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Why the moral equality account of the hypocrite's lack of standing to blame fails

1. Introduction

In her 2007 speech to the nation, the Danish Queen complained about how Danish citizens emit too much greenhouse gases (Helmer 2008). Some dismissed the apparent blame as hypocritical given that the Queen's own greenhouse gas emissions exceed by far that of ordinary Danish citizens, e.g., prior to her speech she had the Danish Royal Airforce fly her personal hairdresser to Paris on a specially assigned flight in connection with an exhibition of the Queen's furniture, which she herself attended. This dismissal reflects the widespread belief that hypocrisy undermines the standing to blame and, thus, that a blamee can dismiss blame when it comes from someone whose faults are relevantly comparable or even worse (Cohen 2013: 115-142; Rossi 2018; Scanlon 2008: 175; Todd 2019).¹ In dismissing an instance of hypocritical blame, the blamee need not imply that the blamer is not be in a position to blame her for a different kind of fault in relation to which the blamer's own sheet is clean. Nor need the blamee deny that others, whose moral records in relation to the matter at hand are better than the blamer's, are in a position to blame her for the fault in question, e.g., Greta Thunberg could appropriately have blamed ordinary Danes for that which the Danish Queen blamed them hypocritically. And, most importantly, the blamee need not deny that what she did was blameworthy, e.g., those Danes, who took a critical stance on the Queen's blaming her subjects, might concede that they are indeed blameworthy for contributing too much to climate change. The dismissal of blame on the ground that it is hypocritical is indirect in that it does not involve taking a stand on the content of the blame (Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 96).

¹ For exceptions, see Bell 2013; King forthcoming. For present purposes we can disregard when exactly the blamer's faults in comparison with the blamee's are such that they undermine her position to blame (Cohen 2013; Lippert-Rasmussen 2013). Similarly, we can ignore that blame need not be hypocritical if the blamer is non-culpably unaware of her own faults.

Assuming the practice of indirect dismissal of hypocritical blame to be sound, we need to ask: ‘Why does hypocrisy undermine standing to blame?’ Blame comes in different kinds and, plausibly, the answer to this question will vary across different kinds of blame. Specifically, public, dialogical blame, e.g., holding someone accountable to her face, is one paradigmatic kind and private blame, e.g., keeping a grudge against someone which one never expresses, another. In publicly blaming someone to her face, I demand an uptake from my blamee, e.g., that he or she responds to my blame by apologizing, laying plans – possibly consulting me – for future self-improvement etc. Not having the standing to blame is not having the moral authority to make such demands on one’s blamee. A similar analysis does not naturally apply to purely private blame, though, perhaps, it can be modified to cover that case as well. My focus here is on public, dialogical blame.

According to what I shall call *the moral equality account*:

What deprives the hypocrite of her standing to blame others is the fact that in virtue of her hypocritical blame, she (implicitly) denies moral equality of persons.

This account is attractive. Apparently, hypocritical blame involves the blamer making an exception in her own favour, e.g., the Danish Queen ignored her own extensive use of private jets even though that use is more objectionable compared to her subjects’ use of ordinary commercial flights. The hypocritical blamer treats herself better – generally, but not necessarily always, blaming someone is treating her disadvantageously – than others for no good reason. This amounts to treating people unequally for no good reason and, plausibly, treating people unequally for no good reason is incompatible with the moral equality of persons. Thus, implicitly (at least), the hypocrite denies the moral equality of persons.

Not only is the moral equality account appealing, it is also an account that plays a central role in much contemporary theorizing on hypocrisy and the standing to blame. R. J. Wallace, for instance, argues that ‘hypocritical moral address’ – hypocritical blame *inter alia* – ‘offends against the commitment to the equality of persons that is constitutive of moral relations in the first place’ (Wallace 2010: 308). Similarly, Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel Miller (2018: 118) submit that hypocritical blame involves rejecting ‘the equality of persons, which... grounds the standing to blame others.’ My concern here is not with the details of these, or other specific, versions of the moral equality account (cp. Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 105-110). I mention them simply to show that the moral equality account has traction. My concern is with the equality account as such. I want to show, first, that the moral equality account, and a closely related account, cannot be correct (Sections 2 and 3) and, second, to reflect briefly on what lessons the flaws of the moral equality and the closely related anti-moral superiority accounts (Section 4) can teach us about the power of hypocrisy to undermine standing to blame.

2. *The hypercrite*

Hypocrisy is common. What I shall call hypercrisis is rare, but it exists (and, for my purposes, all I need is that it could exist) (cp. Nelkin forthcoming). Hypercrisis is when a blamer blames herself in a disproportionately severe way for her relatively minor faults in the presence of relevant others whose much graver faults she either completely ignores or blames the others for, but to a degree which is disproportionately mild in view of the severe self-blame she subjects herself to and the relative mildness of her own faults. In short, the hypercrite is the complement to a hypocrite – someone who makes an unfavourable exception of herself.

If the hypocrite implicitly denies moral equality of persons by implicitly affirming her own elevated moral standing, then so does the hypercrite, by implicitly affirming her own lowly standing

relative to other persons. If all persons are moral equals, then neither is one oneself a superior nor an inferior, so there can be no relevant difference in relation to the implicit denial of moral equality of persons between the hypocrite and the hypercrite. However, setting aside perhaps extreme cases where the hypercrite's pattern of blaming manifests a basic lack of understanding of the concept of blame, the hypercrite's standing to blame others is not undermined. Suppose Adrian severely blames himself for, say, stealing \$10 from a rich person, while at the same time expressing mild disapproval of Beth's theft of all of the possessions of a poor person. Surely Beth cannot dismiss Adrian's mild disapproval on the ground that, due to his hypercrisy, he has no standing to blame her. But if the hypercritical blamer does not lose her standing to blame and if either hypocrisy and hypercrisy both involve denying moral equality of persons or neither does, then it is not the case that denying moral equality of persons is why hypocrisy undermines the standing to blame.

In response, some might doubt that the hypocrite – even implicitly – denies moral equality of persons. However, you might subscribe to this denial and still accept the conditional claim I am putting forward. Additionally, it is not a response that friends of the moral equality account are in a position to offer, since their account rests on the putative fact that hypocrisy involves an implicit denial of moral equality. Hence, the argument in the previous paragraph amounts to a compelling objection to the moral equality account. Still, its primary significance lies in the fact that it makes us see that what we might really be committed to is not the moral equality of standing to blame account but something closely related to it – what I shall call *the anti-moral superiority account*:

What deprives the hypocrite of her standing to blame others is the fact that in virtue of her hypocritical blame, she (implicitly) affirms her superiority in terms of moral status over other persons.²

The anti-superiority account fits the intuitions invoked above, since the hypercritical blamer, unlike the hypocritical blamer, does not affirm her own superiority. It is a good question why these two ways of denying moral equality of persons are relevantly different when it comes to standing to blame.³ However, we can set this question aside, because as we shall now see, independently thereof, there is a compelling reason to reject the anti-superiority account.

3. *The hypocrite who implicitly affirms moral inequality*

Consider the following moral norm (henceforth: the *inegalitarian norm*):

Aristocrats ought to prevent severe harm to other aristocrats when they can do so even only at a moderate cost to themselves, and to prevent severe harm to commoners only when they can do so at a small cost to themselves. Commoners ought to prevent moderate harm to other commoners when they can do so at a small cost to themselves, and to prevent even small harm to aristocrats when they can do so only at a severe cost to themselves.

² For present purposes I can leave open whether this account should be extended to cases where a hypocrite implicitly asserts the superiority of moral standing of third parties relative to her blamee.

³ Perhaps it is significant here that the hypercritical blamer implicitly consents to being disproportionately blamed, whereas the target of the hypocritical blamer (typically at least) does not. However, if it is the denial of a certain moral truth about the moral equality of persons that undermines standing to blame, it is unclear how consent comes into the picture even if, no doubt, it is relevant to the overall moral permissibility of blame.

Surely, to affirm the inegalitarian norm is to affirm some kind of hierarchy of moral status among persons and, thus, to deny – implicitly, if not explicitly – moral equality of persons.⁴

Suppose two aristocrats, both of whom subscribe to the inegalitarian norm, blame you for having acted contrary to the inegalitarian norm. Both of them think of you as an aristocrat like themselves and believe that you have often helped commoners when doing so involved accepting moderate costs for yourself. Suppose also that the first blamer is non-hypocritical – this aristocrat knows that she herself has never violated the inegalitarian norm – while the second blamer is hypocritical – this aristocrat knows that she has often violated the inegalitarian norm, helping commoners even when doing so required her to bear moderate costs.⁵

In this case you can dismiss the blame you are being subjected to in two ways. First, you can do so directly by denying that what you did was morally wrong, or morally blameworthy. The inegalitarian moral norm is false and, accordingly, acting in a way which violates it is neither *ipso facto* morally wrong, nor *ipso facto* blameworthy. This direct dismissal – warranted as it is – however, does not amount to denying that your critics are not in a position to blame you. As noted, denying that someone is in a position to blame you is an indirect response to blame in the sense that it brackets whether what you did was morally wrong or blameworthy. Indirect responses to blame attack the critic's standing to blame the blamee for the relevant act, not the blameworthiness of the

⁴ If some moral norms are incompatible with the moral equality of persons, surely the present norm is. However, readers who think it is not, but think that some moral norms are incompatible with the moral equality of persons, could simply substitute their favoured candidate of hierarchical norms for the one I present here for purposes of illustration only.

⁵ Possibly, friends of the moral equality account are committed to holding that, through her helping deeds, this hypocritical blamer implicitly affirms the moral equality of persons. At this point some might respond by pointing to the fact that by appealing to the inegalitarian norm, the hypocritical blamer explicitly affirms the inequality of persons. But, by parity of reasoning, then, the hypocrite who hypocritically blames someone for violating a norm whose content derives from moral equality of persons similarly explicitly affirms the equality of persons. Hence, if this hypocrite has no standing to blame despite his explicit affirmation of moral equality – as, *ex hypothesis* and plausibly so, he has not – then why should the former hypocrite lack standing to blame in virtue of her explicit embrace of inequality of persons? This is a serious challenge to the anti-moral superiority account, but it is independent of the one I explore here.

act. Hence, the grounds for this dismissal are irrelevant to the truth of the anti-superiority account, which concerns the standing to blame, not blameworthiness.

Second, you can dismiss your hypocritical aristocratic blamer by pointing out that, since she herself has often violated the inegalitarian norm, she is not in a position to point fingers at you for doing so. You cannot say the same to your non-hypocritical aristocratic blamer. But then it follows that the anti-superiority account is false. Both of your blamers affirm their (and that of other aristocrats') superior moral standing. Yet one of them has the standing to express her (for other reasons directly dismissable) blame, while the other has not. The fact that accounts for this difference in standing must result from some other difference between them.

At this point, friends of the anti-superiority account might say that there are two aspects of anti-superiority. First, there is, as it were, an issue about first-order moral norms, i.e. moral norms that regulate, say, the distribution of benefits and harms, the respect for others' will etc. In relation to those norms, one can distinguish between egalitarian and inegalitarian norms – my example of an anti-egalitarian norm pertaining to helping others being of the latter kind. Second, there are second-order moral norms about how we assess our conduct in light of these first-order norms. For instance, do these norms imply in a hierarchical fashion that some people can hold others to account for their failure to comply with the relevant first-order principles, but not the other way around? Some might suggest that to have a standing to blame, one must not affirm superiority in relation to these second-order norms and that the relevant difference between my two aristocratic blamers is that the hypocritical aristocratic blamer denies moral equality in this way, while the non-hypocritical aristocratic blamer does not. True, the latter thinks that the interests of commoners count for less, morally speaking, but she accepts that aristocrats and commoners are symmetrically located when it comes to holding each other to account for their failures to comply with the relevant hierarchical, first-order norms.

Unfortunately, this reply will not do. Consider the following norm (henceforth: *the complex inegalitarian norm*), which consists of a conjunction of the original inegalitarian norm and the following additional, inegalitarian, second-order moral norm:

When reasoning about moral norms and our compliance with them, aristocrats ought to treat the contributions etc. of other aristocrats as equally significant, i.e., as something that demands an uptake, e.g., an apology or a display of an intention to improve, but to treat the contributions etc. of commoners as insignificant, i.e., as something that does not demand any uptake. When reasoning about moral norms and our compliance with them, commoners ought to treat the contributions etc. of other commoners as equally significant, but to treat the contributions etc. of aristocrats as more significant, i.e., as something that demands a more extensive uptake compared to similar contributions from commoners.

The complex inegalitarian norm enables us to see that shifting attention to moral equality at a second-order level simply moves the underlying problem one level up. Consider a case where two aristocrats, who both subscribe to the complex inegalitarian norm, blame you for violating the complex inegalitarian norm, e.g., for your often taking the blame of commoners as meriting a response. One aristocrat always acts in compliance with the complex hierarchical norm, while the other hypocritically often violates it. This situation invites a parallel response to the one I gave in relation to asserting first-order-level moral superiority. You can directly dismiss the blame coming from the first aristocrat, because you rightly dismiss the complex hierarchical norm. But you can also dismiss the blame coming from the hypocritical aristocrat for an additional reason; to wit, that her failure to comply with the norm to which she appeals undermines her standing to blame. Yet both deny the second-order-level moral equality of persons. Hence, this denial cannot be what

explains the second critic's lack of standing to blame. If it did, then the first critic would also lack the standing to blame.

Why do the egalitarian and the anti-superiority accounts seem plausible when, in fact, they are flawed? Here is a conjecture. Second-order moral norms are norms that are, and we believe to be, consistent with or indeed somehow flowing from moral equality of persons. Accordingly, it is not natural for us to think of an egalitarian hypocrite who violates hierarchical norms pertaining to assessing non-compliance with moral norms, and we therefore mistake what is a contingent feature of blame that is hypocritical in a way that undermines standing to blame – that it involves implicitly denying moral equality – for a necessary feature of standing-undermining hypocritical blame.

4. Why does hypocrisy undermine standing to blame?

Can we say something in light of the criticisms of the egalitarian and the anti-moral superiority accounts about why hypocrisy undermines the standing to blame? I think we can. All of the hypocrites that we have encountered have one common feature: they are not really serious about the norm, which they blame others for not complying with. Their lack of seriousness manifests itself in their being relatively unconcerned about their own violations of the norm. Thus, one hypothesis which the present critique suggests is that lack of seriousness about a norm undermines one's standing as a critic of others' non-compliance with that norm.

This suggestion, though no doubt in need of refinement and further defence in light of cases other than those discussed here (cp. Crisp and Cowton 1994), explains why one can regain one's standing to blame through one's moral improvement and self-blame even when one has violated the relevant blame-inducing norm severely in the past – now one is serious about the norm and so one's role as enforcer of the norm is not in question (cp. Fritz and Miller 2018: 121-122; Shoemaker and Vargas 2019). It also explains why a critic can be in a position to blame violators of a certain norm

that, out of weakness of the will, she herself has often violated despite being serious about it (Fritz and Miller 2019: 382). Finally, it explains why it would appear that one's standing to blame can be undermined by facts other than the fact that one is not serious about a moral norm by virtue of violating it oneself. Suppose that I blame you for failing to live up to a principle which I reject myself, even if I have never violated it, nor am disposed in a way that would lead me to do so in the future. Plausibly, I have no standing to blame others for failing to live up to this standard about which, obviously, I am not serious myself. As Rawls (2000: 190) puts it: a 'person's right to complain is limited to violations of principles he acknowledges himself'.

A possible upshot of this reflection, and the preceding objections, is that hypocrisy is not a serious (not: no) moral wrong as such. Suppose that the moral norms that one subscribes to are seriously deficient. In that case, it might be better, morally speaking, if one's engagement with those norms is superficial than if one is very serious about them (cp. Wallace 2010: 311). The morality of hypocrisy belongs to micro-ethics, as it were. However, this is not to say that hypocrisy is unimportant – much of our ethical lives concern micro-ethical issues and many people care strongly about not being subjected to or subjecting others to hypocritical blame. However, we care about much else besides morality, and not being subjected to hypocritical blame might be something we care about in large part for non-moral reasons, i.e., because of how accepting hypocritical blame defines our relation as one of subordination to the hypocritical blamer. Subordination is not morally irrelevant, but it also does not appear to have the same moral gravity as failing to save people from death, bodily harm or, for that matter, asserting the moral superiority of some persons over others (Sher 2017: 88-108). And it is relevant to us not just because of its

moral relevance, but also because of how it influences and constitutes our self-conception and our relations to others in ways not fully regulated by morality.⁶

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