

# Explaining Loss of Standing to Blame

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## Abstract

Both in everyday life and in moral philosophy, many think that our own past wrongdoing can undermine our standing to indignantly blame others for similar wrongdoing. In recent literature on the ethics of blame, we find two different kinds of explanation for this. *Relative moral status* accounts hold that to have standing to blame, you must be *better* than the person you are blaming, in terms of compliance with the norm. *Fault-based* accounts hold that those who blame others for things of which they are also guilty exhibit familiar moral faults, such as making an exception of oneself, and that these faults explain why they lack standing. I argue in support of relative moral status accounts, showing that they both better trace our practice of dismissing blame on the basis of lack of standing, and that they have more explanatory resources than have been appreciated.

## Keywords

blame – ethics of blame – hypocrisy – standing to blame – apology

## 1 Introduction and Preliminaries

Many people, both in ordinary life and in moral philosophy, think that our own past wrongdoing can undermine our standing to blame others for similar wrongdoing. For example, if I regularly lie to get myself out of sticky situations, it seems inappropriate for me to turn around and indignantly blame you for doing the same, even if you are blameworthy.

Though some version of this idea is widely accepted, it does call for explanation. Why does my own dishonesty – which has nothing to do with whether

*you* are blameworthy for lying – undermine my standing to blame you? In the recent literature on the ethics of blame, we find two different kinds of explanations.<sup>1</sup> The first, offered by what I call *relative moral status* accounts, holds that to have standing to blame, you must be morally *better* than the person whom you are blaming, in the local sense of not being blameworthy for the relevant kind of wrongdoing.<sup>2</sup> The second, offered by what I call *fault-based* accounts, identifies some fault that blaming in such circumstances does or would exhibit, and argues that this fault explains why the (would-be) blamer lacks standing.<sup>3</sup> The faults identified by advocates of these accounts are often exhibited by those who blame in cases in which they are not better, in the relevant respect, than the recipient of blame, so the two accounts will often make the same predictions about who has standing to blame. Nevertheless, the accounts offer importantly different kinds of explanations and make different predictions in some cases.

Fault-based accounts have a *prima facie* explanatory advantage. Whereas relative moral status accounts seem to simply posit a ‘be better’ condition (cf. Todd (forthcoming)) on standing, fault-based accounts can employ a familiar explanatory structure: the (would-be) blamers exhibit some moral fault, and as a result they lose out on something, namely the standing to blame. Nevertheless, I argue in favor of relative moral status accounts.

Work on standing typically focuses on the (would-be) blamer, identifying features of them – faults that their blame does or would exhibit, or their own spotty moral record – that undermine their standing. I begin instead from the perspective of the person being blamed, asking how they may reasonably *respond* to blame from those who lack standing. They may respond by *dismissing* such blame, even if they should engage with blame from others. This claim is commonly endorsed, but less often clearly articulated.<sup>4</sup> Getting clearer on what targets of standingless blame can justifiably dismiss helps us see what

1 There are also standing skeptics like Bell (2013), Dover (2019b), O’Brien and Whelan (forthcoming), and King (2019, 2020). Some of these authors hold that such blame typically is appropriate, while others agree that such blame is often inappropriate but offer a very different kind of diagnosis that is not naturally described in terms of *standing* to blame. I will not consider such views here.

2 For example, Dworkin (2000), Rivera-López (2017), and Todd (forthcoming). Isserow and Klein (2017) are explicitly concerned with characterizing hypocrisy rather than with the standing to blame, but it is natural to extrapolate what they say to a version of a relative moral status account.

3 For example, Wallace (2010), Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019), Roadevin (2018), Todd (2019), and Rossi (2021).

4 Edwards (2019) and especially Herstein (2017, 2020) do more than most to develop the idea that standingless blame can be dismissed.

someone who loses standing to blame loses. In my view, they lose the standing to demand a second-personal expression of remorse from the blamed party *to* them. This picture enables relative moral status accounts to give a more satisfying explanation of loss of standing. We can explain why those who are not better, in the relevant respect, cannot appropriately demand a second-personal expression of remorse from the wrongdoer, and so why such demands can be dismissed.

I follow the recent literature on standing and focus on *hostile* blame.<sup>5</sup> This kind of blame involves a hostile attitude toward the wrongdoer, such as indignation or resentment. Some philosophers think that there are forms of blame that do not involve hostile attitudes.<sup>6</sup> As others have remarked, even those who lack the standing to blame in a hostile way will often retain standing to blame or criticize in less hostile ways, so these other forms of blame or criticism are not my focus here.<sup>7</sup>

I also focus primarily on cases in which blame is expressed to the blamed party. Many authors think that blame can be kept private, and it may be expressed to people other than the blamed party. Many think that we can lack standing to blame privately and to express our blame to third parties.<sup>8</sup> I am optimistic that we can extend what I say here, and will briefly return to this point in section 3. But blame expressed to the blamed party is plausibly the paradigm case, so it makes sense to begin there.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Explaining Loss of Standing

Consider the following case.

**Lies.** Our mutual colleague, Pam, asks you to take on some important but tedious task. You do not have any good reason for not taking it on, other

5 See, for example, Smith (2007), Wallace (2010), Bell (2013), Rivera-López (2017), Fritz and Miller (2018), Rossi (2018), and Todd (2019).

6 See, e.g., Sher (2006), Scanlon (2008), Dover (2019a, 2019b), and Johnson King and Kazanjian (ms).

7 For observations along these lines, see, e.g., Dworkin (2000: 184), Cohen (2013b: 139), Rivera-López (2017: 345), and Isserow and Klein (2017: 199), and King (2020: 1437–1438).

8 Herstein (2020: 3, fn. 11) expresses some skepticism that we really do lack standing to blame others privately, even in cases in which we clearly lack standing to express that blame to the blamed party. See also Radzik (2011: 590, fn. 66).

9 Compare Fricker's (2016) paradigm-based approach to theorizing about blame which begins with 'communicative blame.'

than its tediousness. Nevertheless, you lie, telling her that you have a family obligation and so cannot do it. I find out about this and indignantly blame you for it: “I can’t believe you would lie like that. That’s not OK!” But we both know that yesterday, you saw me do the same thing. Pam asked me to complete the task, and I told what you and I (but not Pam) knew was a lie about a conflicting family obligation.

I seem to be doing something inappropriate in blaming you, even though you are blameworthy. You would be within your rights to simply dismiss my blame, saying “Who are *you* to blame me for this?” The explanation intuitively involves my own recent dishonesty. It would typically be appropriate for a more honest colleague to blame you. So how does my own past wrongdoing make it inappropriate for me to blame you?

### 2.1 *Relative Moral Status Accounts*

Relative moral status accounts hold that to have standing to blame someone for violating a norm, you must be *better* than them, with respect to that norm. This account gains support from the kind of response that we might give to being blamed by someone who fails to meet this condition: “Who are *you* to blame me for this? You’re no better than me!” The kind of moral status at issue here is a very local one: what is required is being better than the person whom you are blaming *with respect to the relevant norm*. It is no part of this view to deny any kind of basic moral equality of persons.

Different versions of this account will offer different understandings of what it takes to be better than another with respect to some norm. The most straightforward understanding, and the one which I will be working with here, is primarily in terms of *compliance* with the norm. The way that you lose standing to blame others for violating some norm is by violating that norm yourself. This understanding tracks intuitions in many cases. In *Lies*, for example, it is because I have lied to a colleague that I lack standing to blame you for doing the same. More generally, in paradigmatic cases of standingless blame, the targets of hostile blame object to and dismiss blame on the basis of the blamer’s own violation of the norm.

Importantly, we can adopt this understanding of being better than another with respect to a norm without holding that anyone who has ever violated a norm lacks standing to blame anyone else who violates that norm. Even if you and I are both guilty of violating a norm, you may still be better than me, in terms of compliance with the norm. This can happen if, for example, you have violated it less frequently, or in a smaller range of circumstances, or only under

more pressure, than I have. There will be reasonable variations of this view that weight these and other considerations differently in determining one's status with respect to a given norm. Here I work with the more general picture, leaving some of these details to future work. One important point for now is that this sort of degressed understanding allows for the plausible claim that an agent might have standing to blame some norm violators but not others. For example, in *Lies*, perhaps we both retain standing to blame a different colleague who *frequently* lies to get out of tedious but important tasks.<sup>10</sup>

Relatedly, we can make sense of *regaining* standing to blame on this account – it is not true that once you have violated a norm, you permanently lack standing to blame others for violating it. Relative moral status accounts can allow for regaining standing because we can *improve* our status with respect to a norm, most obviously by building up a better record of compliance. Doing this will typically take some time, but plausibly regaining standing to blame does take time.<sup>11</sup> I lacked standing to blame my classmates in junior high school for shoplifting, given my own behavior as a 13-year-old, but plausibly I would have standing to blame my friends for shoplifting now.<sup>12</sup>

An important question is *why* the standing to blame requires one to be better in this sense. Even if the account does seem to trace our practice, it does not offer much of an explanation. Existing suggestions are not convincing. For example, Dworkin (2000: 187) claims that the reason why we dismiss blame from those who are themselves guilty of the relevant kind of wrongdoing is

10 Besides one's record of compliance, we may think that things like the range of circumstances in which one is *disposed* to comply with the norm or *how seriously* one takes the norm in deliberation can also matter for your stature with respect to a norm. In fact, we may think that one's track record of compliance is really just an indication of how *committed* one is to the norm. If so then the relative moral status account will be very similar to, and perhaps ultimately collapse into, a kind of *commitment* account, which I discuss later as a competing fault-based account (cf. Todd (forthcoming)). I address this issue in section 2.2 and again in section 4.1.

11 Others have observed that regaining standing seems to take time. See, e.g., Todd (2019: 358–359) and Fritz and Miller (2018: 129–130). Comparing the ways that the competing accounts explain this fact is important, but would require more space than I can devote here.

12 One question is whether relative moral status accounts face an *epistemic* problem: since I typically won't know the details of the moral record of those who blame me, I typically won't know whether they have standing to blame me, on this account. I think that this is an important issue in the ethics of appealing to standing, but not a distinctive problem for relative moral status accounts. There are also epistemic barriers to knowing whether the blamer is genuinely committed to the relevant moral norms (e.g., Todd (2019)) or has unfair differential blaming dispositions (e.g., Fritz and Miller (2018)). The difficulties in knowing who has or lacks standing is one reason why appealing to standing is an ethically "precarious" practice (Herstein (2020: 18)).

that since the blamer is no better than us in the relevant respect, we “do not care as much” about their disapproval. But even if this psychological claim is true of some people, the corresponding *normative* claim, that the blame is *inappropriate* and that dismissing it is *permissible*, needs further defense.

Isserow and Klein (2017) argue that the hypocritical blamer lacks the credentials to be a *moral authority* – that is, someone who the moral community looks to for moral guidance – due to their own similar failings, and hold that only moral authorities have the standing to blame. But it is doubtful that having the *moral* standing to blame requires being a moral authority in Isserow and Klein’s sense. It is true that those who are not looked to as moral authorities in a community will often have their blame ignored, but this is often a moral mistake. For example, Campbell (1994) observes that women are often not treated as moral authorities, and their blame and moral complaints are often dismissed on the basis of bitterness or over-emotionality.<sup>13</sup> But they still have the moral standing to blame.

Finally, Rivera-López (2017: 344–345) argues that such blame is inappropriate because blaming someone “implies ... saying ‘you are not as good as me in this respect’” (344), such that this claim to “moral superiority” is “conveyed in the speech act of blaming” (345). Since this is false in the cases in question, the blame is inappropriate. However, while it is plausible that blamers *often* mean to convey this message, and it is plausible that *recipients* of blame often react as if this message has been conveyed, this account does not so far explain why it is morally permissible to dismiss or brush off blame from someone who lacks standing, rather than simply correcting the mistaken implication.

Though I think that these relative moral status accounts do a good job of tracing our practice of invoking lack of standing, we have not yet explained why having the standing to blame requires that we are better, in the relevant sense, than the person whom we are blaming.

## 2.2 *Fault-Based Accounts*

Fault-based accounts seem more promising on this score: those who blame without standing exhibit some recognizable moral fault, and because of this fault, they forfeit the right or standing to blame others. This sort of explanation is familiar in moral philosophy: you exhibit some moral failing, and thereby forfeit some right.<sup>14</sup> So fault-based accounts of loss of standing seem to have a *prima facie* advantage over relative-moral status accounts.

<sup>13</sup> See also Carbonell (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Not everyone who writes about standing understands it in terms of a *right*; see King (2019) whose skepticism about standing to blame is driven largely by his skepticism that it can be understood in terms of rights. See Fritz and Miller (forthcoming a) for a recent discussion. I will not rely on the claim that standing is a kind of right in any serious way in this paper.

Different accounts identify different standing-undermining faults. Rossi (2021) argues that those who blame others for things which they are also guilty of exhibit faults like pretentiousness, self-righteousness, or complacency. Though Rossi (2021) is concerned with characterizing the vice of hypocrisy, rather than explaining loss of standing to blame, these are familiar moral faults, often exhibited by those who blame others for things of which they are also guilty, and it is plausible that they bear on the appropriateness of this blame.

A popular fault-based account is what Herstein (2020: 10) calls the *egalitarian* account, endorsed by Wallace (2010), Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019b), Roadevin (2018), and others. The central idea is that blaming others for violating norms which you have also violated involves the fault of *making an exception of yourself*. Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019b) provide the most complete defense. On their view, such blamers lack standing because (i) our standing, or right, to blame is grounded in the principle of the moral equality of persons but (ii) such blamers, in treating themselves as exceptions, disregard that very principle. Fritz and Miller (2018: 127) assume that you forfeit an (alienable) right when you disregard the principle that grounds it.

Another fault-based account, defended by Friedman (2013), Todd (2019), and others, holds that those who blame others for violating norms that they have also violated exhibit a problematic lack of *commitment* to morality. In particular, Todd (2019: 357) holds that “one has standing if and only if one is morally committed to the values that condemn the wrongdoer’s actions.” Todd does not analyze the relevant notion of commitment, except to say that it “consists, minimally, in *endorsement* of the value as a genuine value, together with at least some degree of *motivation* to act in accordance with the value” (355). Todd takes actual violation of a norm to show lack of commitment to that norm, but also allows for lack of standing due to what one *would have done* in the wrongdoer’s circumstances.<sup>15</sup> In general, Todd holds that “It is not, fundamentally, ‘having done similar things’ that removes standing, but that to which having done similar things typically *points*: non-commitment to the relevant values” (362). Lacking commitment to (genuine) values and norms is a moral fault. Commitment accounts hold that this fault undermines your standing to blame others for violating those norms.

As these remarks bring out, commitment to a norm and compliance with that norm are not independent. Typically, commitment to a norm will lead one

<sup>15</sup> See Todd (2019: 359–361); see Piovarchy (forthcoming) on this kind of *subjunctive* hypocrisy.



to comply with it, and compliance with a norm is evidence of commitment. In fact, in newer work, Todd (forthcoming) hypothesizes that commitment to a moral norm *entails* compliance. If so, then the relative moral status account, understood primarily in terms of compliance, and the commitment account will be very similar, at least extensionally. What is most important is whether an agent's lack of standing is explained by the fault of lacking commitment to the norm or by the fact that the agent is not better, in terms of compliance with the norm, than the person whom they are blaming. I return to this issue in section 4.

Rather than simply positing a condition on having standing to blame and showing that it is extensionally correct, fault-based accounts can appeal to independently recognizable moral faults and a familiar kind of moral explanation.<sup>16</sup> However, I argue in section 4 that once we think more about the perspective of the blamed party, and about when it is reasonable to dismiss blame, we can question the extensional adequacy of fault-based accounts. First, I introduce my preferred way of theorizing about standing by focusing on what kind of response from the blamed party would be appropriate.

### 3 Standing to Blame and Dismissing Blame

#### 3.1 *Responding to Blame*

There are different ways of responding to blame. First, if you agree with the blamer that you are blameworthy and think that this person is within their rights to blame you, then you should *accept* blame. Second, if you think that the blamer is mistaken and that you in fact are not blameworthy, you will *reject* the blame, perhaps explaining why the blamer is mistaken. Third, you might *object* to some aspect of blame, for example its tone or timing. Finally, if you think that the blamer lacks the standing to blame you, for example that they are being hypocritical or that it is none of their business, you might *dismiss* the blame, refusing to engage with the blamer. Since dismissing blame is the response that is distinctively appropriate when the blamer lacks standing, we

16 Fault-based accounts do not *automatically* give a satisfying explanation of lack of standing. As Bell (2013) and Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019b) argue, it is not enough to simply point to a fault that some blame exhibits. We need to know why that fault, and not others, undermines standing, rather than being objectionable in some other way. In particular, given all that has been said about commitment accounts, it is not obvious why lack of commitment to a norm would remove standing. Notably, Todd (2019: 371–372) hypothesizes that this is simply a fundamental fact, lacking any deeper explanation.



can make progress in thinking about standing by thinking first about dismissing blame.

Here I assume that the popular idea that blaming someone in a way that expresses hostile attitudes like resentment or indignation involves issuing (often implicit) *demands* to them.<sup>17</sup> Many authors accept this view and think about standing in these terms: lacking standing to blame is lacking standing to issue the demands typically issued by the blamer.<sup>18</sup> This gives us a corresponding way to think about *dismissing* blame: when we dismiss blame, we dismiss a demand that is typically made on us when we are blamed.<sup>19</sup> The question, then, is what demand we dismiss when we dismiss blame.

### 3.2 *What is the Demand?*

Many philosophers hold that blaming involves issuing demands to apologize, feel remorse, and repent.<sup>20</sup> Herstein (2017, 2020) endorses this sort of view, and argues that for you to lack standing to blame me is for me to be permitted to dismiss or ignore these demands. Dismissing blame involves being aware of the demands, but not being motivated to do these things by the blame, nor treating the blame as a reason to do these things in deliberation.<sup>21</sup> Of course, I still have good reasons to apologize, feel remorse, etc., in virtue of having acted wrongly. Herstein rightly emphasizes that even when the blamer lacks standing, I cannot ignore these independent reasons. Dismissing blame is dismissing only the demands arising from the blame itself.

But I can fail to treat your blame as a reason, and fail to be motivated by it, to apologize, feel remorse, and repent, without thereby dismissing your blame.

17 For just a small sampling, see Strawson (1962), Watson (1987), Wallace (1996, 2008), Hieronymi (2004), Walker (2006), Darwall (2006), Smith (2008), Duff (2010), Fricker (2016), Edwards (2019), and Piovarchy (2020).

18 See, e.g., Herstein (2017, 2020), Edwards (2019), and Piovarchy (2020).

19 See Lippert-Rasmussen (2020: 1–2): “In publicly blaming someone to her face, I demand an uptake from my blame ... Not having the standing to blame is not having the moral authority to make such demands on one’s blamee.” Lippert-Rasmussen’s suggestions for the contents of the demand are shared by Herstein, whose more developed account I focus on in the main text.

20 See, e.g., Darwall (2006) and Fricker (2016). Macnamara (2013b) also accepts something like this view, though she denies that blame involves issuing *demands* in a weighty moral sense, holding instead that the speech act of blaming calls for certain responses.

21 More precisely, Herstein’s (2017, 2020) account is in terms of *directive reasons*: when I demand that you  $\phi$ , I issue directive reasons for you to  $\phi$ . These are reasons for you to  $\phi$ , and to do so *because* of that very reason: they not only tell you what to do, but to do it because they have told you to do it. When I lack standing to issue these directive reasons, you are permitted to ignore them, not treating them as reasons in deliberation about whether to apologize, feel remorse, etc.

I may do these things for good independent reasons, and not because of your blame, without thereby dismissing your blame. Suppose that you have the standing to blame me for wronging some third party, and that you do so. But suppose that I feel remorse and apologize for the independent moral reasons to do so, rather than because you have blamed me. In such a case I *might* dismiss your blame, but I might not. Contrast these two responses:

- (1) Look, I know I shouldn't have done it and I'm going to apologize, but not because *you* of all people have blamed me!
- (2) I know, I just feel terrible about this. In fact, I'm on my way to apologize right now.

In neither case are my feelings of remorse or decision to apologize motivated by your blame, and in fact in neither case do I (re-)deliberate about whether to do or feel these things, taking your blame into consideration.<sup>22</sup> But while response (1) is a way of dismissing your blame, response (2) is not. Responding with (2) is unobjectionable and does not wrong you. Indeed, apologizing, feeling remorse, and repenting for the independent moral reasons to do so often seems *better* than doing so because we have been blamed. But dismissing blame from someone who has standing is inappropriate and is plausibly a way of wronging the blamer. So whatever dismissing blame amounts to, it cannot simply be failing either to be motivated by the blame to apologize, feel remorse, and repent, or to treat it as a reason in deliberation about whether to do these things. So what is the difference between response (1), in which I dismiss blame, and response (2), in which I do not dismiss it?

In my view, when we dismiss blame, we dismiss a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse to the blamer.<sup>23</sup> Such an expression is (in natural readings of the case) present in response (2) but not in the dismissive

22 Is blame inappropriate in a case in which I already feel remorse and already intend to apologize? I do not think so. This would assume that the only point of blame is to get someone to feel badly, apologize, etc., but blame very plausibly is about more than this, e.g., standing up for and communicating our values and holding one another to account (e.g., Bell (2013)). Here I am disagreeing with Wallace (2019: 546): "protest generally makes no sense once the person to whom it is directed has acknowledged wrongdoing and apologized and made amends." I do acknowledge, though, that there may well often be pragmatic reasons not to overtly or publicly blame someone who already clearly feels remorse and has apologized, etc. But equally there can be pragmatic reasons not to overtly or publicly blame even people who do not seem to feel remorse, etc.

23 Edwards (2019) also argues that blame demands (among other things) that the blamed party respond with an expression of remorse. I agree with much of what Edwards says, though I think that his discussion does not sufficiently bring out the point that the expression of remorse needs to be a *second-personal* one, to the blamer.

response (1). We should of course *feel* remorse when we act wrongly, and we should express that remorse to the person whom we have wronged, typically through a sincere apology.<sup>24</sup> But since the person blaming us may not be the person whom we have wronged, such an apology need not involve a second-personal expression of remorse *to the blamer*. I am suggesting that hostile blame involves a demand for the *kind* of second-personal expression of remorse characteristic of a sincere apology, with the blamer as recipient.

How we express remorse will vary widely in the light of social conventions, the relationship between the blamer and wrongdoer, the nature of the wrongdoing, and more. But some common ways include downcast eyes, an averted gaze, and of course sincere apologies. Acknowledgements of wrongdoing can also express remorse, but it is possible to acknowledge wrongdoing without expressing remorse. It is also possible to *tell* the blamer that you are remorseful, while at the same time dismissing their blame: “Well obviously I shouldn’t have done it, and of course I feel bad. But who are *you* to blame me, you hypocrite!?”<sup>25</sup> A second-personal expression of remorse of the kind which I have in mind not only informs the blamer that you are remorseful, but – in a way to be elaborated on in section 5 – lets them in on that remorse and creates a relationship in which you are vulnerable to them in a certain way. This, in my view, is what we refuse to do when we dismiss blame because of lack of standing.

I am not claiming that all moral criticism involves a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse to the blamer, and I am not claiming that all *blamers* will only be satisfied if they receive such an expression. Some blamers may be satisfied if the wrongdoer sincerely apologizes to the third party whom they have wronged, even if they dismissively refuse to express remorse

24 What about cases in which the person whom you have wronged is the person blaming you, but also lacks the standing to blame you since they have wronged you in similar ways? I think that since you have wronged them, this ordinary duty remains in place such that you do owe them a sincere apology, even though they lack the standing to demand it of you. This relies on separating owing someone an apology from their having the right to demand it of you by blaming you, which is a plausible description of the normative situation in such a case. However see Bovens (2008: 232), who argues that in such a case an apology is not owed (but may be sensibly given).

25 Rosen (2015: 82–83) considers someone who responds to resentment with a cheerful but sincere promise to do better, “without a hint of guilt or remorse.” Rosen claims that such a person “palpably frustrates the desire implicit in resentment.” We can say similar things about *indignation*, which is the attitude involved in hostile blame where the blamer is not a victim of the wrongdoing and so is not owed an apology.

to the blamer.<sup>26</sup> Rather, I am claiming that when we dismiss blame, as we do when we think that the blamer lacks standing due to their own wrongdoing, this is what we are dismissing. It might be that in some cases, and for some forms of blame, such a demand is not issued. If so, then dismissing blame in these cases would be inapt. For example, non-hostile forms of blame or criticism, like pointing out wrongdoing or constructive criticism, may not involve this demand, but also are not typically apt targets of dismissive responses.

There are, however, forms of hostile blame which do not seem to involve a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse. Consider private hostile blame, where we keep blame to ourselves, or third-party blame, where we blame someone who is not present, or even dead, expressing our blame to some third party. In cases like this, the blamer knows that no response from the blamed party is forthcoming. Just as the blamed party cannot respond with a second-personal expression of remorse, they also cannot respond by dismissing a demand for such a response. Still, many think that we can lack standing to blame privately and to blame those who are absent.

This is an important general issue, especially for those who think that blame necessarily involves issuing demands to the blamed party. But briefly, it is not obvious that blaming privately, blaming the absent, or even blaming the dead, does not involve a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse. The blamer knows that such a demand will not be satisfied, but this does not make it impossible to issue the demand. It does not obviously even make it irrational to do so. It may be therapeutic or a good way of standing up for your values.<sup>27</sup> Third parties can then challenge the blamer's standing to issue this demand, dismissing it on behalf of the absent party. In the case of private blame, there is no *other* person to dismiss it, but consider the dissonance that we can experience when we find ourselves holding blaming attitudes that we think that we lack standing to hold, for example upon coming to realize that we are no

26 Compare Macnamara (2013a: 156) on the distinction between what kind of response would satisfy individual blamers and what kind of response blame itself calls for. For example, a parent of a young child might be satisfied if the child responds to being blamed for being mean to his sister by initially storming off, but soon after privately apologizing to his sister. But it does not follow that the child has thereby satisfied all the demands issued through the blame, if in fact the parent was genuinely issuing hostile or indignant blame (which is also questionable in many cases involving children).

27 Keeping your blame to yourself, as well as blaming the dead or those who you will never see again, can be psychologically taxing. One explanation is that the person you are blaming will not be able to respond, and in particular that they will not be able to express remorse for what they have done. Your demands will go unsatisfied. This may be part of the reason why it can make sense to let go of blame and resentment toward the dead; cf. Walker (2006: 158–160).

better than the person whom we are blaming. In such cases, keeping our blame to ourselves may be the best that we can do, even if we should not even blame privately.

I will work with this picture in evaluating accounts of loss of standing.<sup>28</sup> First I will cast some doubt on fault-based accounts of loss of standing by considering cases in which blame seems to be dismissible even when the blamer lacks the relevant faults. Second, I will argue that thinking more about what is involved in expressions of remorse and the dismissal of such demands provides a satisfying explanation of *why* we can dismiss blame from those who do not meet the kind of condition posited by relative moral status accounts.

#### 4 Contested Cases

Fault-based accounts hold that in blaming others for things of which you yourself are also guilty, you exhibit some moral fault, and in virtue of this you lack standing to blame. The most common accounts focus on either a lack of genuine commitment to the norms in question or making an exception of oneself. However, there are cases in which the blamer does not exhibit either of these faults, but in which they arguably lack the standing to blame due to their own relevantly similar wrongdoing. If so, then lack of standing cannot be explained by these faults. It may be that those who blame without standing very often exhibit these faults, but these would not explain the lack of standing. As we will see, the cases are contestable. Still, I think that they motivate revisiting relative moral status accounts.

##### 4.1 *Weak-Willed Blame*

The first kind of case is *weak-willed* blame. As Bell (2013: 275), Rivera-López (2017: 343–344), Rossi (2018: 558–559), and Fritz and Miller (2019a: 382–383, 2019b: 558–559) have observed, those who act wrongly due to weakness of will,

28 More would have to be done to fully defend this view of dismissing blame; I discuss this more thoroughly in Snedegar (forthcoming). One objection concerns *self-blame*: when I blame myself for some wrongdoing, do I thereby demand that I express remorse to myself? We should be careful not to draw conclusions about blame more generally from self-blame. Insofar as blaming involves issuing demands, and the standing to blame involves having the authority to issue such demands, we should expect things to look different in the case of self-blame than in the case of other-blame, given the very different relationships which you have with yourself and with others. See Tierney (2022) and Nelkin (2022) for a discussion of some important differences. Todd and Rabern (2022), Shoemaker (2022), and Fritz and Miller (forthcoming b) all discuss some complications that self-blame raises for theorizing about standing.

and then – as is often the case – feel guilty and intend to do better in the future need not exhibit apparently standing-undermining faults like lack of commitment to moral norms or exception-seeking.<sup>29</sup> But some authors have claimed that they nevertheless lack standing to blame.<sup>30</sup> Fritz and Miller disagree, insisting that since these blamers do not make exceptions of themselves, they retain standing “to feel or express anger or indignation” (2019b: 558). They add that “no one has offered a principled argument that [weak-willed wrongdoers] *do* lack the standing to blame” (2019a: 383).

It is difficult to make progress here by appeal to direct intuitions about whether weak-willed blamers have or lack standing to blame, because such intuitions typically are not very strong in either direction.<sup>31</sup> But we can get leverage, or at least a new source of evidence, by switching perspective and putting ourselves in the shoes of the blamed party. Importantly, we should hold fixed that the weak-willed blame in question is *hostile*, indignant blame, of the kind typically at issue in this literature, and which I have just argued involves a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse to the blamer. Suppose that I know that you gave in to temptation and lied to our colleague to get out of a boring task yesterday, and that you feel guilty and intend to do better. Now you see me do the same thing today and indignantly blame me. When I imagine being on the receiving end of indignant, hostile blame in this case – even when your wrongdoing (like mine) was due to weakness of will, and you feel guilty – it seems to me that I would be within my rights to *dismiss* your blame, asking “Who are *you* of all people to blame me for this?” Blame from a more honest colleague, on the other hand, would not be dismissible in this way. Since this kind of dismissive response is distinctively appropriate when the blamer lacks standing, this is evidence that weak-willed blamers in fact do lack standing to blame in a hostile or indignant way.<sup>32</sup> Less hostile criticism, on the other hand, may be appropriate.

Relative moral status accounts hold that to have standing to blame others, you yourself must be *better* than them, in terms of compliance with the relevant norm. Even if your violation of the norm was due to weakness of will,

29 They also need not exhibit the kinds of faults which Rossi (2021) identifies as involved in hypocrisy, like deceitfulness, pretentiousness, or complacency.

30 See, e.g., Cohen (2013b), Rivera-López (2017: 344), and Rossi (2018: 558–559). Isserow and Klein (2017) are not explicit that weak-willed blamers lack standing, but I believe that much of their discussion lends itself to this interpretation.

31 See Piovarchy (2020: 619–620), and empirical work by Jordan et al. (2017) and Alicke et al. (2013) for a discussion of this uncertainty and ambivalence.

32 This is to employ what Edlich (2022: 213) calls the *Deflection Test* for standing: we determine whether a blamer has standing by asking “whether we would accept a deflecting response by the blamee.”

you may fail to meet this condition and so, according to these accounts, lack standing. Thus, relative moral status accounts give what I take to be *prima facie* intuitive verdicts about these cases.

Defenders of fault-based accounts will insist that wrongdoing due to weakness of will does not undermine standing when the blamer does not exhibit the relevant standing-undermining faults. Fritz and Miller (2019a, 2019b) hold that since weak-willed blamers do not make exceptions of themselves, they retain standing to blame. However, if I am right that the targets of such blame can appropriately *dismiss* indignant blame in these cases, that is some evidence that these blamers *do* lack standing, and it is not enough in this context to simply claim that because they do not make exceptions of themselves, they retain standing.

Fault-based theorists can respond by claiming that if the agents in question really do not exhibit the relevant faults, the targets of blame should, despite our initial judgments, accept hostile or indignant blame. They may offer an error theory for the judgment that this blame can be justifiably dismissed. For example, they may argue that hostile blame directed at others typically communicates that the blamer does not blame themselves for similar wrongdoing. Otherwise, we would expect the blamer to make clear that they *do* blame themselves before blaming others. If so, it is natural to interpret cases in which hostile blame is directed only at the other as involving exception-seeking. Once we stipulate that the blamer really does blame themselves, we should acknowledge that the blame cannot be dismissed, and that the blamer has standing.

Here we have a clash of intuitions: the exception-seeking theorist insists that once we stipulate that the blamer does not make an exception of themselves, their hostile blame cannot be justifiably dismissed, while I judge that it can be. In response, I offer an error theory of my own, meant to explain the reluctance that some might feel to accept that such blamers lack standing. Notice that there is something very unusual about the blamer issuing hostile or indignant blame, given that it is common knowledge that they recently did the same thing.<sup>33</sup> It would be more common for them to issue gentler criticism, acknowledging how hard it can be to resist temptation and stressing the importance of complying with the norms. Such criticism can be quite sharp, but what is crucial is that it does not involve a hostile attitude like indignation.

33 See Todd (forthcoming: 7) for the suggestion that this is so unusual because such critics would seem to be “creating a rod for [their] own back.” See also Cohen (2013b) who wonders whether acknowledging your own similar wrongdoing in the course of *indignantly* blaming others just makes the hypocritical blame “more manifestly absurd.” Obviously acknowledging your own similar wrongdoing while criticizing in more gentle ways is not at all absurd.



But even those who have lost standing to issue *hostile* blame will typically retain standing to criticize in these gentler ways. So in the more typical cases of gentler criticism from weak-willed wrongdoers, the critic will have standing to *criticize*. It is just the standing to *blame* in an indignant, hostile way that they lose, and such blame is unusual. This helps explain the resistance to the claim that weak-willed wrongdoers lose standing to (indignantly) blame, even if they do in fact lose it.

The defender of a commitment-based account can hold that the cases are under described, and that once we fill them in, our intuitions about whether the blame can be justifiably dismissed turn on whether the blamer is committed to the norm in question. One kind of weak-willed case is where the wrongdoing is a one-off, rather than part of a pattern of weak-willed wrongdoing. If I lie to a colleague to get out of a tedious task once, due to weakness of will, that may not show that I lack commitment to the norm against lying. But if I regularly do this, that is good evidence that I lack sufficient commitment to the norm, even if I feel badly about it each time. We would be more likely to accept blame from a one-off liar than from a frequent liar, and the commitment account is well placed to explain this: the former but not the latter is sufficiently committed to the norm.

I agree that the one-off liar is more plausibly committed to the norm against lying than the frequent liar. But I think that considering variations of the case shows that standing depends not only on how often the blamer lies; it also depends on how often the blamed party lies.<sup>34</sup> If the blamed party's lie is *also* a one-off, then I think that they are still within their rights to dismiss the blame: "Look, I shouldn't have done it, I know. I gave in to temptation this one time, *just like you did yesterday*, so get off my back." On the other hand, if the blamed party is a frequent liar, this kind of response is not apt. What this suggests is that it is not just the *commitment* of the blamer that matters, as the fault-based commitment account holds. Rather, the variation in standing across these different cases shows that what matters is relative moral status, with respect to the norm.

An alternative commitment-based response is that so-called weak-willed wrongdoers must not be sufficiently committed to the norms and values in question. Todd (2019: 357) formulates a standing-denying response to blame as "Who are you to blame me? Your *past behavior* reveals your own non-commitment to the values that would condemn what I did." And in Todd (forthcoming), he hypothesizes that violating a norm entails non-commitment to that

34 It also plausibly depends on how serious the lies are, but that adds an unnecessary layer of complication here.

norm. His reasoning is that, if being committed to a norm is not enough to get you to comply, then complying is beyond your control in an important sense, in which case it is not a genuine norm for you. However, this is a very strong notion of commitment. We seem to violate norms to which we are committed very often – this is, arguably, just what it is to be weak-willed. As Cohen (2000: 8) observes, our commitment to the norm comes out in other ways, e.g., taking it seriously in deliberation, criticism of others for violating it, and guilt when we violate it. So commitment and compliance can come apart, and it is the latter that seems to explain the blamer's (loss of) standing.

#### 4.2 *Culpably Mistaken Blamers*

The second case is blame from someone whose wrongdoing was due to culpably mistaken beliefs. Here is a variation on a case from Rossi (2021: 71):

**Foolish Frank:** Frank believes, and has frequently stated, that it is immoral for a parent to risk losing large sums of money on risky financial ventures. He has blamed others for playing the stock market and investing in startups. However, Frank is also extremely gullible and foolish, and culpably so. When he receives an email from someone claiming to be a deposed prince asking for a \$25,000 loan to fund a coup d'état to be repaid with interest, he sends it, thinking about the college funds that he will be able to start for his children once the money from the "prince" rolls in. Frank has fallen for similar scams in the past, and should have known better. Later that day, he finds out that his brother has invested a significant sum of money in a friend's new business, and indignantly blames him for it: "You have kids! You have to be more careful with your money!"

Even if we assume that Frank is correct that his brother's investment was too risky, it seems clear that his brother would be within his rights to dismiss this blame, asking "Who are you to blame me for this? You just foolishly sent money to that so-called prince!" But Frank need not lack commitment to the norm against wasting money when others depend on you, and he need not make an exception of himself – we can imagine that once he realizes what he has done he will blame himself just as harshly as he is blaming his brother. As Rossi (2021) points out, he also need not exhibit other faults plausibly associated with hypocrisy such as pretentiousness, self-righteousness, or complacency. He does of course exhibit serious faults like gullibility and foolishness, but these are not faults that are naturally associated with hypocrisy or loss of standing to blame.

The fault-based theorist will try to find some fault that Frank exhibits that could explain his lack of standing. One thought is that Frank is being *complacent* in not working to correct his gullibility, in a way that shows lack of commitment to the norm against wasting money. He has fallen for scams like this before, so he should realize that he is gullible, and that it is harming his family. Even if, in any given case, he does not realize that he is doing the wrong thing, genuine commitment to the norm should lead him to realize that he is gullible and to try to do better. This, then, would be a fault that could explain his lack of standing.

But we can stipulate that Frank really is committed to the relevant norm, and that he has started to try to do better. Still, making oneself less gullible takes time, and at least in the meantime, Frank's brother seems within his rights to dismiss Frank's blame over his investment, after Frank has once again sent money to a "prince." But it is not plausible to say that Frank lacks commitment in this intervening time in which he is genuinely trying to become less gullible.

A defender of the exception-seeking account may claim that Frank really is making an exception of himself, but is doing so unknowingly. Many of us are not always sufficiently reflective about our behavior and so may not reflect on the fact that we are acting wrongly.<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, we may realize in passing that we have acted wrongly but not dwell on it long enough to blame ourselves. Or, we may realize that we have acted wrongly but make *ad hoc* excuses for ourselves. If we then blame someone else for the same behavior, we can rightly – and informatively – be accused of hypocrisy, and have our blame dismissed. But we can stipulate that none of this is happening in Frank's case: he is fully aware of what he is doing, and on reflection endorses sending the money. It is just that he is culpably gullible in believing that the "prince" will pay him back.<sup>36</sup> Even given this stipulation, Frank's brother seems within his rights to dismiss Frank's blame.

#### 4.3 *Hypocrisy and Lack of Standing*

As a final point, and extension of the error theory that I have offered above, even if we accept that weak-willed or culpably mistaken wrongdoers lose standing to blame, it does not follow that their blame would be *hypocritical*. Discussions of the ways in which wrongdoing undermines our standing to blame are nearly always framed as analyses of hypocritical blame. Hypocrisy is a distinctive moral vice that can be exhibited in different ways, not just in

<sup>35</sup> See Wallace (2010) for a discussion of the role of self-scrutiny in hypocritical blame.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee here.

blaming.<sup>37</sup> While blaming others for things that you have also done will often display this vice, it need not always do so. On the account of blame at issue here, standing involves the right to make certain demands on people who have acted wrongly. Unless we simply define “hypocritical blame” as blaming others for  $\phi$ -ing when you yourself have  $\phi$ -ed, there is no reason to think that the only way that one’s own past wrongdoing can undermine standing is by making one’s (would-be) blame hypocritical. So part of the reluctance to say that weak-willed or culpably mistaken blamers lack standing to blame may come from a reluctance to say that they are *hypocrites*. But they may lack standing without being hypocrites.

#### 4.4 *Taking Stock*

I have argued that cases of weak-willed and culpably mistaken wrongdoing cast doubt on fault-based accounts of lack of standing. Such wrongdoers seem to lack standing to blame despite not exhibiting the relevant faults. However, they are not better, in the relevant respect, than those whom they are blaming, and so the relative moral status account predicts that they lack standing. I have also tried to defuse responses that defenders of fault-based accounts may offer. I do so in order to motivate the revisiting of relative moral status accounts.

Still, I acknowledge that we may have a stalemate. Fault-based accounts and relative moral status accounts offer different verdicts about these cases, but both can say plausible things in defense of their verdicts. Defenders of fault-based accounts may therefore appeal to theoretical considerations. They can offer principled reasons as to why the blamers in these cases retain standing to blame: they do not exhibit the faults that, according to these accounts, undermine standing. Relative moral status accounts, on the other hand, can only point to their so-far unargued-for ‘be better’ condition on having standing. In the next section I argue that fault-based accounts do not have an explanatory advantage over relative moral status accounts, after all. Relative moral status accounts can give a principled reason why weak-willed and culpably mistaken blamers lack standing, because we can justify the ‘be better’ condition on standing.

37 See e.g., Shklar (1984), Turner (1990), Crisp and Cowton (1994), Szabados and Soifer (2004), and Rossi (2018, 2021) for more general discussions of hypocrisy. This is not to say that there is some simple account of hypocrisy – it may capture a range of different kinds of faults connected in a loose way. Still, we have found it useful in moral evaluation, and there are certain patterns of behavior that naturally attract the label. For skepticism, see Dover (2019b: 389): “I suspect it unhelpfully groups together a number of habits and character traits that are morally problematic for very different reasons.”

## 5 Relative Moral Status, Expressing Remorse, and Standing

As we saw in section 2.1, advocates of relative moral status accounts have made suggestions for why the standing to blame requires being better in the relevant respect, but they are unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete. These accounts are onto something important, however. When we dismiss blame, we often react as if the blamer has claimed some kind of moral superiority, and reply with a denial of this: “You’re no better than me! I don’t have to take this from *you* of all people.”

Drawing on this thought and the discussion of dismissing blame, we can provide an explanation for why we can dismiss blame from those who are not better than us in the relevant respect, and hence why they lack the standing to blame. In brief, complying with the blamer’s demand for a second-personal expression of remorse involves a kind of subordination of ourselves to them, putting them in an elevated position from which they can decide whether to, as Bovens (2008: 231) puts it in his discussion of apology and forgiveness, “restor[e] our moral stature,” in a certain sense. But when the blamer is no better than us, in the relevant respect, we can justifiably dismiss a demand to do this because they have not earned this elevated position. In this section I will flesh out this explanation and discuss some important open questions.

### 5.1 *Apology and Forgiveness as a Primer*

When the person blaming us is someone whom we have wronged, the second-personal expression of remorse should typically take the form of a sincere apology. In many cases, this apology will be met with forgiveness, or at least be a first step in that direction. But often the blamer is not someone to whom we owe an apology, and as a non-victim, they are not in a position to forgive us.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to begin with an apology and forgiveness, in part because much of the existing work on responding to wrongdoing takes this as its focus.

A prominent line of thought is that apologizing involves subordinating oneself to the recipient by empowering them to decide whether to forgive and let us move on from the wrongdoing. For example, Helmreich (2015: 76) says, “When an offender apologizes to his victim ... he treats the victim as someone ... to whom moral repair is both owed and insufficient, and he commissively empowers the victim to hold him to such treatment ... the apologizer begins a relationship as the victim’s moral debtor.” Similarly, Bovens (2008: 230–231)

<sup>38</sup> See Fritz and Miller (forthcoming a) for a discussion of important asymmetries between the standing to blame and the standing to forgive.

says that apologies should be delivered in a humble way, communicating that I “attribute special respect to you and I thereby try to make up for the deficit of respect with which I treated you” and that “I relinquish power to you in that I let you be in charge of restoring my moral stature.” Martin (2010: 551–552) discusses “kneeling apologies” which attempt to give the recipient a reason to let the wrongdoer back into the moral fold “despite his unworthiness,” by “affirming the recipient’s superiority and thereby invoking a kind of noblesse oblige.”<sup>39</sup>

Literal *kneeling* apologies are, for most of us, rare, and the language of subordination, relinquishing power, and noblesse oblige can be jarring in discussing interactions between mature moral agents. Still, the general idea that an apology puts the power in the hands of the recipient to decide whether to forgive and stop holding the wrongdoing against the wrongdoer is compelling. There are of course different accounts of what it is to forgive, but a common idea is that it involves a commitment not to seek further reparations and apologies. Walker (2005: 153) argues that forgiveness releases the wrongdoer from “further grievance” and “open-ended ... demands for satisfaction.” And Allais (2008: 56–57) argues that when you forgive, you stop holding the wrongdoing against the wrongdoer and “dissociate her wrongdoing from the way you feel about her.”

This gives us the sense in which the recipient of an apology can restore the moral stature of the wrongdoer. This does not rely on seeing the wrongdoer as losing any kind of fundamental moral worth. Rather, they lose moral stature insofar as their wrongdoing colors their relationships with others – others relate to them *as wrongdoers* by, e.g., feeling resentment, making demands for reparation, distrusting them, and so on. By forgiving, the recipient of an apology can put the wrongdoing behind them, not letting it continue to color the relationship, and so in this sense restore the wrongdoer’s moral stature.<sup>40</sup>

To reiterate a crucial point, apologies are *not* a way of fully compensating for the wrongdoing, such that forgiveness and restoration of moral stature is

39 Related ideas show up in broadly Kantian theorizing about the nature and meaning of wrongdoing as treating others as less worthy of respect; see, e.g., Murphy (1988), Hieronymi (2001), and Anderson and Pildes (2002).

40 Walker (2006: Chapter 5) argues that forgiveness is much more complex than this, and that some instances of forgiveness will not involve a complete return to the former state of the relationship. She argues, in fact, that in some cases forgiveness will just require ending the relationship, rather than restoring it to its former state (p. 161). Still, the idea that forgiving involves ceasing to hold the wrongdoing against the wrongdoer so that it is no longer treated as a reason for further grievance, mistrust, and so on is plausible, and it is this basic thought that I need here.

*owed*. It is something that we are *asking* for, acknowledging that the recipient does not owe it to us. Thus, apologies empower the victim to decide whether to grant us this restoration of moral stature. As Helmreich (2022: 13–14; 2015) says, an apologizer places himself “in his victim’s hands” and takes an apologetic *stance* toward the victim. This stance is a way of relating to the victim, namely in a subordinate way.

## 5.2 *Expressing Remorse*

Apologizing and forgiveness are not at issue in cases in which the blamer is not a victim of the wrongdoing. But I think that important elements of apologizing and forgiveness can carry over to these cases. While philosophers have understandably focused primarily on the ways that victims should feel toward remorseful wrongdoers, and on victims’ ability to restore the moral stature (in the sense at issue here) of those wrongdoers, there are also important questions about how third parties should feel about and respond to remorseful wrongdoers. Just as the wrongdoing colors the relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, the wrongdoing also colors the ways that third parties relate to the wrongdoer. And just as wrongdoers typically have an interest in restoring – as far as possible – relationships with their victims, they also have an interest in restoring relations with third parties. This is an important part of moving on from one’s wrongdoing.

I argued in section 3 that hostile blame issues a demand for a sincere expression of remorse, analogous to an apology – or at least that this is the demand that we take ourselves to be dismissing, when we dismiss blame. My suggestion here is that by complying with the blamer’s demand for a second-personal expression of remorse to them, we empower the blamer to decide whether to restore our moral stature in much the same way as we empower the victim when we apologize, so that our wrongdoing is “put behind us” and does not further color the way that they think about and relate to us. The recipient of an apology is empowered to decide whether to cease treating the wrongdoing as a reason for further resentment and demands for satisfaction. Similarly, by complying with the blamer’s demand for an expression of remorse, we empower them to decide whether to cease treating the wrongdoing as a reason for further indignation, reproach, and more generally for relating to us as a wrongdoer.<sup>41</sup>

If this is right, then by issuing hostile blame, the blamer is taking up an elevated position, relative to us, and demanding that we empower them in this

41 In the case of apologizing, the subordination is often thought to be *corrective*. Bovens (2008) argues that we subordinate ourselves to the person whom we have wronged as a way of giving them an excess of respect to make up for the lack of respect involved in our



way, via a second-personal expression of remorse to them. Complying with this demand involves accepting the fact that the blamer is in a position to demand this; that is, accepting the arrangement whereby you are subordinate or vulnerable to them in this way.<sup>42</sup>

It is not that expressing remorse itself involves subordinating oneself to whoever the audience of that expression of remorse happens to be. It is also not necessarily true that we put this power in the hands of the person to whom our expression of remorse is *addressed*. I might make a tearful confession of my wrongdoing to someone who I take to be even more morally flawed than me because I know that they will not take up a position of judgment, to which I am not ready to be subjected. Rather, when we express remorse to the blamer as a way of *complying with their demand* that we do so, we put this power in their hands. In demanding that the wrongdoer responds to their blame in this way, the blamer demands to be given, or recognized as having, an elevated position like that of the recipient of an apology, such that it is up to them to restore the wrongdoer's moral stature, in the sense outlined above.

Now we can begin to justify a 'be better' condition on the standing to blame. Hostile blame involves a demand for a sincere expression of remorse to the blamer, analogous in important ways to apologizing. Complying with this demand involves taking up a subordinate position relative to the blamer, empowering them to decide whether to restore one's moral stature. And so, in making this demand, the blamer takes up an elevated position, relative to the blamed party. When the blamer is no better, in the relevant respect, the blamed party can justifiably reject this arrangement by dismissing the demand.<sup>43</sup>

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wronging them. When the person blaming us is not someone whom we have wronged, we have not necessarily treated *them* disrespectfully, and so there may not be any deficit of respect that we need to correct. But I do not think that we need to appeal to this sort of moral re-balancing to motivate the claim that apologizing involves putting the power to begin moving past the wrongdoing in the hands of the recipient, so I do not think that there is a problematic disanalogy between apologizing and responding to blame from someone you have not wronged.

- 42 See Helmreich (2022: 7–10, 13–14) (drawing on Owens (2006)) for a discussion of how apologizing, as well as accepting "gifted" forgiveness, accepts the presupposition that the victim is in a position to restore the wrongdoer's moral stature. I am suggesting here that complying with the demand, issued via hostile blame, to express remorse to the blamer accepts the presupposition that the blamer is in a position to restore the wrongdoer's moral stature.
- 43 An anonymous referee observes that, in the end, the relative moral status account may be a kind of fault-based account: the agent who blames without standing exhibits the moral fault of demanding an expression of remorse when they are not in a position to

The claim is not that there is something wrong with viewing the wrongdoer in a more negative light, and so as deserving of reproach, mistrust, and so on, if you are not better, in the relevant respect. The problem arises when you issue hostile blame, and so demand a second-personal expression of remorse, empowering you to decide whether to restore the wrongdoer's moral stature in the way outlined above. This is because by doing so you take up an elevated position relative to the wrongdoer, and demand that the wrongdoer take up a subordinate position, when your own similar wrongdoing means that you have not earned this elevated position. This does not mean that those who are not better should not be ready to stop holding the wrongdoing against the wrongdoer once they show remorse. It is just that they cannot justifiably demand that the wrongdoer empower them to decide whether to do so, via a second-personal expression of remorse to them. This would be to take up an elevated position relative to the wrongdoer that they have not earned.

### 5.3 *Is Blaming Morally Objectionable?*

This account may seem to rely on a morally objectionable understanding of blame. Being blamed, as I have described it here, involves being issued demands to subordinate ourselves to the blamer. On such a view it is no wonder that we frequently try to dismiss blame – in fact, we might think that we are nearly *always* within our rights to dismiss such a demand, especially if the blamer is not someone whom we have wronged.

It is important to keep in mind that I have been focusing on hostile, indignant blame, so that some degree of ugliness is to be expected.<sup>44</sup> That said, it might be that in many cases and at least in some respects, such blame is objectionable. Nussbaum (2016), for example, argues that anger is objectionable because it involves a desire to “downrank” the offender. Perhaps Dover (2019a, 2019b) is right that our practice would be improved by approaching critical interactions in an open-ended, conversational mode rather than the condemning, sanctioning, or didactic modes that pervade both philosophical work on blame and much of our everyday blaming practice. All of this is compatible with my main claims, that when we dismiss blame on the basis of

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do so. I agree that standingless blamers exhibit this fault. But this fault just is, or just is constituted by, the fault of blaming without the standing to do so. It is not an independent moral fault, like being disposed to make an exception of yourself or lacking commitment to morality, that explains the lack of standing. In any case, this is not the kind of fault that defenders of fault-based accounts have identified as explaining loss of standing.

44 See McGeer (2013) for a criticism of attempts to take the “bile out of blame” (163). McGeer takes the task of accounts of blame to be to show how blame can be fitting and appropriate, even given its unsavory features.

lack of standing, we are dismissing a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse to the blamer, and we are doing so because complying with this demand would involve subordinating ourselves to the blamer, who we take to have not earned this elevated position. For all I have said here, this practice may turn out to at least often be mistaken.

Relatedly, we often *inappropriately* dismiss blame. This is not surprising, given the unpleasantness typically involved in complying with a demand to give the blamer the power to restore our moral stature.<sup>45</sup> One obvious way of inappropriately dismissing blame is to dismiss blame from someone who in fact has standing. The account here also brings out another way in which we might inappropriately dismiss blame, which I think is common though less often acknowledged. Dismissing blame because of lack of standing is only apt when the blamer has issued a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse. But many gentler or more constructive kinds of moral criticism do not do this. Targets of criticism may interpret that criticism as hostile even when it is not – think of common reactions to well-intentioned and non-judgmental vegetarians and climate activists, for example – and when they do so they may inappropriately attempt to dismiss that criticism, dismissing a demand that was not actually issued. It can be hard to tell – especially as the target of criticism, given a common tendency toward defensiveness in the face of accusations of wrongdoing – when some instance of criticism is genuinely hostile blame and issues a demand for a second-personal expression of remorse.

Blaming interactions are filled with opportunities to make moral mistakes, and the practice of appealing to a lack of standing is likely to be particularly fraught. But I hope to have shown here that this practice is well captured by a relative moral status account, and that this account has more explanatory resources than we may have thought. Getting clearer on the nature of this practice, as I hope to have done here, is crucial for the important further work of morally evaluating it.

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45 See Herstein (2020: 18), who observes that appealing to a lack of standing is an ethically “precarious” practice, given both its effectiveness in silencing critics and the unavoidable uncertainty in determining who does or does not have standing.

## Biographical Note

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