You Don't Have to be Better to Blame

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Abstract: It is widely held that hypocrites lack standing to blame. Leading accounts explain this by reference to some fault of the hypocritical blamer, such as a rejection of the equality of persons or insufficient commitment to the relevant norm. Recently, however, some theorists have rejected these *fault-based* accounts in favor of a novel proposal: having the standing to blame another individual requires being better than them with respect to the relevant norm. We argue that extant defenses of these "*be better*" accounts fail, and such accounts face a host of objections that cast doubt on their truth.

Keywords: blame; moral standing; standing to blame; hypocrisy; ethics of blame; criticism.

> *Go ahead*
> *Throw your rocks at me*
> *From your little glass house*
> *And then take off running*
> *You're no better than me*
> *We've both made mistakes, haven't we?*
> –Kealla Settle, "I Didn't Plan It"

In the musical *Waitress*, Jenna becomes pregnant with her abusive husband, leading to several appointments with her obstetrician, Dr. Pomatter. Although Jenna and Dr. Pomatter are both married, the two begin an affair. Afterward, Jenna finds her fellow waitress Becky kissing their boss Cal at the diner and chastises her for cheating on her husband. Becky responds by singing the song "I Didn't Plan It," emphasizing, "You're no better than me/We've both made mistakes, haven't we?"

This retort is familiar. Becky suggests that Jenna is not entitled to blame Becky for her affair when Jenna is no better, having had an affair herself with Dr. Pomatter. Becky doesn't say that

having an affair with Cal isn't wrong. Instead, she just resists *Jenna's* blame. This idea that certain facts about the blamer can make their blame inappropriate even when someone is blameworthy has seen increasing attention in the philosophical literature. While it is rarely labeled in popular media and everyday life, philosophers refer to this phenomenon of being entitled to blame others as having *moral standing* to blame.

Several philosophers think of standing as a right, particularly as a normative power or authority. In blaming, one generates an obligation for the blamee to somehow give that blame uptake, such as by apologizing, admitting fault, making amends, etc. (Edwards 2019; Piovarchy 2020; Fritz and Miller 2022; Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a). We'll adopt this understanding of moral standing here. To maintain this power, a blamer must satisfy various conditions: they must not be *hypocritical* in their blaming, they can't be *complicit* in the wrongdoing, the wrongdoing must be their *business*, etc.[1] One way to understand Becky's complaint, then, is that Jenna is hypocritical, and the hypocritical blamer lacks any normative power to demand uptake for their blame.

Exactly why Jenna's hypocrisy undermines her standing to blame is controversial. Theorists often point to some kind of *fault* in the blamer that undermines her standing for some reason. *Moral Equality theorists*, for instance, argue that the hypocritical blamer implicitly rejects the moral equality of persons with respect to some norm by holding themselves (or being disposed to hold themselves) to a different standard of accountability than others. After all, Jenna seems content to blame Becky for infidelity, but she makes an unfair exception of herself by not sufficiently blaming herself. Because we are all moral equals, and this moral equality grounds the right to blame, Jenna forfeits her right to blame Becky for infidelity by being hypocritical (see Wallace 2010; Fritz and Miller 2018,

[1] On the non-hypocrisy condition, see Cohen 2006; Wallace 2010; Fritz and Miller 2018; Roadevin 2018a; Rossi 2018; Todd 2019; and Piovarchy 2020, among others. On the non-complicity condition, see Cohen 2006; Todd 2019; and Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a: 116-125. And on the business condition, see Radzik 2012; McKiernan 2016; Seim 2019; and Snedegar 2025.

2019; Vogt 2024). Other theorists focus on a different kind of fault, namely, that hypocritical blamers are insufficiently committed to whatever norm they blame others for violating.[2] According to these *Commitment theorists*, one has the right to blame for some norm violation only if one is sufficiently committed to that norm (see Friedman 2013; Rossi 2018; Riedener 2019; Todd 2019; Piovarchy 2023a, b; Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a). By only blaming Becky, however, Jenna seems insufficiently committed to fidelity.

Recently, theorists seeking an alternative to these *fault-based accounts* of standing have proposed *relative moral status* accounts (Todd 2023; Snedegar 2024). On relative moral status accounts, "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" (Snedegar 2024: 405). We can express this requirement as a *Be Better* condition on standing:

> **BB**: An agent, S, has standing to blame R for violating some norm, N, only if S is better than R with respect to N.

BB nicely explains various cases where agents intuitively lack standing to blame. The case from *Waitress* is one such example; Jenna is no better than Becky with respect to violating the norm against marital infidelity. Accordingly, Jenna lacks the right to blame Becky for her infidelity.

These kinds of cases are common in our everyday lives. Consider another example:

> *Blinker:* Leah notoriously never uses her blinker while driving. While Leah's friend, Kayla, is normally a very conscientious driver who signals regularly, on one occasion she forgets to use her blinker and consequently gets into a minor accident while giving Leah a ride. Despite

[2] Just what the relevant commitment amounts to is disputed. At minimum, it plausibly involves endorsing a norm or value and being motivated by it (Todd 2019: 355; Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a: 67), though it may also involve prioritizing the norm over less important ones (Piovarchy 2023b: 3471); being disposed to communicate one's commitment to the norm and to respond to it appropriately (Rossi 2018: 562-563); having the appropriate affective responses in response to its adherence and violation, such care or distress, respectively (Piovarchy 2023a: 526); and a willingness to blame those who violate the norm (Riedener 2019: 197) and accept blame from others when one violates it oneself (Rossi 2018: 563).

> knowing Kayla's normally responsible driving habits, Leah rebukes Kayla for not using her turn signal, correctly pointing out that the blinker would have prevented the accident. Kayla angrily replies, "Like you have room to talk! You're no better! In fact, you're *worse*! I didn't use my signal *one time*, but you *never* use yours!"

While Kayla should have used her signal, Leah seems ill-positioned to blame her for this failure. And Kayla's response presents a plausible explanation for this fact: Leah is worse than Kayla at using her signal, thus violating BB.

Clearly, BB and the non-hypocrisy condition on standing are close cousins, and so one might put forth BB as an alternative account of why hypocrisy undermines standing meant to *compete* with fault-based accounts like the Moral Equality view or the Commitment view. Yet one might insist that while BB and not being hypocritical are related, they are significantly different. On one understanding of hypocrisy, for instance, it may be hypocritical for Kayla to blame Leah for not signaling even though Kayla is better at signaling than Leah.[3] In that case, one could see BB as an *additional* condition on standing beyond hypocrisy, or perhaps even as a standing condition that should *replace* the non-hypocrisy condition. While it is not always clear how proponents of BB think of the condition, they clearly see themselves as offering something in competition with fault-based views like Moral Equality and Commitment views, so we will also understand BB as a competing account.[4]

Although BB fits nicely with cases like *Blinker* and *Waitress*, we think this turn to BB, and to relative moral status accounts generally, is a mistake. We argue in section 1 that BB itself is insufficiently motivated in the literature, critiquing extant defenses of the view. In section 2, we

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[3] We revisit the idea that hypocrisy and being worse than another come apart in 2.1 and 2.3 below.
[4] Todd 2023 suggests that, given additional premises, BB might be extensionally equivalent with a Commitment account (1181-1183), though Snedegar 2024 argues that this depends upon an implausibly strong notion of commitment (419-420).

make the case that not only is BB insufficiently motivated; there are also good reasons to think that it is false. The result is that fault-based accounts remain the top contenders in the literature for why hypocrisy undermines standing.

1. Be Better Must be Better Motivated

The two most prominent defenders of BB are Patrick Todd and Justin Snedegar.[5] Yet each supports BB uniquely. We first examine Todd's 2023 case for BB, then turn to Snedegar's 2024 argument. Both lines of support, we argue, are insufficient to justify acceptance of BB.

1.1 Criticism, Blame, and Confounding Factors

BB is framed in terms of *blame*. Yet Todd endorses a broader version of BB that relates to *criticism*, wherein one has standing to criticize another with respect to some standard only if one is better than another with respect to that standard (2023: 1158). Because blame is, he argues, a form of criticism, there is a BB norm on blame.[6] Todd's argument can be expressed (2023: 1181):

1) There is a *be better* norm on standing to criticize.
2) To blame is to criticize.

So,

3) One has standing to blame a certain agent with respect to some standard only if one is better than that agent with respect to that standard.

[5] Rivera-López 2017 also seems committed to BB.

[6] Notably, Todd distinguishes criticism from merely judging that something falls below some standard, writing that his "defense of the *be better* norm thus crucially relies on some felt distinction between *recognizing* and *advising* that someone or something falls below some relevant standard, and *criticizing* that someone or something for falling below that standard" (1168). Along these lines, BB is not properly understood as a condition on the standing to *judge* blameworthy, but on blaming—particularly, "hostile," or angry blame (1172-1173).

One could resist the argument by rejecting either of the premises, but our focus here will be on the first. We don't wish to argue that the first premise is *false*, but only to argue for the weaker claim that it lacks the necessary support. This leaves us without sufficient reason to accept BB.

Consider the following cases Todd offers to support the claim that there is a *be better* norm on criticism (2023: 1158):

> *The Gardeners:* John and Jane are fellow friends and gardeners. John is visiting Jane when he notices that her orchids have wilted and died. Grinning sarcastically, John says "Looking after these orchids well I see!" Jane says, "Hey, I'd like to see you keep orchids alive!"

> *The Graduate Students:* Andrew and Marcus are friends and history PhD students, and Andrew has recently started submitting some of his work for publication, but keeps getting rejected. Marcus—who is a year behind Andrew in the program—says, with just a small discernible hint of *schadenfreude*, "Another rejection, eh Andrew?" Andrew replies, "Yeah, well, let me know when you get your first acceptance, wise guy."

It's quite plausible that Jane and Andrew would respond to their criticizers in the way they do. John and Marcus are painted as jerks, not merely criticizing others but nearly ridiculing them in a condescending manner. But this raises the concern that it is not John and Marcus's criticism itself that elicits the intuition that their criticism is inappropriate, but rather the *way they criticize* that is problematic. After all, mean or condescending criticism is often uncontroversially objectionable.

Todd recognizes that his cases often involve mean or condescending criticism, but offers the following justification: "without even a small hint of 'meanness'…I fear that some readers will not interpret John's utterance as genuine *criticism of Jane*—and thus simply fail (or be more likely to fail)

to have the intuition that John's (genuine) criticism of Jane is somehow inappropriate if John too can't keep orchids alive" (1162, n. 6, emphasis original).

We are sympathetic with Todd's concern. It's difficult to describe cases that clearly elicit certain intuitions without contingent features that might explain those intuitions. Nevertheless, the fact that Todd worries that readers will not interpret his characters' criticism *as* criticism without the meanness suggests that meanness might be *required* to elicit the relevant intuition. Todd has two options for supporting the *be better* norm on criticism with his cases, then. He can either explain why all criticism necessarily involves meanness such that the meanness ought to be included in the cases, or else he can offer cases of criticism without the meanness to see if they elicit the same intuition. Otherwise, we cannot be sure that it's the criticism *alone* doing the work rather than the meanness.

Let's begin with the first option. Admittedly, what it takes to be criticism is unclear, and neither Todd nor we have a developed account of criticism. Yet plausibly, criticism need not involve meanness. After all, those of us who grade student papers know just how important it is to criticize someone (or their work, at least) without being mean or condescending. This suggests that those who wish to claim that *all* criticism involves meanness or condescension owe us an argument for that claim. Without that support, it isn't clear that the *be better* norm holds for criticism generally rather than for a certain *type* of criticism—namely, mean or condescending criticism.

To avoid limiting his conclusion in this way and to support the *be better* norm on criticism generally, Todd could take the second option and offer at least one case in which the agent criticizes without the confounding factors of meanness and condescension. Consider, for instance, a modified version of *The Gardeners*:

> *The Gardeners*:* John* and Jane* are fellow friends and gardeners. John* is visiting Jane* when he notices that her orchids have wilted and died. He gently says, "Unfortunately, it looks like you've

> overwatered the orchids, Jane*. Orchids are notoriously difficult to care for, but you've got to keep a better record of how much and how often you water them. I can send you an article I found that might be helpful for next time." Jane* responds, "Hey, I'd like to see you keep orchids alive!"

While there's nothing incoherent about Jane*'s response, the intuition that this response is appropriate is, at least for us, significantly weaker. In fact, her response to John*'s criticism seems almost rude.[7]

These observations suggest a potential alternative explanation for the intuitions Todd's cases generate. The cases offered are ones in which the criticism, in virtue of its meanness and condescension, seems to (conversationally) imply that the criticizer is better than the criticized with respect to the standard in question. And, of course, *that* sort of criticism is objectionable (and perhaps standingless) whenever the criticizer is in fact no better than the agent criticized. If an agent is going to criticize *as if* they are better than someone else, then it makes sense that the agent ought to actually be better than the person they criticize in the relevant respect. But of course, that's not a norm on criticism generally, but rather on the *way* one criticizes.

This lesson becomes even clearer when we consider not merely criticism, but blame. Todd makes it clear that he is concerned with angry blame (1173). He describes a case of two akratic vegetarians, each of whom give in to temptation to order meat at a restaurant. One of them responds to the other's failure:

> First, I want to admit that earlier today I broke down and ordered meat in exactly this way, and I feel terrible about that. But [angry/indignant tones] I can't believe you broke down like this, you

[7] Todd might reasonably respond that John* is not *criticizing* Jane*. If so, we would encourage Todd to offer a case without the meanness or condescension that he thinks is nevertheless criticism.

contemptible animal killer! (1174).

According to Todd, this case supports BB, because the blaming akratic vegetarian is no better than the akratic vegetarian they blame. Yet it also suggests that, contrary to what Moral Equality theorists maintain, blaming oneself (and thereby respecting the moral equality of persons) cannot preserve one's own standing to blame. Instead, Todd contends, what is relevant is that one must be better than another at respecting the norm, as this case is meant to show.

Though this akratic vegetarian intuitively lacks the standing to blame in this way, this seems the case because of the hostile and forceful way in which they blame. Perhaps such angry, indignant blame is simply disproportionate to the agent's degree of blameworthiness—particularly if this is a case of *akrasia*. Anticipating this response, Todd writes, "This kind of blame, even were it to be otherwise proportionate and deserved, cannot be rendered appropriate by one's also being hostile with oneself" (1174). Yet there are two important points to appreciate here. First, the Moral Equality theorist holds that the blamer must be disposed to blame themselves *to a similar degree* (Fritz and Miller 2019: 563, n. 19). Given the level of indignation implied in the case, it seems implausible that the blamer subjected themselves to the same degree of blame that they dish out, and so they likely don't satisfy moral equality. Accordingly, a competing explanation for the intuitive lack of standing remains in addition to the explanation implied by BB.

Second, if the fact that the blamer is no better than the blamed is supposed to explain why the blame seems standingless, then a relevantly similar case with mild (though angry) indignation should generate the relevant intuition just as strongly. Yet we contend that it does not. Consider the following variation:

> First, I want to admit that earlier today I broke down and ordered meat in exactly this way, and I feel terrible about that. For the same reasons, I'm angry at you, too. I'm angry with *both* of us for our failures.

Perhaps this blame, too, is standingless. But if so, the intuition is significantly weaker. And this is reason to think that designing cases of blame to involve *additional* features that are uncontroversially objectionable (e.g., disproportionality) muddies the waters.

Todd may reply that this altered case does not involve blame but merely the expression of a judgment of blameworthiness (1174). We find it plausible that this case involves genuine blame—even the sort of angry blame with which Todd is concerned. Admittedly, it does not involve *condescending* angry blame. But it is far from clear that all angry blame is condescending in the way the agents in Todd's cases suggest.[8] Consider two agents who are both trying to quit drinking alcohol and who have agreed to keep one another accountable. When one falls off the wagon, the other might angrily express their frustration ("C'mon, man! We said we were going to stop doing this!") without any implication of superiority.

If this diagnosis is correct, then it seems that whether Todd's case for BB succeeds depends upon whether angry blame is, by its very nature, condescending. If not, then there are ways of blaming that don't (conversationally) imply that the blamer is better than the blamee. And if one isn't implying that in one's criticism or blame, then the intuitive support for BB drops out.

Suppose that our concerns are unfounded, however, and Todd can provide further cases that motivate BB without the condescension and meanness currently involved. One final concern is

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[8] Notably, Todd claims that BB is a norm on blame because it is a norm on criticism, yet it is only *angry* blame that is subject to a standing norm. This is puzzling if criticism need not be similarly angry or hostile. If there's a broader norm on criticism that applies to blame because blame is a subset of criticism, it is curious that the norm only applies to some forms of blame and not others. This again suggests that the meanness, hostility, and condescension of both the criticism and the blame are doing the heavy lifting in eliciting the intuitions that Todd hopes readers will have, but it also undercuts the motivation for seeing BB as a standing norm on criticism generally.

that it is one thing to show that BB exists as a norm in our social practices, yet another to show that such a norm is *justified*. Todd only seems concerned with the first claim, though sometimes he suggests the second: "My claim is that, when the relevant critics are no better than those they criticize, their criticism is simply *intrinsically objectionable*" (1164, n. 8). He sets aside what, if anything, might ground BB. Perhaps there is no deeper normative justification for BB. But if so, it seems reasonable to question whether this is a norm we *ought* to respect. We are unconvinced that BB is a genuine norm in our social practices on criticism or blame. But even if it is, there's the further question of whether such a norm is justified.[9]

In sum, the cases Todd uses to support BB involve criticism and blame that is mean and condescending. But unless all criticism is mean or condescending, which we find implausible, reflection upon these cases suggests that it may simply be the meanness and condescension doing the work. Perhaps to criticize or blame condescendingly, as if one is better than another, one must actually be better than another. But the claim does not clearly hold for criticism and blame more broadly.[10]

1.2 Elevation, Subordination, and Normative Power

Justin Snedegar also defends BB. Whereas Todd maintains a *be better* norm on both criticism and blame, Snedegar restricts his account to instances of blame that involve hostile attitudes such as indignation or resentment, and in particular, overt forms of hostile blame that are directed at the wrongdoer (2024: 406). While we have argued that the intuitive pull of Todd's account seems to

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[9] Similar questions might reasonably be asked of the standing norms put forth by fault-based accounts (e.g., is the norm concerning respect for moral equality one we *ought* to respect?). How forceful such questions will be for competing accounts will depend partly upon whether they can offer a deeper normative justification. We have argued that it is an advantage of the Moral Equality account in particular that it can offer a deeper justification (Fritz and Miller 2018, 2019).

[10] This suggests that it's possible that an individual might have standing to blame for violations of N, but only in certain ways (e.g., not condescendingly, or perhaps only to a certain degree of severity). The more general possibility that one's standing to blame for a particular norm itself might vary depending upon the nature of one's blame is discussed briefly in Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a (51-53) and is explored in detail in De Marco, Fritz, and Miller ms.

depend upon confounding factors such as the condescension or meanness expressed by the blamers in his cases, Snedegar's account depends upon the idea that the normative *structure* of hostile blame involves an implication of moral superiority on the part of the blamer. In these ways, Snedegar's account seems to avoid the criticisms we raised for Todd's account.

Snedegar begins by motivating relative moral status accounts over fault-based accounts by arguing that the former better capture intuitions about lack of standing in certain cases (in particular, weak-willed and culpably mistaken blame). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that fault-based accounts have resources to offer their own explanations (or error theories) about conflicting intuitions concerning such cases. As he sees it, breaking the stalemate over intuitions requires offering a further defense of his own account (422).

Snedegar's defense of BB begins with a claim about the nature of blame: "I assume the popular idea that blaming someone in a way that expresses hostile attitudes like resentment or indignation involves issuing (often implicit) demands to them" (412). This claim corresponds to the view that standing to blame involves a normative power to make demands or issue directives that are communicated via one's blame (e.g., to apologize, to feel remorse, etc.). On this view, when someone lacks standing, such demands may be permissibly dismissed; the blamee needn't treat the demands as reasons that must be weighed in their deliberation about how to respond to their own wrongdoing (412).[11]

To recognize a blamer's standing to issue such demands, on Snedegar's view, is to accept their "elevation" relative to the blamee, and the blamee's corresponding "subordination" to the blamer. Snedegar analogizes the relevant kind of elevation and subordination involved in blaming

[11] This helps explain why Snedegar restricts his view to hostile blame: "non-hostile forms of blame or criticism, like pointing out wrongdoing or constructive criticism, may not involve this demand [for expression of remorse], but also are not typically apt targets of dismissive responses" (415). He continues, "even those who have lost standing to issue hostile blame will typically retain standing to criticize in these gentler ways" (419).

with that involved in cases of forgiveness, where those with the relevant standing can restore the moral stature of the wrongdoer: "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" (424). Concerning blame, he writes, "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" (426). Because of this, Snedegar argues, "[w]hen the blamer is no better, in the relevant respect, the blamed party can justifiably reject this arrangement by dismissing the demand" (426). Indeed, on Snedegar's view, the elevated position required for standing to blame must be *earned* by the blamer in virtue of their better compliance with the relevant norm relative to the blamee (423, 427).[12]

We agree with Snedegar that having the standing to overtly express hostile blame to a wrongdoer does, in a sense, place them in an "elevated" position over the wrongdoer. In particular, this kind of elevation is a matter of having a normative power, and thus the ability to generate duties (or *pro tanto* obligations) for the wrongdoer via one's blame (to apologize, etc.). It is natural to think of this normative power metaphorically: the ability to *hand down* directives. It is also intuitive that being better than someone else with respect to some norm involves a kind of elevation: one is "higher up" than someone else when it comes to "measuring up to" some normative standard. But since these two kinds of elevation are not *identical* to one another, Snedegar needs to show that the former kind of elevated position (i.e., the normative power involved in the standing to overtly express hostile blame) requires the latter kind of elevation (i.e., being better in some way). Consider, then, the following reconstruction of Snedegar's argument:

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[12] This differs sharply from the Moral Equality account, according to which standing to blame isn't something *earned* but rather possessed in virtue of our equal personhood (and then possibly defeated by various factors).

1) Overt, hostile blame involves making (often implicit) demands of the blamee (e.g., to apologize, etc.).
2) The relevant demand is a demand that the blamee subordinate themselves to the blamer; i.e., to see the blamer as having an elevated position relative to the blamee with respect to the relevant norm, N.
3) The blamer has the standing to demand this of the blamee only if the blamer has earned this elevated position via better compliance with N relative to the blamee.
4) If the blamer is no better than the blamee (with respect to compliance with N), then the blamer has not earned this elevated position.

So,

5) If the blamer is no better than the blamee (with respect to compliance with N), then the blamer does not have the standing to make the relevant demand, and thus the blamee can justifiably dismiss the demand.

Our critique of this argument focuses on premises that refer to an "elevated position," particularly (2) and (4). As explained above, there are two different kinds of elevation (and subordination) to which these premises could refer. Premise (2) is plausible if we understand "subordinate" in terms of acknowledging a power right. If so, then "subordinate" in (2) could be read: "subject oneself to, or accept the moral authority of, the blamer to impose a duty on oneself with respect to the blamee's violation of N." Here, the idea would be that one accepts the blamer's elevated status as a matter of having the relevant normative power (e.g., to make a demand for apology for the violation of N). But the argument succeeds only if it preserves the same sense of "subordination" (and "elevation") throughout. On the current reading, premise (4) amounts to

saying that the blamer has the relevant normative power(s) only if they are better than the blamee with respect to compliance with N. But on this reading, (4) is just a restatement of Snedegar's view and so doesn't provide any independent reason to accept BB.

On the other hand, suppose that we read "elevation" (and subordination) in premise (2) to mean "better at complying with N". On this reading, (2) amounts to the claim that the demand communicated by the blame is a demand to acknowledge that the blamer is better at complying with N. But we aren't offered independent reasons to think that the kind of hostile blame Snedegar focuses on involves such a demand.

In summary, premise (2) of Snedegar's argument is plausible on the first reading of "elevation" (or "subordination"), but unsupported on the second reading. Premise (4), on the other hand, is unsupported on the first reading. Therefore, there is no univocal reading of Snedegar's argument that provides independent reason to accept BB.

2. Reasons to Reject the Be Better Norm and Relative Moral Status Accounts

Perhaps the support Todd and Snedegar have offered for BB is insufficient. Nevertheless, there is *something* intuitive about BB, so it would be premature to dismiss it entirely.[13] Indeed, one

[13] What is intuitive about BB is a larger question than we can fully tackle here, but we can offer some preliminary thoughts. One natural interpretation of the "Let's see you do better!" retort is as an *epistemic claim* rather than a challenge to standing. In Todd's *House Painter* case, Rebecca's father "chirps various corrections and criticisms" regarding spreading plaster (2023: 1158). Rebecca's reply could be seen as pointing out that her father doesn't understand the difficulty of the task. If he did, he would retract the criticism. Rebecca's retort, then, is a way to invite her father to acquire the knowledge of the difficulty of the task, but not a challenge to his standing to criticize. Todd admits this is a possible interpretation of the "Let's see you do better!" reply, though he doesn't think it captures all the relevant cases (1165-1166).

Suppose Todd is correct about this. Another natural interpretation of the retort that may target standing is something akin to "Easy for you to say!" It's easy for Rebecca's father to make these criticisms because he's not doing the work, and there's nothing at stake for him in criticizing. While this charge may concern standing, it is unclear that there is any justification for thinking his standing is undermined because it is easy for him to say in this sense (O'Brien 2022). There are other potential interpretations of the "Let's see you do better!" reply as well, some of which may seem appropriate. But the challenge for an advocate of BB will be to show that the right interpretation of such a retort concerns standing in some relevant set of cases, and that such charges against standing are justified. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us to say more here.

might think BB simply requires an alternative justification. However, we argue there are good reasons to think BB is not merely insufficiently supported, but false.

2.1 Be Better? Or Don't Be Worse?

Both Todd and Snedegar claim that standing to blame requires being *better* than another with respect to some standard or norm. But consider the following case:

> *Equals:* Ash and Bea are equally compliant with a norm against stealing. Each has stolen the same type of candy bar from the same store for the same reasons only once.

According to BB, neither Ash nor Bea has the standing to blame the other for stealing, because neither is better than the other with respect to not stealing. Although one might think it would be hypocritical for Ash to blame Bea for stealing when Ash is just as guilty of stealing, we can describe the case in a way that makes it clear Ash's blame is not hypocritical. He may treat Bea as his peer when blaming, publicly chastising both himself and Bea for stealing. It seems plausible that moral peers are entitled to blame each other. If Ash is willing to accept blame for stealing just as he is willing to blame Bea for stealing, it's unclear why he would lack standing to blame for stealing despite being no better than her in abiding by the norm.[14]

Todd entertains a similar case regarding criticism. Suppose that Dan and Lucy are equally bad at drawing dragons. Dan looks at their dragons and says, "Oh jeez, Lucy, we're both terrible artists" (Todd 2023: 1171). Although Dan is no better than Lucy at drawing dragons, it seems he

[14] Notice that this could be true on a Commitment account or a Moral Equality account. Ash may be sufficiently committed to the norm against stealing (especially given that he has only violated it once, and sufficient commitment plausibly doesn't require perfection) (Rossi 2018; Todd 2019; Piovarchy 2023b). And Ash seems disposed to blame equally, thus respecting the moral equality of persons (Fritz and Miller 2018, 2019).

nevertheless has the standing to make the criticism given that he's criticizing himself as well as Lucy. Yet Todd replies that this isn't a case of genuine criticism; Dan merely asserts that both he and Lucy are *criticizable*: "Dan has asserted that there is a criticism…of Lucy…. But—on a natural interpretation of this type of exchange—Dan has not criticized Lucy" (1172). And since, on Todd's view, the *be better* norm applies to *criticism* and not claims of criticizability, Dan has not violated the norm.[15] While we are skeptical that Dan's remark is not criticism, suppose this is right. Yet there are other cases, like *Equals*, where we can stipulate that one agent is genuinely criticizing or blaming the other, yet also criticizing or blaming themselves equally. In such cases, it seems we have a counterexample to BB as formulated.

Although Ash is no *better* than Bea with respect to stealing, he is also no *worse*. This suggests a simple fix to BB: one need not be better than another to have standing to blame them, but one cannot be worse. Call this the *don't be worse* norm on the standing to blame. This norm also preserves why it is intuitive in cases like *Blinker* for Kayla to dismiss Leah's blame, because Leah is so much *worse* at using her turn signal than Kayla is. Todd could in principle accept this more plausible norm, thus allowing for moral peers to have the standing to blame one another, while still preserving the general spirit of BB. Indeed, both norms fall under the heading of what we can call *comparative goodness accounts*: accounts according to which blamers have standing only if they meet some moral standard of goodness relative to their blamee.[16] Accordingly, our discussion below will shift from BB to comparative goodness accounts more broadly.

Before turning to our critiques of such accounts, however, *Equals* has a further lesson. Even if Snedegar's argument in 1.2 withstands our criticism, the argument cannot serve as a defense of the

[15] This again raises important questions regarding the differences between criticism and blame discussed in 1.1.
[16] We coin this phrase rather than using "relative moral status accounts" because Snedegar defines relative moral status accounts as holding that the blamer be *better* than the blamee (2024: 405), and we wish to avoid confusion from using the phrase more broadly than it has been used in the literature.

don't be worse norm. Snedegar's argument depends upon being *better* than the blamed, because this elevated position is what justifies the demand for apology and remorse. On this reasoning, moral peers or equals cannot make such a demand. Therefore, *Equals* suggests that, strictly speaking, BB is false. While comparative goodness accounts that favor the *don't be worse* norm remain viable, such accounts require an alternative defense.

2.2 Problems with Comparative Goodness as Compliance

We now turn to critiques that apply to comparative goodness accounts generally, whether they require blamers to be as good as their blamees or whether they require them to be better. Before proceeding, however, we must distinguish between two views about the relevant standard of goodness. On the first view, what makes one individual as good as (or better than) another individual is a matter of their actual compliance with (or violations of) a norm. On this view, the more one has complied with a norm, the better they are with respect to that norm, and the more one has violated a norm, the worse they are with respect to that norm.[17] This standard is explicitly endorsed by Snedegar (2024: 417). Call a comparative goodness account that adopts this view a *compliance account*.

Perhaps the clearest challenge to compliance accounts is posed by how luck can affect whether one complies with or violates a norm. Compare two terrorists, each of whom sets up a bomb in a city center with the intention of killing hundreds of innocent people, and each of whom presses the button that activates the detonator. The first terrorist fails in his efforts due to a mechanical issue, while the second succeeds in his efforts, killing hundreds of innocent people. It

[17] Of course, such a view can allow that some instances of compliance with (or violation of) a norm are more significant than others, either in terms of the seriousness of the behavior or the difficulty it takes to comply, which perhaps can make a difference to whether one is good enough to have standing to blame (Snedegar 2024: 407-408). For example, cheating on a spelling quiz seems less significant than cheating on the MCAT, and posting humiliating photos of someone on social media seems more significant than privately making a joke about their mismatched outfit.

seems inappropriate for the first terrorist to blame the second, citing their moral superiority in complying with the norm against killing as a justification for their standing to do so. It's of course true that, since only the second terrorist actually violated the norm against murder, the first terrorist is morally better with respect to compliance with the norm. But it's implausible that his claim to moral superiority can rest on a difference that is entirely due to external factors beyond the control of either terrorist. Accordingly, it's easy to imagine how the second terrorist could respond to the first terrorist's blame: "You can't be serious! You were trying to do the same thing, and the only reason you didn't succeed is due to dumb luck!" This response is reasonable; the fact that each of them were equally willing to commit mass murder and took all the same steps to ensure their success certainly seems relevant to their moral status relative to one another. And yet, compliance accounts imply that the first terrorist offers a genuine justification for their standing to blame the second. What compliance accounts disregard is that whether individuals end up acting in a way that reflects their character, dispositions, or intentions often depends upon opportunities and situations that are largely outside of their control. Accordingly, compliance accounts fail to accommodate the fact that our actions alone do not capture the full measure of our goodness (or badness) with respect to some norm.[18]

Consider next what we call the "always behind" problem for compliance accounts. To illustrate, suppose that an individual has spent decades involved in gang-related drug-trafficking, but has a moral transformation late in life. He appreciates the weight of the wrong he has done, feels immense remorse for his actions, sincerely repents of his old ways, and commits the remainder of his life to fighting against the evils of drug-trafficking. Due to the sheer amount of his violations of norms against drug-trafficking, it is unlikely that anything he can do in his remaining years will make

[18] This objection is independent from questions concerning moral luck, which generally concern whether agents are (more) *morally responsible* for items that are at least partly due to factors beyond their control.

up for his past faults in terms of compliance with the norm; his moral ledger will always be deep in the red, as it were. And so, on compliance accounts of standing, he will likely never have the standing to blame younger men who are in the "game" (e.g., by confronting them and giving them a hard talk about the gravity of their offenses). Most theorists writing on standing take it that wrongdoers can regain standing by mending their ways, addressing their past faults, and reforming their character (Fritz and Miller 2018: 130-133; Todd 2019: 357-359; Riedener 2019: 197; Lippert-Rasmussen 2020: 672). But compliance accounts set the bar impossibly high for regained standing in cases like this.[19]

The "always behind" problem brings into relief an additional concern for compliance accounts: even if a person is completely reformed, the number (or significance) of their past wrongs can keep them from ever regaining standing. In this way, compliance accounts treat undermined standing like some forms of retributivist punishment: just as some criminals might never *deserve* their freedom, even if they are fully reformed (because of their past crimes), compliance accounts imply that some wrongdoers may never be able to "merit" or "earn" the standing to blame (at least most) others for certain norm violations, even if the wrongdoer is fully reformed. And although theorists who hold a compliance account may be willing to accept this implication, it is certainly a departure from the mainstream literature (including Fritz and Miller 2018; Todd 2019; Riedener 2019; and Lippert-Rasmussen 2020).

What these two problems suggest is that comparative goodness cannot be *simply* a matter of one's compliance with a norm.[20] Instead, the relevant sense of "goodness" must involve something

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[19] Snedegar explicitly maintains that his account can make sense of regained standing, though he acknowledges that this will require "building up a better record of compliance" (2024: 408). The case above demonstrates that building up a better record may, in some cases, be impossible for certain agents.

[20] An anonymous reviewer suggested that a more sophisticated version of a compliance view, such as one that places more importance on an agent's recent (non-)compliance, may avoid some of these objections (for discussion of how standing might be time-relative, see Lippert-Rasmussen 2024b). Why more recent (non-)compliance is more important, however, seems to require explanation. One plausible explanation is that more recent behavior usually matters more, but

in addition to or instead of compliance with the norm.[21] Both problems suggest we should look inward, to an agent's intentions, attitudes, or character, to determine their goodness with respect to some norm.

2.3 Problems with Comparative Goodness as Dispositions to Comply

The challenges we have presented for compliance accounts recommend a view of comparative goodness wherein what matters is not (or at least not solely) someone's *actual* behavior with respect to a norm, but instead (or also) their *dispositions* regarding compliance. Call a comparative goodness account that adopts this view a *dispositional account*.

Dispositional accounts avoid the luck problem, since agents who are similarly disposed to behave in certain ways with respect to a norm would be roughly equivalent in goodness with respect to that norm, regardless of whether factors beyond their control affect their actual compliance. Dispositional accounts also avoid the "always behind" problem, since no matter what one's past record is, one's *character* can still potentially become fully reformed (or one's dispositions repaired, as it were), and one can thereby regain standing. For the same reasons, such accounts also avoid treating undermined standing as akin to a punishment.

Even so, dispositional accounts face their own challenges. Such accounts allow morally superior hypocrites to maintain standing. Suppose that Cliff has marginally better dispositions to comply with the norm against stealing than Dina does. On one occasion, Cliff steals, but refuses to

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only in virtue of the fact that it is usually a more reliable indicator of one's *current* moral character or dispositions. In the following section we canvas and critique a view along these lines.

Note too that it might be that the more recent one's (non-)compliance, the more one's standing is impacted. This points toward the possibility that the standing to blame may come in degrees, an idea that has only recently begun to be explored (Lippert-Rasmussen 2024a: 51-53; Upadhyaya forthcoming; De Marco, Fritz, and Miller ms).

[21] Lippert-Rasmussen's Comparative Unfairness account offers a considerably more nuanced view, according to which one's standing to blame another for a violation of N depends upon both the seriousness of one's past violations of N compared with the blamee *and* one's focus on one's own faults as compared with one's focus on the blamee's faults (2025). Due to its inclusion of the second of these factors, we do not consider the Comparative Unfairness account a target of the critiques we offer against comparative goodness accounts in this paper.

blame himself (or to accept blame from others) for stealing. Shortly afterward, Cliff blames Dina for a comparably bad theft. As long as Cliff is better disposed than Dina with respect to the norm against stealing, he cannot lack standing to blame her for stealing, even if he unfairly exempts himself from blame while being perfectly willing to dole it out to Dina. It is this kind of unfair exception-making that is both essential to hypocritical blame and also what seems particularly objectionable about it (Fritz and Miller 2018, 2019). Dispositional accounts of comparative goodness ignore this fault at the heart of hypocrisy provided the blamer meets a certain standard of goodness. Although such accounts may often imply that hypocrites lack standing, they simply don't track hypocrisy. This is especially problematic for theorists like Todd, who maintain that the non-hypocrisy condition on the standing to blame can be derived from BB (2023: 1160).[22]

A second challenge to dispositional accounts is that they bar victims from blaming their wrongdoers whenever the victim isn't as good as the wrongdoer. Suppose that Allan has slightly worse dispositions with respect to complying with the norm against lying than his friend, Benji (perhaps he is disposed to lie in a marginally wider set of cases than Benji). Dispositional accounts imply that, if Benji lies to Allan, then Allan lacks the right to blame Benji for his lie; in particular, he cannot demand an apology. And this is true even if Allan feels remorse and has sincerely apologized for his own past violations of the norm. To be fair, dispositional accounts can still maintain that wrongdoers like Benji *ought* to apologize to their morally inferior victims, but victims like Allan lack the standing to demand it. But this is at odds with the common view that victims are *owed* apologies by their wrongdoers (Twambley 1976: 89; Nelkin 2013: 175ff; Warmke 2016: 690) and are therefore entitled to demand the apology that is owed (Warmke 2016: 689; Bennett 2018: 209; Roadevin

[22] This objection to dispositional accounts (as well as the following objection) could be modified to apply to compliance accounts as well (we can imagine that Cliff's actual compliance is marginally better than Dina's).

2018b: 259-260).[23] In sum, being a victim of wrongdoing (and possessing the corresponding rights) doesn't require measuring up to a standard of moral goodness.[24]

3. Conclusion

We began with the case from *Waitress* and the case of *Blinker*, which seemed to support BB. While the *be better* retort is understandable (especially when one blames in a way that implies superiority), BB is ultimately untenable. Even so, there are alternative explanations for such cases that are arguably equally plausible yet more defensible. Fault-based accounts can explain why Jenna lacks standing to blame Becky for infidelity and why Leah lacks standing to blame Kayla for not signaling with her blinker. Moral Equality theorists can point out that both Jenna and Leah blame other persons while making unfair exceptions of themselves, thus rejecting the moral equality of persons. Commitment theorists can plausibly claim that Jenna is insufficiently committed to the norm against fidelity if she is only willing to blame for its violation when others are guilty of it. The same goes for Leah; if she were so committed to signaling in traffic, we would expect that commitment to manifest in her using a signal and accepting blame for her own failures as well.

Our discussion of relative moral status accounts yields two results. The first is that there is currently no viable and persuasive argument in their favor, and so no need to turn to them in light of the cases we have seen. The second result is that such accounts face a host of objections that cast doubt on their truth. Of course, novel arguments for such accounts may be forthcoming, along with

[23] This is why, although Snedegar suggests that wrongdoers may *owe* apologies to their morally inferior victims (2024: 414, n. 24), this seems more than his view would allow.

[24] Of course, a fault-based view like the Moral Equality view allows that even victims can lack standing to blame. But this isn't because they lack the right to blame altogether, but because they *have* the right yet it has been defeated via a kind of forfeiture. This seems significantly different from a view that simply disqualifies a certain class of victims on the grounds that they're not good enough.

defenses against the objections we have raised. Until then, however, those like us can rest easier knowing we don't have to be better than those we blame.

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