

# Hypercrisis and Standing to Self-Blame

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## Abstract

Lippert-Rasmussen (2020) argues that the moral equality account of the hypocrite's lack of standing to blame fails. To object to this account, Lippert-Rasmussen considers the contrary of hypocrisy: hypercrisis. In this article, I show that if hypercrisis is a problem for the moral equality account, it is also a problem for Lippert-Rasmussen's own account of why hypocrites lack standing to blame. I then reflect on the hypocrite's and hypercrisis's standing to *self-blame*, which reveals that the challenge hypercrisis poses for accounts of standing is different than the challenge Lippert-Rasmussen articulates.

## 1. Introduction

When we make an exception of ourselves, we often become the target of moral criticism. Putting our interests ahead of others' is labelled as selfish, demanding special treatment is considered entitled and blaming people for wrongs that we are unrepentantly guilty of is thought to be hypocritical. But whether, and why, these attitudes and behaviours are wrong is the topic of debate. Take, for example, discussions surrounding hypocrisy and standing to blame. Many argue that hypocrites lack standing to blame. Because these agents engage in unapologetic wrongdoing, they do not possess the moral authority to make demands of others who perform relevantly similar wrongs by blaming them.<sup>1</sup> However, there is very little agreement about *why* this is the case.<sup>2</sup>

According to one account, which Lippert-Rasmussen calls *the moral equality account* (ME), hypocrites lack standing to blame because hypocritical blame '...(implicitly) denies moral equality of persons' (2020: 2). On this view, blaming others for behaviour that you have performed but for which you do not blame yourself constitutes treating people unequally for no good reason. And treating people unequally for no good reason is incompatible with moral equality of persons. So, hypocritical blame denies moral equality of persons, and this is why hypocrites lack standing to blame.

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Lippert-Rasmussen in focusing on public, dialogical blame and conceiving of standing in terms of the moral authority to make demands of others to respond to one's blame (2020: 1–2). However, see Piovarchy (forthcoming) for a discussion of the different uses of standing in the literature.

<sup>2</sup> For competing accounts, see Cohen 2013, Fritz & Miller 2018, 2019a, 2019b, Isserow & Klein 2017, Piovarchy forthcoming, Rossi 2018, 2020, Scanlon 2008, Todd 2019 and Wallace 2010. And, for criticism of the claim that hypocrites lack standing, see Bell 2013 and King 2019.

ME has several defenders in the literature (Wallace 2010; Fritz & Miller 2018) and nicely captures why it is objectionable to make an exception of yourself by engaging in hypocritical blame. Nevertheless, Lippert-Rasmussen argues that this account fails. One of his critiques focuses on the contrary of hypocrisy: hypercrisy.<sup>3</sup> Hypercrisy occurs when agents severely blame themselves for minor wrongs while either ignoring or only mildly blaming others for more significant wrongs (Lippert-Rasmussen 2020: 2–3). Lippert-Rasmussen argues that hypercrites are relevantly similar to hypocrites—either both treat people unequally for no good reason and thus (at least implicitly) deny moral equality of persons or neither does. But the hypercrite, unlike the hypocrite, does not lack standing to blame. Surely no one could object to being blamed by a hypercrite on the grounds that she blames herself for lesser wrongs to a significantly greater degree. And if the hypercrite does not lose standing to blame, yet she is relevantly similar to the hypocrite with regards to the denial of equality of persons, then ME must be false. It cannot be the case that denying moral equality of persons explains why the hypocrite lacks standing to blame.

Lippert-Rasmussen concludes his article by proposing a competing account of why hypocrisy undermines standing to blame, which I call *the taking norms seriously account* (TNS). He argues that because hypocrites do not blame themselves for violating moral norms, they are not concerned about their violations or serious about the norms themselves. And one does not have the moral authority to enforce norms that one is not serious about. So, the hypocrite lacks standing to blame, not because he denies equality of persons, but because he is not serious about the norms that he blames others for violating.

Lippert-Rasmussen's reflections on the nature of hypercrisy are illuminating and can serve to push discussions of standing forward considerably. However, I argue that considerations of hypercrisy do not drive the debate in the direction that Lippert-Rasmussen wishes to pursue. In

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<sup>3</sup> Lippert-Rasmussen also objects to the closely related *anti-moral superiority account*. His criticism of this view focuses on cases of hypocritically and non-hypocritically blaming others for violating inegalitarian norms. Because my aim in this article is to explore what hypercrisy and self-blame can tell us about standing, I will focus only on his challenge to ME.

§2, I show that if hypercrisy is a problem for ME, it is also a problem for TNS: Just as hypocrites are relevantly similar to hypocrites in denying equality of persons, they are also relevantly similar in failing to take norms seriously. In §3, I argue that the challenge hypercrisy poses for accounts of standing is different than the challenge Lippert-Rasmussen articulates. While hypocrites lack standing to blame *others*, they maintain standing to blame *themselves*. In contrast, hypercrites lack standing to blame *themselves*, but possess standing to blame *others*. Thus, the challenge for accounts of standing is not to explain why hypocrites lack standing and hypercrites possess it. Rather, the challenge is to explain why hypocrites lack standing to blame others but possess standing to self-blame, while hypercrites maintain standing to blame others but not themselves. I conclude in §4 by briefly reflecting on the importance of attending to self-blame when theorising about standing and the ethics of blame more generally.

## 2. Hypercrisy and Taking Norms Seriously

Here is Lippert-Rasmussen's statement of ME:

What deprives the hypocrite of her standing to blame others is the fact that, in virtue of her hypocritical blame, she (implicitly) denies moral equality of persons. (2020: 2)

And here are the key claims of Lippert-Rasmussen's argument against this view:

(Relevantly Similar Equality Claim) Hypocrites and hypercrites are relevantly similar with regards to the denial of moral equality of persons.

(Standing Asymmetry Claim) Hypocrites lack standing to blame but hypercrites do not lack standing to blame.

(Anti-Equality Conclusion) So, what explains hypocrites' lack of standing cannot be their denial of moral equality of persons.

The ME theorist may be tempted to object to the Relevantly Similar Equality Claim. One could argue that the relationships we bear with ourselves licence a higher degree of blame than the relationships we bear with other people, such that hypercrites rarely engage in blame that treats people unequally for no good reason and denies equality of persons.<sup>4</sup> But Lippert-Rasmussen

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion of a similar claim, see Nelkin (forthcoming).

could grant that we are generally permitted to blame ourselves to greater degrees than others while still claiming that there is at least one instance of hypercrisy that is relevantly similar to hypocrisy, where either both the hypercrite and hypocrite deny equality of persons or neither does. And as long as the hypocrite lacks standing to blame while the hypercrite possesses it, then the argument goes through.

After rejecting ME, Lippert-Rasmussen proposes an alternative explanation for why hypocrites lack standing to blame, TNS:

All of the hypocrites that we have encountered have one common feature: they are not really serious about the norm which they blame others for not complying with. Their lack of seriousness manifests itself in their being relatively unconcerned about their own violations of the norm. Thus...lack of seriousness about a norm undermines one's standing as a critic of others' non-compliance with that norm. (2020: 7)

While Lippert-Rasmussen concedes that this account requires further defence in light of cases he does not discuss (2020: 7), one of the cases he considers—hypercrisy—also poses a challenge to the view. Perhaps Lippert-Rasmussen is right that hypocrites lack the requisite seriousness for standing to blame. But if hypocrites are unserious about the norms they blame *others* for violating, then hypercrites also fail to be serious about the norms that they blame *themselves* for violating. According to Lippert-Rasmussen, because the hypocrite does not blame himself for violating a norm, he is not concerned with his own violations of the norm or serious about the norm itself. Similarly, one could argue that because the hypercrite does not blame others for violating a norm, she is not concerned about their violations of the norm or serious about the norm itself. Just as we can blame others for violating norms that we do not care about, we can also blame ourselves without caring about the relevant norms. Imagine an agent who severely blames himself for telling even the smallest white lie, while rarely and only mildly disapproving of others who engage in more harmful deceptions. The agent engages in this hypercritical blame not because he cares about honesty, but because he struggles with feelings of self-loathing and takes every opportunity to engage in self-punishing behaviour. In this case, the agent's severe self-blame is clearly about something other than the norm in question.

But if hypocrites and hypercrites are relevantly similar with regards to not taking norms seriously, then one can object to TNS in the very same way Lippert-Rasmussen objects to ME:

(Relevantly Similar Seriousness Claim) Hypocrites and hypercrites are relevantly similar with regards to not taking norms seriously.

(Standing Asymmetry Claim) Hypocrites lack standing to blame but hypercrites do not lack standing to blame.

(Anti-Seriousness Conclusion) So, what explains hypocrites' lack of standing cannot be that they do not take norms seriously.

The TNS theorist may be tempted to deny the Relevantly Similar Seriousness Claim. One could argue that because self-blame is generally more costly to oneself than other-directed blame, self-blame about a norm violation manifests a higher degree of seriousness about that norm than other-directed blame for similar violations. This may very well be true. However, all one needs to secure the Relevantly Similar Seriousness Claim is one instance in which a hypercrite's asymmetrical blaming behaviour is relevantly similar to hypocrites' asymmetrical blaming behaviour with regards to taking norms seriously. Because individuals can engage in self-blame for reasons other than taking norms seriously (e.g. because they are masochistic, have an inferiority complex or want to virtue signal) it will be easy to establish this claim. And, as long as these hypercrites do not lose standing to blame, the argument goes through. Thus, hypercrisy poses a symmetrical challenge to both ME and TNS: If ME fails, then TNS will fail on the very same grounds.

### **3. Standing to Self-Blame**

In the above discussion, I've granted the Standing Asymmetry Claim and assumed that hypocrites lack standing to blame while hypercrites possess it. However, it will be worthwhile to investigate this claim. To illustrate that hypercrites possess standing to blame, Lippert-Rasmussen presents the following case:

Suppose Adrian severely blames himself for, say, stealing \$10 from a rich person, while at the same time expressing mild disapproval of Beth's theft of all of the possessions of a poor person. Surely Beth cannot dismiss Adrian's mild disapproval on the ground that, owing to his hypercrisy, he has no standing to blame her. (2020: 3)

Lippert-Rasmussen may be right that Beth cannot object to being blamed by Adrian in virtue of his hypercrisy. Still, there is something objectionable about Adrian's *self-blame*, and hypercritical self-blame more generally. One could argue that hypercritical self-blame is criticisable because it is disproportionate—hypercritics blame themselves too much for minor wrongs. And while this will no doubt be true of many hypercritics, this doesn't fully capture why hypercrisy is criticisable. After all, it's possible that a hypercritic blames herself to the appropriate degree and blames others too little. But even in this case, there is something unfair about blaming oneself to a significantly and arbitrarily greater degree than one blames others. And while it is unlikely that the hypercritic would object to this inappropriate self-blame, since she is the culprit as well as the victim, those who care about her would likely object on her behalf. It is not uncommon for the loved ones of hypercritical individuals to intervene in an attempt to stop their asymmetrically harsh self-treatment, often by asking: 'Would you treat another person this way?'

One could argue that individuals cannot blame themselves unfairly, at least not in the same way that their blame of others can be unfair, and so there is nothing unfair about hypercritical self-blame. But this claim lacks plausibility. Self-blame can be unfair in many of the same ways that other-directed blame can be unfair—self-blame, like other-directed blame, can be unfitting, disproportionate and unjustified. So, it stands to reason that self-blame can also be unfair in virtue of being hypercritical, just as other-directed blame can be unfair in virtue of being hypocritical.

But in what sense is hypercritical self-blame unfair? Given the above considerations, one could argue that hypercritical self-blame is unfair because it lacks *standing*. According to Lippert-Rasmussen, when we have standing to blame others, we have the moral authority to demand that they uptake our blame by, for example, apologising or making amends (2020: 1–2). Similarly, when we have standing to self-blame, we possess the moral authority to demand of ourselves that we engage in these same reparative behaviours. And while we generally have greater authority over ourselves than others, one could argue that we do not have the moral authority to blame ourselves

hypercritically.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, both ME and TNS can explain why the hypocrite doesn't have standing to self-blame. The hypocrite demands more of herself than she does of others for no good reason, which denies equality of persons and, according to ME, undermines her standing to self-blame. The hypocrite also attempts to enforce norms that she isn't serious about, as evidenced by her relative lack of concern regarding other agents' violations. And, according to TNS, agents cannot possess the moral authority to enforce norms that they are not serious about. Thus, Lippert-Rasmussen's claim that hypocrites possess standing to blame may be only partially correct. By relying on ME and/or TNS, one can argue that hypocrites lack standing to blame *themselves*.

Can the fact that hypocrites lack standing to self-blame be used to dismiss the Standing Asymmetry Claim? Not quite. While hypocrisy arguably undermines agents' standing to self-blame, it doesn't undermine their standing to blame others, as illustrated by Lippert-Rasmussen's discussion of Adrian above. And, once we begin to attend to standing to self-blame, a new and interesting asymmetry between hypocrites and hypocrites is revealed. While the hypocrite does not have the moral authority to blame others for violating norms that he has unapologetically violated, he doesn't lose the standing to blame *himself* for violating these norms. To see this, we can alter Lippert-Rasmussen's case:

Suppose Adrian severely blames Beth for, say, stealing \$10 from a rich person, while at the same time expressing only mild disapproval of his own theft of all of the possessions of a poor person. Surely Adrian cannot dismiss his mild self-disapproval on the ground that, owing to his hypocrisy, he has no standing to blame himself.

In this case, though Beth could dismiss Adrian's blame on the grounds that it is hypocritical, Adrian cannot dismiss his own self-blame on the same grounds. Not only do hypocrites possess standing to self-blame, they are often *encouraged* to blame themselves. Indeed, many argue that hypocrites can regain standing to blame others by blaming themselves (Fritz & Miller 2018;

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<sup>5</sup> One could object that because hypocrites *want* to blame themselves hypercritically, this gives them the moral authority to do so. However, many individuals engage in hypercritical self-blame not because they want to, but out of compulsion, self-loathing, etc. But, even for those who do want to be the target of hypercritical self-blame, this does not grant them the moral authority to engage in the practice. Imagine an individual who wants to be the target of *hypocritical* blame. This does not give the hypocritical blamer standing—they still lack the moral authority to demand that the blamee uptakes their blame, even if the blamee would happily oblige.

Lippert-Rasmussen 2020). Thus, Lippert-Rasmussen's claim that hypocrites lack standing to blame is, like his claim regarding hypercrisy, only partially correct. Though the hypocrite lacks standing to blame others, he retains standing to self-blame.

If the above discussion is correct, then there are two ways in which the hypocrite's standing to blame differs from the hypercrite's: while the hypercrite has standing to blame others but not herself, the hypocrite possesses standing to blame himself but not others. So, rather than dismiss the Standing Asymmetry Claim, we must replace it with two claims that capture the full extent to which hypocrites and hypercrites differ in terms of standing:

(Standing to Blame Others Asymmetry Claim) Hypocrites lack standing to blame others but hypercrites do not lack standing to blame others.

(Standing to Self-Blame Asymmetry Claim) Hypocrites do not lack standing to self-blame but hypercrites lack standing to self-blame.

When paired with the Relevantly Similar Equality Claim and Relevantly Similar Seriousness Claim, these asymmetry claims present problems for both ME and TNS. Since both hypocrites and hypercrites are relevantly similar with regards to denying moral equality of persons and taking norms seriously, neither account can offer an explanation for why hypocrites lack standing to blame others but hypercrites do not, nor can they explain why hypocrites possess standing to self-blame while hypercrites lack it.

There are many ways defenders of ME and TNS can object to the above asymmetry claims. For instance, they could deny that agents can possess and/or lose standing to self-blame. This would require them to explain why self-blame can be evaluated along many of the same dimensions that we evaluate other-directed blame—fittingness, proportionality, justification—but not in terms of standing. And, even if this hurdle is overcome, both accounts are still vulnerable to Lippert-Rasmussen's original asymmetry claim. Alternatively, they could argue that hypercrisy and hypocrisy undermine standing to blame others *and* self-blame. However, this would require these theorists to revise their arguments, since Lippert-Rasmussen argues extensively for the claim that hypercrites possess standing to blame others and both views are implicitly committed to hypocrites

possessing standing to self-blame (e.g. Fritz & Miller 2018: 133–4; Lippert-Rasmussen 2020: 7). Finally, it may be possible to augment these accounts to explain the asymmetries. But until these views address the distinction between standing to blame others and standing to self-blame, their explanations are bound to be incomplete.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Though the literature on the ethics of blame, and standing to blame in particular, has expanded in recent years, very little attention has been paid to the ethics of self-blame.<sup>6</sup> This is an unfortunate oversight. In this article, examining hypocritical and hypercritical self-blame illuminated important and overlooked weaknesses in extant accounts of hypocrisy and standing to blame. It is likely that further reflection on the nature of self-blame can be brought to bear on other debates surrounding the ethics of blame as well.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For exceptions, see Nelkin (forthcoming) and Tierney (forthcoming).

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