something good.

This distinction between instrumental and procedural value is much discussed in political theory, particularly in relation to democratic processes.<sup>21</sup> In that context, a familiar view holds that citizens' deliberating together about public policy confers value on subsequent political decisions, even if it does not cause those decisions to

<sup>18</sup>Studies suggest that people who are otherwise morally responsive are more likely to dismiss criticism when they believe their critic is playing the moral high ground (Cramwinckel *et al.* 2013; Minson and Monin 2011; Monin *et al.* 2008).

<sup>19</sup>For a general account of grandstanding, see Tosi and Warmke (2020).

<sup>20</sup>One real-world instance is the use of convicts and ex-convicts to engage students and young convicts in juvenile detention facilities (see Dakers 2011). Of course, some real-world examples involve countervailing factors (see Lilienfeld 2005; Petrosino *et al.* 2002).

<sup>21</sup>For helpful clarification, see Christiano (2004).

be better decisions.<sup>22</sup> One way to explain this idea is to think of co-deliberation as constitutive of a broader ideal of living together. Collaborating about issues of public concern is part of a community that is shaped, jointly, through the interpersonal exercise of the agency of its members. The value of that community depends on the process by which political outcomes are generated as much as on the outcomes themselves: a non-collaborative process may generate the same decisions, yet would not achieve the same good.

A similar point pertains to mutual deliberation. Obviously, deliberating about public policy is quite unlike deliberating about our wrongs. But the ideal of collaborative outcomes appeals to our context. It may be that Blake and Amy would remedy their faults were they to reason about these in isolation. However, if the pair was to achieve the same good outcome by reasoning together, they would secure the additional good of having jointly exercised their agency in pursuit of a wider range of reformatory goals. Though those goals are non-mutually attainable, a mutual process augments the value of their attainment.

### 2.3. *Prevention and togetherness*

Aside from realising a good of collaboration, Blake's mutual engagement with Amy has further non-instrumental value owing to his position as a similar wrongdoer.

One reason it is apt that Blake, relative to say Ciara the petty thief, or Djamel the saint, collaborates with Amy has to do with his responsive duties. Arguably, beyond preventing their own recidivism, a wrongdoer has special duties to prevent similar wrongdoing in others.<sup>23</sup> In correcting for our misconduct, we ought to show special concern to protect the values it flouted. But that concern cannot be self-indulgent. Neither Amy nor Blake can protect the values that speak against prejudice just by ensuring that she alone, or he alone, sustains them. Both must also take an interest in addressing and mitigating offenses to those values at the hands of others.

Mutual deliberation is an exemplary enactment of these preventive duties. Through open, co-responsive engagement, each similar wrongdoer can inspire and fortify both their own and the other's commitment to the values they lacked. In so doing, each can help themselves and the other prevent these deficiencies from re-emerging, as well as helping each other to do the same for third parties. To be sure, Blake's non-mutual engagement with Amy may go some way towards prevention, but again, a multilateral platform heightens these possibilities of joint moral commitment.

A final non-instrumental merit in collaboration between similar wrongdoers is the relationship this entails. Deliberating mutually involves an open recognition that parties are not alone in facing a set of normative demands; they're in it together. That bond matters in itself.

All agents are 'in it together' in one sense – namely that normative standards apply universally. In that sense Ciara and Djamel are no different from Blake: were they in Amy's situation, they too would owe recompense. However, unlike Ciara and Djamel, Blake is in fact responsible for prejudicial abuse. Unlike them, he is together with Amy in confronting the specific moral task of correcting for that type of fault. Mutual reasoning embodies this relation of togetherness.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>The literature on deliberative democracy is vast, but relevant recent discussions include Lovett and Zuehl (2022), Leland (2019), Lister (2017), and Ebels-Duggan (2010).

<sup>23</sup>A central theme in Tadros (2011).

<sup>24</sup>Thanks to Matthew Clayton and Adam Slavny for discussion.



In support of this claim, consider again instances of complicity, where multiple agents participate in the very same wrongdoing. Suppose that Amy and Blake together plan and perpetrate prejudicial affronts in a public forum. Suppose that they then decide to reason about this situation in isolation from one another. That would be a striking omission to recognise being in something together. Yet how different is that example from our present one, of similar rather than the same wrongdoing? True, in cases of merely similar wrongdoing, the very facts which explain responsive duties are different: the precise content of what Amy and Blake owe depends on who their insults wronged and other circumstantial factors. However, many of the facts underpinning their duties – for example, the public and prejudicial nature of their abuses – are either the same or similar. We might then think of complicity as a core case where wrongdoers are warranted in relating on a basis of togetherness, and of non-complicitous, similar wrongdoing as a version of that core case.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Mutuality, blame, and hypocrisy

That concludes our positive appraisal of mutual deliberation as an instrumental and non-instrumental good. Now to explain how this finding relates to the wrong of hypocritical blaming. I will argue, first, that mutual deliberation is an accountability ideal, and second, that hypocrisy undermines that ideal.

#### 3.1. Blaming, done well

To see why mutual accountability should appeal to fans of blaming, let us quickly review the values sketched in the previous section.

Mutual deliberation, we saw, incorporates the value of discussion with wrongdoers about their wrongdoing: of urging agents to respond to their wrongs for the right reasons, through exercise of their agency. These discursive values are significant components of healthy blaming practices. I think this is uncontroversial on many accounts of blaming. Many also hold that blaming has *non*-discursive value, such as fair or deserved sanctions on wrongdoers,<sup>26</sup> and the formation or expression of apt attitudes about wrongdoing.<sup>27</sup> However, even on such views, building the right responses in wrongdoers, by urging them to reflect on and account for their behaviour in conversation with others, is important to vindicating the practice.<sup>28</sup>

But we also saw that mutual deliberation is an optimal model of discussion. By reasoning together, multiple wrongdoers can be better positioned to respond to wrongdoing for the right reasons and in a proportionate manner; they can do so through a more collaborative process; and can form especially salient bonds of commitment to shared preventive duties. In short, mutual deliberation *enhances* discursive values. Given that these are central to healthy blaming, mutually deliberative blaming is a stand-out felicitous case.

Is mutual deliberation too placid to be described as a blaming interaction? People tend to think of blame as angry, forceful in tone, and liable to cause a sting, whereas

<sup>25</sup>This is one account of Matt King's, Gary Watson's, and Victor Tadros' judgements (King 2015; Tadros 2009: 398–400; Watson 2015: 176–84).

<sup>26</sup>Nelkin (2017); Dworkin (2000); Wallace (1994).

<sup>27</sup>Owens (2012); Scanlon (2008); Strawson (1962).

<sup>28</sup>See e.g. Mason (2019); Sliwa (2019); McGeer (2019); Duff (2018); Fricker (2016); McKenna (2012); Bennett (2002).

deliberation might proceed in a more casual tenor; a tenor that some may associate with mere criticism, not blame.<sup>29</sup>

However, a forceful tone has its own discursive value. Casually mentioning someone's wrongdoing, without the exhortation needed to emphasise its demands, risks miscommunicating the subject's stringency and urgency.<sup>30</sup> So there is no reason why a forceful tone cannot be part of mutual deliberation. Quite the contrary – we can expect those who are willing to face their mistakes together to treat the subject with proportionate gravitas.

A related worry is that mutual deliberation is unrealistic. In the real world, blaming is seldom deliberative. Often it is a set of negative attitudes that incline people to resent and shun, rather than communicate and confront. Even when communication occurs, the aim may be more combative than conversational; closer to what Daniela Dover calls a 'drive-by' attack than a dialogue.<sup>31</sup>

This is no objection to the argument being made, however. We must not confuse features of an activity as it is currently practiced with the ideals that the practice ought to aim at. Mutuality is a view about the latter. It claims not that blamers are always or even typically in the business of discursive engagement, but that this is a crucial aspect of blaming when done well.

### 3.2. *The significance of acknowledgement*

Having recognised mutual deliberation as a blaming ideal, we can begin to understand the wrong of hypocritical blaming as a distinctly non-mutual, and therefore non-ideal, instance of the practice.

To see how hypocrisy undermines mutual deliberation, suppose that the blaming process unfolds as follows. When engaging Amy on the topic of her racist abuse, Blake is never willing, during their exchange, to engage with her about his own casteist abuse. The way in which Blake blames Amy here seems wrong. And the central reason why it seems wrong is that he engages her *hypocritically*.

For contrast, imagine a different trajectory: while calling Amy out for racism, Blake acknowledges his casteism without reservation. He says, in earnest, 'I know I committed that similar act; I too must work on responding to what I did, and I'm ready to explore this issue'. Here, his blaming Amy is neither wrong nor hypocritical.<sup>32</sup> Some may disagree.<sup>33</sup> But even those who do should agree that blaming others is less obnoxiously hypocritical when the blamer acknowledges wrongdoing as described. This suggests that one specific type of hypocrisy might be morally wrong: the hypocrisy (or, if you like, aggravated hypocrisy) of *failing to acknowledge similar wrongdoing while blaming others*.

The explanation I propose for such wrongful hypocrisy is this: failure to acknowledge forestalls the values of mutual deliberation. Before we explore when and why that forestalling is wrong, let me clarify how it takes place.

Consider first what is possible if Blake blames Amy *non-hypocritically*, acknowledging his casteist abuse. By acknowledging the issue, he can raise it as a subject of mutual

<sup>29</sup>See e.g. Wolf's and Owens' responses to Scanlon (2008) (Owens 2012: ch. 2; Wolf 2011).

<sup>30</sup>Compare Pickard's contrast between 'affective' and 'detached' blame (Pickard 2011: 128).

<sup>31</sup>Dover (2019: 400–1).

<sup>32</sup>Proponents of the *Egalitarian View* (note 37 below) tend to agree. See also Fabre (2018: 153–73).

<sup>33</sup>E.g. for Isserow and Klein (2017), the fact that a person acted wrongly in the past is sufficient to make blaming problematic. Dover (2019) and Todd (2017) also define hypocritical blaming in a way that it renders it unaffected by acknowledgement.

deliberation with Amy. The pair is now in a position to address, on a multilateral basis, how both Amy and Blake himself should respond to wrongdoing of a certain kind. Now suppose that Blake blames Amy hypocritically instead – he fails to acknowledge his casteism. In this case, the matter is closed for deliberation with Amy. The pair is now no longer in a position to address together the issue of how both Blake and Amy should respond to their wrongs. The most they can address together is how Amy, and only Amy, should respond.<sup>34</sup>

Hypocritical Blake can still make relevant points.<sup>35</sup> As indicated earlier, he can say, ‘Amy, people who do this type of thing should apologise face-to-face’. And he can reply to some things that Amy says – if she asks, ‘How best should people set about apologising?’, he can say, ‘I suggest a private setting’. What the pair cannot discuss together, though, is just the thing that Blake does not acknowledge: his own casteist abuse, and his need to correct for it. When it comes to that issue, Blake cannot participate in a multilateral interaction. He *can* absorb and think about Amy’s comments. If she says, ‘You made a degrading joke; you should similarly apologise to your victim’, he can grasp that point within himself. But the conversation cannot be co-responsive. Without acknowledging his wrong, Blake can neither reply adequately to Amy’s reflections on the topic, nor offer his own. He cannot for example say, ‘Apologising to the person I insulted needs another tack’; or, ‘I intend to apologise face-to-face, but they don’t want to hear from me right now’.

In a nutshell, hypocrisy undermines Mutuality because the hypocritical blamer *deliberatively self-excludes*. Their failure to acknowledge similar wrongdoing means that that subject is off the table for discussion; the only subject on the table is the blamee’s wrong. Correlatively, to accommodate mutual deliberation, we need the deliberative *self-inclusion* that acknowledgement makes possible. Again, we need a two-way street to address both people’s situations together. When it comes to the blamer’s situation, hypocritical blaming permits a one-way street at most.

### 3.3. Non-hypocrisy as willingness to reason

Some might object to this account because they view hypocrisy as a purely internal fault – so long as a blamer recognises their own faults in private cognition, they can address another person’s wrongdoing without being hypocritical at all.<sup>36</sup> Proponents of this view might allege that the failure of mutual reasoning is explained not by hypocrisy *per se*, but by a separate failure to publicly acknowledge wrongdoing.

As suggested in Section 1, perhaps hypocrisy comes in varieties, and perhaps different varieties admit of different moral explication. I agree that it is hypocritical to be blind to our own mistakes when we see similar mistakes in others. However, I also think that a distinct, and disquieting, species of hypocrisy consists in the refusal to converse about one’s wrongdoing, even when one is mindful of it. Imagine the interaction between Amy and Blake playing out as follows:

<sup>34</sup>In Johann Frick’s terminology (2016), giving an argument about how multiple agents in a situation ought to act is part of being able to *interpersonally justify* our conduct to others (2016: 240–42). We might infer that hypocrisy, understood as a failure to reason openly with others about how we ought to act, blocks interpersonal justification. (However, note that Frick uses this idea to assess T. M. Scanlon’s contractualism, rather than to assess the wrong of hypocrisy.)

<sup>35</sup>Thanks to Joe Horton for discussion.

<sup>36</sup>Compare Fritz and Miller’s (2018) and Todd’s (2017) criticisms of Wallace (2010). See also Duff (2010: 128).

*Diversion:*

Blake: That insult you shouted was incredibly demeaning.

Amy: Yes, but likewise for you. I saw your casteist slur.

Blake: Ok – but you really must think about what you did, and apologise.

Amy: Again, so should you.

Blake: Stop changing the subject!

It is plausible that Blake behaves hypocritically here, even though he confesses to his casteism, which suggests that he is also internally mindful. Neither private nor public admission of wrongdoing, therefore, is sufficient to absolve a person of hypocrisy. The acknowledgement sought involves a willingness to deliberate mutually about the content of one's admission.

### 3.4. Other accounts of acknowledgement

Other accounts of hypocrisy have highlighted the significance of acknowledging similar wrongdoing. It is worth briefly noting a few differences in the account given here.

Matt King (2020) argues that a failure to acknowledge wrongdoing is a failure of moral priority. It is, King submits, more urgent for a person to attend to their own faults than it is to attend to other people's faults. So, the problem with focussing on other people's faults while not acknowledging our own is that this gets our priorities backwards.

One limitation in this view is that it does not explain why blaming others affects the nature and gravity of not acknowledging our faults. It is, for example, no less a problem in Blake's priorities to fail to attend to his own prejudice when another prejudice seizes his attention in a Netflix show, than it is to show the same self-blindness when he blames Amy. Mutuality, in contrast, explains the relevance of the latter context, for mutual deliberation depends precisely on the *combination* of blaming-and-acknowledging. Just as we cannot mutually engage others if we blame them without acknowledging our faults, we also cannot mutually engage others if we acknowledge our faults without blaming them. Sure, we have independent reasons to blame, and independent reasons to acknowledge; but only by doing both do we instantiate the value of reasoning together.

Again, Mutuality is not the only view that can explain why the combination of blame-and-acknowledgement matters. A prominent alternative is the *Egalitarian View*.<sup>37</sup> On this view, when Blake blames Amy and fails to acknowledge his abuse, he treats Amy in a manner he is unwilling to treat himself, and this is to deny Amy's status as an equal. That charge does not stick if Blake merely fails to acknowledge his abuse. Only if he also blames others does he commit the sort of differential treatment that is supposed to warrant egalitarian complaint.

Below, in Section 5, I challenge the Egalitarian View. But notice for now the different emphasis. Whereas that view emphasises the badness of treating others as inferior,<sup>38</sup> Mutuality emphasises the goodness of recognising ourselves as included in the same deliberative project with others. Non-hypocrisy matters because it affirms our togetherness, rather than our equal status.

<sup>37</sup>See Fritz and Miller (2018), Lippert-Rasmussen (2013, 2018: 4); Wallace (2010); Duff (2010: 127; 138–39); and Tadros (2009: 394–404). Roadevin's fairness view supports the duty to blame-and-acknowledge in a slightly different way (Roadevin 2018).

<sup>38</sup>Or, closer to Roadevin's terminology (Roadevin 2018), the badness of acting unfairly.

#### 4. The duty of non-hypocritical blame

So far, I have argued that because non-hypocritical blaming advances Mutuality, it is more valuable than hypocritical blaming. This still does not substantiate our conclusion – that hypocrites are wrong to forestall something valuable.

We are not always required to do what is most valuable. Arguably, however, we ought to do things that are valuable for others when we cannot justify doing something else instead. This section applies that familiar principle to hypocrisy. Hypocritical blaming is difficult to justify relative to the more valuable option of non-hypocritical blaming.

Here is a classic example of Shelly Kagan's which brings out the duty to benefit someone where an agent is unjustified in taking a worse option. It might at first seem unrelated to blaming, but we will see that it turns out to be helpfully analogous:

*Parrot:* I risk my life upon entering a burning building. Once I get to the only intact room, I see a parrot in a large cage, and a large baby. I can either flee with only the parrot in the cage, or with both the baby and parrot in the cage; but the latter makes for heavier and more awkward lifting. I flee with only the parrot.<sup>39</sup>

My fleeing with the parrot is wrong here. The reason why is also clear – the hardship of carrying the baby is not sufficient to justify failing to rescue the baby along with the parrot.

Similar reasoning explains the wrongness of hypocritical blaming. The benefits of mutual deliberation are not lifesaving, of course, but I have argued that those benefits – of improved prospects in knowledge and motivation, collaboration, and bonds of moral commitment – are weighty. Moreover, I doubt that we can generally appeal to the hardships of mutual blaming to justify hypocritically blaming others instead.

Again, this claim is not unconditional – just as mutual deliberation may sometimes contribute little, its costs may sometimes permit hypocrisy. For example, my failing to acknowledge wrongdoing may be excused or justified if this risks my imprisonment or social ostracism (though in such cases I am less inclined to consider the blame hypocritical). The point is rather that costs are not *generally* persuasive as justifications for hypocritical versus non-hypocritical blaming.

The costs of mutual deliberation may appear serious at first glance. One natural concern is that it is shameful to be confronted with our faults. This is often raised as a concern about blaming.<sup>40</sup> If it is a valid concern about blaming, is it not also a valid concern about acknowledgement, given that the latter also involves facing our faults? This point might seem to indicate a major difference between Parrot and mutual blaming – heavy lifting is a drag, but it is not emotionally distressing.<sup>41</sup>

But I think considerations of distress are rarely decisive. Remember that those we blame hypocritically are similar wrongdoers, and not only that; wrongdoers whose similar faults are already a topic of discussion. Facing our mistakes in front of *them* is not such a shameful prospect, and if it were, the shame would be unwarranted as our confidants are in the same moral boat.

Even when non-hypocritical blaming is distressing, this only supports hypocritical blaming if the latter is less so. But hypocritical blaming may be more distressing. I

<sup>39</sup>Adapted from Kagan (1989: 16).

<sup>40</sup>See e.g. note 26.

<sup>41</sup>Thanks to Johann Frick for pushing this point.

noted earlier, for example, that a blamee can lash out if blamed hypocritically, and that this is less likely when their critic is mutually deliberative. Non-hypocrisy reduces the distress caused by defensive reactions, which will sometimes offset the distress of acknowledgement.

Another reason why Mutuality might be beneficial, rather than costly, is this: from a more holistic understanding of a person's well-being, being accountable to others is worth the costs. This is one basis for the opening observation that blaming others is better than silence. Being blamed might hurt, but how well a person's life goes for them depends on their facing moral facts about them that others raise. As a similar wrongdoer, Blake benefits from opening up to accountability by others in the same difficult-yet-rewarding way that Amy would.

The strongest reason to discount burdens of acknowledgement, though, is that a wrongdoer independently owes it.<sup>42</sup> For example, wrongdoers owe acknowledgement to their victims and perhaps to similar victims, even in their absence. They also owe special regard, outlined previously, to the values they flouted. Such duties do not disappear whenever they are costly. Perhaps some of these duties do not require mutual reasoning; perhaps Blake can make amends without having to initiate any exchange with Amy. But, remember that a hypocritical blamer is already in the business of engaging a similar wrongdoer about the topic. Plausibly, they have a responsive duty to set about that business in the morally best way.

## 5. Scepticism, silence, and wrongs of second-best

Now that we have completed the argument of this essay, notice its structure. It is a version of the idea that if we decide to blame others, we ought to do so in better rather than worse ways. A view with this structure helps account for the puzzle about the wrong of hypocritical blaming I presented at the beginning. Let's conclude by returning to that puzzle.

On what grounds does Mutuality condemn hypocrisy? The reason it gives is that non-hypocritical blaming is morally superior. It does not say that hypocritical blaming is bad overall. In fact, the discussion has allowed that it is sometimes positively good.

Here is a way to underline that intuition. Suppose Blake has witnessed Amy's abuse. He is now deciding what to do. Blake compares two options.

- (1) Keep quiet.
- (2) Blame Amy accurately and proportionately, but also hypocritically.

Blake – clearly, in my view – has stronger moral reason to do the second thing rather than the first. As conceded throughout, even hypocritical blaming has conversational promise. Calling Amy out with accuracy and proportion may do much to help her understand and make appropriate responses to her racism. These things, without doubt, are moral goods, and are non-mutually attainable. Where keeping quiet is devoid of those goods, Blake has stronger moral reason to choose the hypocritical alternative.

This insight drives some philosophers to be sceptical that hypocritical blaming is wrong to begin with. For example, in arguing against a non-hypocrisy norm, Daniela Dover (2019) points out:

<sup>42</sup>Thanks to Helen Frowe for discussion.

Avoiding [criticism] would not in itself constitute a moral improvement in these cases: silence is not the answer to the [critic's] moral problems. (2019: 405)

Similarly, Macalester Bell (2013) writes:

The educational or motivational value of blame is not undermined by the blamer's hypocrisy; we can learn from the morally corrupt just as we can learn from the morally pure. (2013: 275)

The challenge, here, is to explain how an activity – in our case hypocritical blaming – can be wrong despite having a positive moral valence. How can it be wrong to engage in an activity when avoiding it altogether would be worse?<sup>43</sup>

For some accounts of hypocrisy, this challenge is ominous. One example is the Egalitarian View outlined earlier – that hypocritical blaming is wrong because it treats people as inferior. If that were the right analysis of hypocritical blaming, it would be difficult to explain how it can be better than nothing. Consider: where blaming a person has educative and motivational value, is it morally better to blame them in a way that treats them as inferior in worth? Or, is it better not to blame at all, thereby avoiding treating them as your inferior at the cost of their education and motivation? Well, that seems a tricky moral question. But if it is a tricky question, then accurate hypocritical blaming is not *clearly* better than silence.

However, there is no such challenge for Mutuality. On the contrary – this view shows that it is a mistake to reject the wrongness of hypocritical blaming on the ground that it is better than nothing. It simply does not follow from the fact that something is better than nothing, that it is therefore morally permissible. Again, Parrot illustrates this. In Parrot, my saving only the parrot is better than nothing – one rescue is better than none. But doing so is still wrong.

Now focus on why this is wrong. The answer cannot be that inaction is morally more warranted. The relevant contrast to draw is not with inaction, but with what I have even stronger moral reason to do: viz. save both the parrot and the baby. That superior alternative is what makes the activity wrong.

I have made the same form of argument about hypocrisy. The wrong of hypocritical blaming is not grounded in its contrast with silence. The relevant contrast is with non-hypocritical blaming – that superior alternative is what makes the activity wrong. Thus, hypocrisy can be wrong, not because it is worse than nothing, but because it is second-best.

Is this conclusion defensible when Blake is under no moral duty to blame Amy to begin with? This might be so, for instance, if Amy will lash out at Blake whether he blames her in a hypocritical way or not; or if Blake has borne great burdens in the past to engage people about wrongdoing. Suppose that for such reasons Blake is permitted to keep shtum. Yet suppose that he also has stronger moral reason to blame Amy

<sup>43</sup>Compare Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen's (2023) treatment of a related challenge – he calls it 'The *Anti-Improvement Objection*' – that a rule denying a hypocrite's standing to blame would over-silence criticism. Lippert-Rasmussen responds that because silence itself can be hypocritical, a blamer can also lose standing to keep quiet, and may therefore be justified, overall, in speaking up. By comparison, the response presented in this essay doesn't rely on the controversial idea that a person can lose standing to keep quiet. It also differs in scope from Lippert-Rasmussen's solution. The complaint that hypocritical blaming is second-best applies, for example, in circumstances where we don't lose standing to keep quiet for the reasons Lippert-Rasmussen thinks we can. It also applies in circumstances where, even if we did lose standing to keep quiet for those reasons, that fact would fail to justify hypocritical blaming.

hypocritically, as doing so would still realise moral goods.<sup>44</sup> Then it might seem doubtful that Blake could be wrong to blame hypocritically, as this would imply, curiously, that a person can have stronger moral reason to do something *wrong* than to do something *permissible*.

However, Parrot shows that this implication is to be welcomed. Entering the burning building risks my own life – this may well make it permissible to do nothing. But once I decide to enter, I decide to take on the risks. At that point, I must compare the alternatives that remain to me. Rescuing the baby is crucial for the baby, and there is no compelling rationale for avoiding the heavy lifting and rescuing only the parrot. Albeit better than a permissible option, rescuing only the parrot is unjustified.

The same goes for hypocrisy. We may well be permitted to bite our lip altogether, but once we have decided to engage a similar wrongdoer, we have decided to take on the costs of that decision. The comparison to make at that point is between blaming the person hypocritically versus non-hypocritically. That comparison reveals hypocrisy to be unjustifiably second-best, albeit better than permissible silence.

Once more, the circumstances of blaming won't always be as they are in Parrot. Accountability conversations are thorny interpersonal endeavours whose benefits and burdens rely on many contextual factors. Sometimes, we will lack a good argument for silence both about others and ourselves, owing a duty both to blame, and to acknowledge. At other times, we will be permitted to do neither of those things, for instance where the goods of accountability are already secured. I have also indicated circumstances, like risks of self-imprisonment, where we may be required to blame but permitted not to acknowledge. However the factors play out, though, whether we ought to blame non-hypocritically rather than hypocritically depends on a comparison between those alternatives, and not simply on a comparison between hypocrisy and silence.

In sum, the duty to blame non-hypocritically is underdetermined by the duty to blame at all. That is why we can accept the sceptic's premise – that hypocritical blaming is better than nothing – while rejecting their conclusion – that it is therefore permissible. Even when the worse option of silence is permissible, we can think that hypocritical blaming is wrong in virtue of its attributes as a second-best option. As it happens, this is what we should think.

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<sup>44</sup>This assumes that it can be permissible to do nothing rather than something we have stronger moral reason to do: compare Harman (2016).



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