

# When Hypocrisy Undermines the Standing to Blame: A Response to Rossi

Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel J. Miller

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We aim to offer an argument justifying the Nonhypocrisy Condition on the standing to blame:

**NH:** *R* has the standing to blame some other agent *S* for a violation of some [moral] norm *N* only if *R* is not hypocritical with respect to violations of *N* (Fritz and Miller 2018: 119).

We maintain that the hypocritical blamer has an unfair *differential blaming disposition*, or *DBD*: he is unfairly disposed to blame others, but not himself, for violations of some norm *N* (122). In virtue of this, he implicitly rejects the equality of persons with respect to *N*, which grounds the right to blame for violations of *N*. By implicitly rejecting that which grounds this right, the hypocritical blamer forfeits his right to blame for violations of *N* (125-127).

Benjamin Rossi (2018) has recently offered several criticisms of this view. We defend our account from Rossi's criticisms and emphasize the account's unique advantage: explaining why hypocritical blamers lack the standing to blame.

## 1. Criticisms and Clarifications

Rossi's criticisms can be summarized as follows:

- i. One can be hypocritical with respect to non-moral norms and ideals, yet we only focus on moral norms (560).
- ii. A DBD is not necessary for hypocrisy, because some paradigmatic hypocrites lack a DBD (556-559).
- iii. Hypocrisy does not require blame, because some hypocrites are not disposed to blame others, but may give hypocritical advice (558).
- iv. Our argument for NH is unsound if (ii) or (iii) are true (560).
- v. The account lacks explanatory power, because it cannot explain why hypocrites without DBDs lack the standing to blame (560).

Consider (i). We write that a hypocritical blamer has an unfair DBD with respect to violations of some *moral* norm (Fritz and Miller 2018: 122, emphasis added), but Rossi correctly notes that one could hypocritically blame for violations of a personal, non-moral norm or ideal (2018: 560). While our restriction is unwarranted, we can unproblematically amend our view to include any "norm, good, or ideal," as Rossi does (561).

Criticisms (ii) and (iii) constitute Rossi's objection that we offer an incorrect account of hypocrisy, which is central to our argument for NH. We offer H3:

**H3:** *R* is hypocritical with respect to violations of *N* iff *R* is blameworthy for a violation of *N* and *R* has a DBD with respect to violations of *N*.<sup>1</sup>

Criticism (ii) states that a DBD is unnecessary for hypocrisy. So-called “clear-eyed hypocrites” do not care about certain norms or ideals, but nevertheless pretend to blame others for violating them (Bell 2013: 275). Moliere’s hypocritical Tartuffe feigns piety for social gain, but lacks any DBD, because he does not judge *anyone* blameworthy for violating the religious norms to which he pretends to be committed (Rossi 2018: 557). Additionally, one might recognize weak-willed individuals as hypocrites, as they are committed to certain norms or ideals, but akratically fail to uphold them (Bell 2013: 275). Such individuals lack a DBD: they feel remorse and guilt for these failures, and are disposed to consistently blame themselves and others.

Criticism (iii) states that blame is also unnecessary for hypocrisy, describing a lecherous priest who “does not blame [his congregation] for their violations of sexual norms, but advises them on how to overcome sexual temptation with compassion and concern” (2018: 558).<sup>2</sup>

Rossi’s criticisms are understandable, since the language of H3 suggests that we are concerned with offering an account of hypocrisy *simpliciter*. Yet given that the context and purpose of our paper concerns *hypocritical blame* (and how it undermines standing), H3 is plausibly understood as an effort to give an account of hypocritical blame, as follows:

**H3\*:** *R* is hypocritical with respect to *blame for* violations of *N* iff *R* is blameworthy for a violation of *N* and *R* has an unfair DBD with respect to violations of *N*.

Since our argument for the Nonhypocrisy Condition depends upon a proper understanding of this principle, it is worth presenting the argument (with clarifications in bold italics) to reflect the clarification in H3\* (cf. Fritz and Miller 2018: 125):

1. If *R* is hypocritical with respect to ***blame for*** violations of *N*, then *R* has an unfair DBD with respect to violations of *N*.
  2. If *R* has an unfair DBD with respect to violations of *N*, then *R* rejects the impartiality of morality with respect to violations of *N*.
  3. If *R* rejects the impartiality of morality with respect to violations of *N*, then *R* rejects the equality of persons with respect to violations of *N*.
  4. If *R* rejects the equality of persons with respect to violations of *N*, then *R* rejects the grounding that gives *R* the right to blame for violations of *N*.
  5. If *R* rejects the grounding that gives *R* the right to blame *S* for violations of *N*, then *R* forfeits the right to blame *S* for violations of *N*.
- So,
- C. If *R* is hypocritical with respect to ***blame for*** violations of *N*, then *R* forfeits the right to blame *S* for violations of *N*.

<sup>1</sup> We mean that *R* has an *unfair* (i.e., unjustified) DBD (Fritz and Miller 2018: 123).

<sup>2</sup> Though he does not blame, he may be *disposed* to blame. If he does have an unfair DBD then he lacks the standing to blame, on our account.

The conclusion of our clarified argument entails NH\*:

**NH\*:** *R* has the standing to blame some other agent *S* for a violation of some norm *N* only if *R* is not hypocritical with respect to *blame for* violations of *N*.

Rossi contends that (ii) and (iii) demonstrate that Premise 1 of our argument is false. If so, then the argument is unsound (criticism (iv)). We will argue, however, that the clarification to Premise 1 (*mutatis mutandis* for the conclusion) renders criticisms (ii) - (iv) ineffective.

## 2. Kinds of Hypocrites and the Standing to Blame

Consider Rossi's criticisms in light of the foregoing clarifications. H3\* is compatible with (ii), since even if an unfair DBD is not necessary for hypocrisy, it may be necessary for hypocritical blame. Rossi agrees with us that blame requires reactive attitudes and admits that clear-eyed hypocrites are not disposed to experience reactive attitudes in response to violations of *N*; they merely pretend to blame (2018: 557). Tartuffe may be hypocritical, but he is not a hypocritical blamer, and so is no counterexample to H3\*. A similar response applies to the lecherous priest of criticism (iii). If he is not disposed to blame his congregation, then he is not a hypocritical blamer (even if he is hypocritical in other ways). Neither the clear-eyed hypocrite nor the lecherous priest show that our argument is unsound, since the first premise is compatible with each of them.

Criticism (v) remains: What good is an argument that only shows that hypocritical blamers lack the standing to blame, rather than all hypocrites? This question should concern us only if all hypocrites lack the standing to blame. But this is implausible. Consider the clear-eyed hypocrite, who by Rossi's own admission *does not genuinely blame*. It is inapt to ask whether the clear-eyed hypocrite has the moral standing to do something he does not do and is not even *disposed* to do. We can nevertheless account for the intuition that the clear-eyed hypocrite *would* lack the standing to blame if he *were* to genuinely blame, because then (supposing he were still a hypocrite of some sort) he would have an unfair DBD. Yet notice: in this counterfactual he would, by definition, no longer be a clear-eyed hypocrite.

The lecherous priest is hypocritical in failing to take his own advice, and this may undermine his standing *to advise*. But this fact alone does not imply anything about his standing *to blame*. If the priest lacks the standing to blame, it would be in virtue of being hypocritical with respect to blaming, not in virtue of his dispositions to advise.

One may find it counterintuitive not to maintain that the clear-eyed hypocrite and hypocritical advisor always lack the moral standing to blame. However, such intuitions may track a distinct notion of standing. Like Wallace (2010), Todd (2017), and Roadevin (2018), we understand the standing to blame as a *right* or *entitlement* (on par with the right to speak one's mind) (Fritz and Miller 2018: 118).<sup>3</sup> One might instead focus on moral *authority*, as Isserow and Klein do. They write about "a kind of standing that [someone] occup[ies] within a particular moral community—a status that is intimately tied up with their capacity to (1) warrant esteem, and (2) bestow (dis)esteem on others"

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<sup>3</sup> Rossi explicitly acknowledges that we understand standing as a right (560, fn. 18). If he is engaged with us in a genuine debate, he must understand standing as a right.

(2017: 193). For this reason, the pronouncements and advice of those who lack moral authority ought not be taken seriously. Clear-eyed hypocrites and the lecherous priest do not merit esteem and lack “social standing” (200). But this is compatible with such agents retaining the *right* to blame, which requires neither a position of social esteem nor that one’s moral pronouncements have illocutionary force.

In sum, the clear-eyed hypocrite and lecherous priest are irrelevant to the truth of H3\* and our clarified argument. One point remains: If weak-willed individuals are hypocritical blamers, H3\* is false, and the argument cannot explain why some hypocritical blamers lack the standing to blame. Importantly, weak-willed individuals pose a problem for us only if they are genuinely hypocritical, and if there is good reason to think that they lack the standing to blame on that basis.

That weak-willed blamers are hypocrites is far from clear. They feel guilty for their wrongs, blaming themselves as well as others (2018: 130).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Szabados and Soifer argue that “some form of insincerity appears to be a requirement for hypocrisy,” but since weak-willed individuals lack insincerity, they will not typically count as hypocrites (1999: 73-74). Alicke, Gordon, and Rose have attempted to empirically test whether people judge weak-willed individuals as hypocritical. Yet their findings are mixed. A priest who preaches against adultery yet finally succumbs to the temptation to sleep with a married woman once was judged as hypocritical by 83% of respondents (2013: 681). Yet a woman who is against even prescription drugs but who “gives in one day to the temptation to ease her pain” was seen as hypocritical by only 12% of respondents (680).

One concern is that these authors’ scenarios are underdescribed. They do not specify whether one is genuinely committed to the value, whether one genuinely believes one’s actions are wrong, or whether one feels guilty after acting against one’s declared values (cf. 692). Perhaps respondents want to condemn worse offenses or those in greater positions of moral authority, like the priest, and the label of “hypocrite” is the only available condemnation in the question. Regardless, the idea that weak-willed blamers are hypocritical cannot be taken for granted, and empirical evidence for this is inconclusive.

Furthermore, as Isserow and Klein argue, “mere mismatches [between words and actions] cannot suffice to single out the phenomenon of hypocrisy” (2017: 192). We are all morally imperfect, and sometimes we simply change our minds. Weak-willed individuals are not guilty of insincerity, false pretense, or making exceptions of themselves. Beyond a mismatch between words and deeds, there is no reason to think weak-willed individuals are hypocritical. If so, it is no shortcoming of our account that it implies neither that weak-willed blamers are hypocritical nor that they lack the standing to blame. Thus, both criticisms (iv) and (v) fail: our argument is neither unsound nor explanatorily weak.

But suppose we are wrong that weak-willed blamers are not hypocritical blamers. H3\* would need to be revised to state a sufficient condition for hypocritical blamers rather than a necessary and sufficient condition. But even so, since weak-willed blamers

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<sup>4</sup> Roadevin also acknowledges this (2018: 145).

lack an unfair DBD, we see no reason to think that they lack the standing to blame. Furthermore, no one has offered a principled argument that they *do* lack the standing to blame. So, even if (contrary to our view) an unfair DBD is unnecessary for hypocritical blame, it may be that an unfair DBD is necessary to explain why a hypocritical blamer lacks standing. If so, then our account would still explain why any hypocritical blamer lacks the standing to blame on the basis of their hypocrisy.

### 3. Rossi's Shortcomings

Rossi seems intent on offering an account of hypocrisy that does the work that our account allegedly fails to do. At the outset, he writes, "we can only understand why hypocrisy is morally objectionable and has an effect on standing to blame if we can correctly characterize hypocrisy itself" (2018: 553).

As noted above, one of Rossi's central criticisms of our account is its purported limited scope:

There seems to be no reason to deny that clear-eyed [...] or weak-willed hypocrites who lack a DBD also lack standing; for example, it is surely the case that Tartuffe's standing to blame others for violations of religious norms is severely compromised by his clear-eyed hypocrisy. So even if the argument were restricted to those hypocrites that possess a DBD, it would provide at best only a *partial* explanation for why hypocrisy undermines standing. (560, emphasis added)

Rossi's language is somewhat misleading, since he does not dispute that we offer a *complete* explanation of why certain types of hypocrites lack the standing to blame. And, as we argue above, we can explain why the clear-eyed hypocrite lacks the standing to blame in a counterfactual sense: if he *were* disposed to blame, he would have an unfair DBD.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, we do not wish to maintain that all types of hypocrites lack the standing to blame, especially if they are not hypocritical blamers.

Regardless, one would expect that Rossi's account at least purportedly explains why hypocrisy undermines the standing to blame, since this is one of his primary justifications for offering it (553-554). Yet Rossi offers *no* explanation for why NH is true. He offers no explanation for why the clear-eyed hypocrite or the weak-willed blamer lack the standing to blame. Furthermore, he fails to offer an alternative explanation for why hypocrites with an unfair DBD lack the standing to blame. His only defense for NH is that "[t]here seems to be no reason to *deny*" that all hypocrites lack standing (560, emphasis added). But this is far from sufficient reason to *affirm* this.

Rossi claims that our account should be rejected primarily because it cannot explain why all hypocrites lack the standing to blame. If this is disqualifying, one wonders why Rossi's own view is not dismissible for the failure to explain why *any* hypocrites lack the standing to blame.

Notably, nearly all authors writing on the relationship between hypocrisy and standing either offer an inadequate account of why hypocrisy (in *any* case) undermines an agent's right to blame, or else offer no explanation at all.<sup>6</sup> While those writing on this topic (Wallace 2010, Todd 2017, Roadevin 2018, and Rossi 2018) point out some

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to clarify this.

<sup>6</sup> Todd 2017 claims that the fact that hypocrisy undermines moral standing has no explanation.

objectionable feature(s) of hypocritical blame, all fail to answer the challenge offered by Bell 2013: why does the fact that hypocritical blame is objectionable in some way imply that the hypocritical blamer lacks the standing to blame?<sup>7</sup>

To our knowledge, we offer the only extant answer: the hypocritical blamer implicitly rejects the equality of persons, and crucially, this grounds the right to blame. In rejecting the former, one forfeits the latter. With our view clarified, and with a powerful explanation for why hypocritical blamers lack the standing to blame, our view cannot be discounted so easily.

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<sup>7</sup> See Fritz and Miller forthcoming.