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## The Standing to Blame and Meddling

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### RESUMEN

Generalmente se acepta que para que un reproche sea adecuado, la persona que ha actuado mal tiene que merecerlo. Sin embargo, ser merecedor de un reproche no es suficiente para que este resulte apropiado. Se ha argumentado que para que el reproche resulte apropiado el que lo profiere tiene que estar en *posición de hacerlo*. Este artículo examina la consideración hasta ahora poco explorada de cómo las relaciones personales pueden influir en quién está en posición de emitir un reproche. Parece que suponemos que, si no estamos en la relación correcta con la persona que ha actuado mal, no es asunto nuestro el reprocharle nada. Identifico tres desafíos a esta tesis. En primer lugar, no sabemos qué tiene de malo el entrometarse en algo (si es incorrecto moral o prudencialmente). En segundo lugar, hay casos en los que no tenemos una relación estrecha con el que ha obrado mal, pero parece no obstante que estamos en posición de entrometernos en ello: el asesinato y otras serias infracciones morales graves son ejemplos de esto. En tercer lugar, no parecemos tener una concepción clara de lo que significa “estar en posición de”, con lo que es difícil ver cómo el análisis de ese concepto puede ayudarnos a determinar que un reproche es apropiado. Este artículo defiende que, en los casos de intromisión, la noción de “estar en posición de” es una condición para que el reproche sea adecuado. Argumento que las relaciones personales influyen en quién está en posición de hacer un reproche mediante la constitución de normas específicas para tales relaciones, y que el papel que esas normas desempeñan en el desarrollo y la regulación de nuestras relaciones puede explicar por qué el reproche por intromisión es moralmente erróneo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *reproche, ética del reproche, posición moral, intromisión, relaciones personales.*

### ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that for blame to be appropriate the wrongdoer must be blameworthy. However, blameworthiness is not sufficient for appropriate blame. It has been argued that for blame to be appropriate the blamer must have *standing to blame*. Philosophers writing on the topic have distinguished several considerations that might defeat someone's standing to blame. This paper examines the underexplored consideration of how personal relationships can influence who has the standing to express blame. We seem to assume that if we do not stand in the right relation to the wrongdoer, it is not our business to blame them. I identify three challenges to this view. First, we do not know what is wrong with meddling (whether it is morally or prudentially wrong). Second, there are cases where we have no close relation to the wrongdoer, but where we seem to have standing nonetheless – murder and other serious moral offences are examples of

this. Third, we don't seem to have a clear conception of what 'standing' means, and this makes it hard to see how discussion on standing can help us determine the propriety of blame. This paper defends the notion of standing as a propriety condition on blame in cases of meddling. I argue that personal relationships influence who has the standing to blame through constitution of relationship-specific norms; and that the role these norms play in developing and regulating our relationships can explain why meddling blame is morally wrong.

KEYWORDS: *Blame, Ethics of Blame, Moral Standing, Meddling, Personal Relationships.*

## I. WHEN IS BLAME APPROPRIATE?

Within the philosophy of responsibility, much work has recently been done on the nature and ethics of blame. The ethics of blame's primary concern is to determine under what circumstances blame is fitting and appropriate. The notion of *standing to blame* first becomes relevant within this context.

For an instance of blame to be fitting and morally appropriate, several conditions must be met. First, it must be determined whether the agent is blameworthy. To be blameworthy for something the agent must be morally responsible for it, and there must be no excusing or justifying conditions.<sup>1</sup> The blamed agent might be excused if it can be argued that they were coerced or forced to the act in question. Further, they can be excused by providing a legitimate justification for the action by showing that they had no bad will, acted out of nonculpable ignorance, or to achieve a greater good. Exemptions, on the other hand, usually come from considerations on moral agency. If the agent does not have the necessary cognitive capacities necessary for moral agency, for example, they can be exempted. Legitimate excuses and exemptions are evidence that proves the agent is not blameworthy. If the agent is not blameworthy, blame is not fitting. Importantly however, even when the agent is decidedly blameworthy, blame might not be morally appropriate.

I here rely on Justin D'Arms' and Daniel Jacobson's (2000) distinction between fittingness and propriety. D'Arms and Jacobson emphasize the difference between saying that an emotion is *fitting*, in the sense that it correctly represents some feature of an object and saying that an emotion is morally or prudentially *appropriate*, in the sense that it is morally or prudentially right to have this feeling. Drawing on this distinction, one can say that conditions on blameworthiness are fittingness conditions.<sup>2</sup> If the target of blame is blameworthy, blame is accurately representing a feature of its target, namely its blameworthiness. Blame is thus fitting

when its target is blameworthy. For blame to also be morally or prudentially appropriate, however, several other conditions must be met. These conditions pertain to the blamer and the context of the wrongdoing in question and come in addition to fittingness in determining whether blame is morally or prudentially appropriate.

Philosophers writing on the topic have distinguished several propriety conditions on blame. First, there are consequential conditions: In certain situations, blame might be inappropriate because it would be too harmful for the wrongdoer due to her emotional or psychological sensitivity; or because expressed blame will have other foreseeable negative consequences. Further, there are procedural considerations: The response the wrongdoer has to their own wrongdoing seems to weigh in on the appropriateness of blame. If the wrongdoer has repented and made repairs, blame might be inappropriate. In addition, the force of the blame should match the severity of the wrongdoing. As an example, if a friend shows up late to a dinner appointment, it would be appropriate to be slightly annoyed with them for letting you wait and perhaps lose the table. It would be inappropriate, however, to end the friendship based on this minor offence. The last and crucial (for the purposes of this paper) propriety conditions pertain to the blamer's *standing to blame*. If the blamer lacks standing, it has been argued, blame is inappropriate despite the wrongdoer's blameworthiness.

There are three conditions pertaining to the standing of the blamer that can defeat the propriety of blame:

1. **HYPOCRISY/COMPLICITY** Conditions pertaining to the lack of standing due to one's own moral transgressions or complicity in the wrongdoing. If you have committed or been complicit in the same moral wrong, you lack standing to blame someone else for it [see: Todd (2017), Cohen (2006), Wallace (2010), Bell (2012), McKenna (2012), Friedman (2013)].
2. **MORAL COMMUNITY** Conditions pertaining to the fact that the blamer and the blamed must inhabit the same moral community. If they do not share moral norms and concepts they lack standing to blame each other [see: Darwall (2006), Bell (2012)].
3. **MEDDLESOMENESS** Conditions pertaining to the possibility that special relationships and social roles may affect one's standing to blame. If you do not stand in the right relation to the wrongdoer

it might not be your business to blame them [see: Todd (2017), Smith (2007), Adams (1985), McKenna (2012)].<sup>3</sup>

The most discussed condition pertains to how an agent can lose standing to blame due to their own previous wrongdoing or complicity in the wrongdoing. This paper attends to a more underexplored consideration, namely the MEDDLESOMENESS condition.

It is common to think of blame as something that comes with an RSVP; that is, a way of calling people to answer for what they have done and blame them if they have no excuse or justification. However, everyone is not equally well positioned to call someone to answer or respond with blame for what they have done. In the literature on the standing to blame, as well as in our common moral practice, it is often taken for granted that personal relationships and social roles influence who has the standing to blame. To better see how the meddlesomeness consideration influences the propriety of blame consider this paradigm example of what might count as meddlesome blame:

*Meddling in Personal Relationships:* Paul and Mary are close friends having an intimate conversation about Mary's affair on the bus to work. A stranger sitting behind them suddenly weighs in reprimanding Mary for her unfaithfulness: "Poor partner, you should be ashamed of yourself?" etc. The stranger's blame is inappropriate because it is not a stranger's business to blame Mary for having cheated on her partner. Appropriate blame in this case would be for Mary's partner, or friend to blame her for it.

As Linda Radzik points out, we do hesitate to blame our friends when they commit wrongs we feel are none of our business; teachers hesitate to sanction parents for how they treat their children, and we often underline the fact that it is none of our business to judge people for their infidelity [Radzik (2011), p. 582]. There are however several problems with this underexplored assumption.

First, even if we grant that personal relationships influence who has the standing to blame, it is not clear what kind of wrong we are committing when we blame without standing. The extant accounts of standing to blame tend to disagree on what is problematic about meddlesome blame. Most argue that meddlesome blame is either pointless or impossible because it does not 'work'. Others argue that it is morally wrong. There are, as I will show, serious problems with the idea that meddlesome blame does not 'work', and that this is what is problematic about

meddlesome blame. Further, the claim that meddlesome blame can be morally wrong is still underexplored.

Second, there seems to be a tension between the intuitions we have in cases of meddlesome blame. People who blame when it is not their business are often judged to be moralistic, self-righteous and meddlesome. At the same time, not blaming can be judged unprincipled, complacent or cowardly [Radzik (2012), p. 174, Watson (2004), p. 283]. There are certainly cases where we think we don't have standing to blame, but in cases of graver moral offense our intuitions seem to lean towards there not being any restrictions on who has standing. Consider a serious moral offence like murder: We do not think that only those personally associated with the victim have the right to condemn the wrongdoer. On the contrary, when it comes to serious moral wrongdoing, it seems as though it should be anyone's business to blame the wrongdoer. We are thus faced with the problem of differentiating between cases where we do not have standing because we do not stand in the right relation to the wrongdoer, and cases where everyone seems to have standing regardless of association.

Third, there is the problem of what we mean by 'standing', and whether the concept of 'standing' brings out anything important in the debate about appropriate blame. It seems we can talk about what is wrong with hypocrisy, complicity, differing moral communities, and meddling without needing the concept of 'standing'. So, does the use of 'standing' really help us understand what is wrong with meddling, or does it just confuse things further?

In short, the assumption that personal relationships and social roles influence who has the standing to blame is met with three challenges: 1) We don't know what kind of wrong we are committing when we blame without standing in the case of meddling, 2) we need an explanation of how to distinguish standing in cases of personal relationships from the more general standing we have in relation to all moral agents, and 3) we do not know what we mean by 'standing' or whether it is a helpful concept when analyzing the propriety of blame.

The aim of this paper is to examine our assumptions about meddlesome blame and what might be wrong with it. I will propose a possible route by which one can argue that meddlesome blame can be all things considered morally wrong. I will start by canvassing the extant accounts of what is wrong with meddlesome blame. Two distinct views are identified: meddlesome blame is pointless or impossible, or it is morally

wrong. Next, recent objections and skeptical challenges to both these accounts are discussed. The remainder of the paper presents a possibly reply to these challenges. I argue that personal relationships are governed by relationship-specific-norms, norms that again are constituted by our attitudes and intentions toward each other. I suggest that blaming someone for breaking these norms is a prerogative only for those who participate in the relationship. Because the norms apply only to actions and attitudes related to the relationship we do not need to worry about not having standing to blame someone for breaking moral norms that apply to all equally.

## II. STANDARD ACCOUNTS OF THE STANDING TO BLAME

Extant accounts of the standing to blame mainly focus on the first challenge mentioned above, namely what is problematic or wrong about meddlesome blame.<sup>4</sup>

The first account explains the impropriety of meddlesome blame by drawing an analogy to the doctrine of standing in law [Sabini and Silver (1982)]. According to Marilyn Friedman, this is perhaps what the notion of the standing to blame has been modeled on originally [Friedman (2013). p. 278]. As Macalester Bell writes: “Standing is the term used to signify that one has the right to initiate a lawsuit, and in the United States only those who have been directly injured have a right to sue for damages” [Bell (2012). P. 269]. The main idea behind the analogy is that if you do not have the jurisdiction, or the authority to blame, you lack the standing to blame. There are two ways of interpreting this analogy: either, it means that blame is impossible: you will not ‘be able’ to blame without requisite authority. Or, it means that blame will not ‘work’; that is: it will not be able to fulfill its function (or have no effect), unless you have the requisite authority. These are not arguments to the fact that meddlesome blame is morally inappropriate, but rather that it is conceptually inappropriate, in case of it being impossible, or prudentially inappropriate in the case of it not being able to fulfill its function.<sup>5</sup>

Other theorists argue for the inappropriateness of meddlesome blame on moral grounds [Smith (2007), Radzik (2011), McKiernan (2016)]. What is wrong with meddlesome blame on this account is that it violates someone’s privacy, someone’s right to privacy, or someone’s right to agency. Linda Radzik’s account of sanctions is an exception. Radzik argues that meddlesome blame violates a right to agency through not respecting someone’s value of liberty to explore and make mistakes, or vio-

lating the need for privacy, intimacy and trust needed in order for a relationship to flourish [Radzik (2011), pp. 592-593]. On Radzik's account all free and rational agents have standing to sanction, but "this standing is merely *prima facie* and can be defeat by other moral reasons" [ibid p. 592]. These "other moral reasons" are differentiated by appeal to respect for agency. In other words, Radzik argues that there are situations where one is obligated *not* to blame someone for a moral wrong, and one opens oneself up to sanction from others were one not to comply with this obligation. I draw on and discuss Radzik's account further below.

### III. OBJECTIONS TO THE STANDARD ACCOUNTS

One reason to be skeptical of the analogy between the standing to blame and the doctrine of standing in law, is that the doctrine of standing in law is itself problematic. Catherine MacKinnon (1991) has argued that the doctrine of standing in law can be oppressive to women. Women are often victims of collective injuries; it can therefore be hard to identify a victim and an offender in the way necessary for standing in law. In addition, as Macalester Bell points out, we have a reason for having a strict doctrine of standing in law that we do not have in our moral lives, namely that because courts have limited resources it makes sense to limit who can sue whom for what. This restriction does not exist in our moral lives [Bell (2012), p. 270]. Lastly, Friedman argues that legal standing is not a good model for the standing to blame because it would leave third party blame entirely out of the picture [Friedman (2013), pp. 277-78]. As such, blame would only be appropriate when it is expressed by the immediate victim of the wrongdoing in question, and this would put too strong limitations on who has the standing to blame.

I find these objections to the analogy with the doctrine of standing in law convincing. Nonetheless, they do not address the claims that meddling blame can be impossible or pointless in itself. If we take the claim that standingless blame is pointless first, and ignore the analogy with standing in law and its problems, it seems plausible that blame authored by someone without standing will not have uptake. That is, the blamed will not feel obliged to answer to the one blaming, or see reason to change their behavior or to apologize etc. At first glance this seems to make standingless blame impotent regardless of how problematic the analogy with standing in law is. The question is then whether blame must have uptake to 'work' or fulfill its function. I do not think it does. Just

like private blame can be proper blame, blame without uptake can be blame.<sup>6</sup> It is not the moment that blame gets uptake that an act of blaming starts being characterized as proper blame. If that were the case, most instances of blame would not be proper blame, as uptake with its change in behavior and reconciliatory consequences is a rather seldom phenomenon. It might also be argued that blame has several goals, or functions, one of which could be to address the moral community. If that is the case, blame can fulfill a function through uptake in the moral community. I therefore reason that impotent blame is still blame.

Further, if we take the claim that blame is impossible, and abstract it from the analogy with standing in law, the question becomes whether our capacity to blame depends on us having standing, or not. I don't think it does. Standing to blame is not a state-controlled organ that hinders us in expressing blame if we lack authority. We will still *be able* to blame if we lack standing. In sum it does not seem convincing that the problem with meddling blame is that it is either pointless, or impossible.

There are problems with the assumption that meddling blame evinces a moral fault as well. Bell argues that respecting someone's right to privacy by arguing for it as a condition on standing will block important instances of blame. Bell's positive point is that we sometimes ought to blame even if it might violate someone's right to privacy because the valuable motivational, educational and protective function blame has, overrides consideration on standing [Bell (2012), pp. 267-268, 271-281]. This objection to seeing meddling blame as a moral wrong brings us to the second challenge identified in the introduction, that is: how do we distinguish standing in cases of personal relationships from the more general standing we have in relation to all moral agents?

#### IV. SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE STANDING TO BLAME

The first skeptical argument I will consider comes from Macalester Bell (2012). Bell objects to the assumption that meddling blame is inappropriate. According to Bell, the standard account – that one needs standing to blame appropriately – fails to capture *the positionality of blame*, and further, it does not account for how blame goes over and above considerations of fittingness and standing. With the concept of *the positionality of blame*, Bell means to capture the fact that one's position to blame sometimes depends on the relationship between the blamer and the blamed. This is so, she argues, because relationships are partly constituted by “relationship-dependent norms” [Bell (2012), p. 277]. This



might not seem any different from what a proponent of the standard account would argue; however, the standard account fails, according to Bell, because it does not distinguish relationship-dependent norms from general moral norms. On Bell's account, relationship-dependent norms are overridden by general moral norms. Further, Bell argues, blame has motivational, educational and protective values that give us a reason to blame, despite lacking standing [Ibid, pp. 267-268, 279-281]. In short this means that blame is both fitting and appropriate as long as the wrongdoer is blameworthy, and we ought to blame even if we don't have standing given blame's reason-generating values. The skeptical argument from Bell then, can be stated as the worry that everyone always has standing, and therefore there is nothing to object to in cases of meddling.

Another possible skeptical argument, and the third challenge identified in the introduction, relates to the concept of 'standing' itself. It is hard to get a grasp of what exactly we mean by 'standing'. If the concept originated from the analogy with the doctrine of standing in law, and this analogy has been proven unsuccessful, continuing to use the concept might just make the discussion unnecessarily complicated. In addition, it seems we can explain what is problematic about meddling without referring to 'standing'. We can simply say that meddling is a violation of a right to privacy, or a violation of a social norm that says we should not interfere in other people's business. So perhaps we would be better off when accounting for why meddling is inappropriate without using the concept of 'standing'.

## V. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MEDDLING

To tackle the challenges to the idea that we need standing to blame appropriately, I will start by providing a possible way of distinguishing the standing we have to blame people in personal relations from the standing we have to blame all moral agents. In answering to this challenge, I will also start to develop a reply to what is wrong with meddlesome blame, what standing means, and why it is a useful concept when attempting to account for appropriate blame.

The initial assumption here is that personal relationships are governed by special norms. This means that in personal relationships our behaviour is governed by norms that are not general, but specific to the relationship, or to the type of relationship in question.

Relational norms come with special obligations, rights, permissions and powers that govern our relations with others. This means that the

way we are permitted or obliged to treat each other in personal relationships varies from how we are permitted or obliged to treat each other in non-personal relations. Take the classical example of friendships: Friendships are notoriously hard to characterize because they take many different shapes and thus incorporate many different norms. Nonetheless, there are some common norms involved in anything that we could reasonably regard as a genuine “friendship”. For example, one is expected to have certain attitudes, that is, dispositions and intentions, to behave and feel in certain ways towards one’s friends [Scanlon (2008), p. 132]. One such expected attitude could be to care about each other’s well-being. This can, for example, be done through asking how the other person is doing, sympathizing, or by making oneself available to the other person when they need you. As an example, consider that Mary’s spouse Jane gets a divorce after having found out about Mary’s infidelity. Jane is distraught by the events, but her close friend Sam takes no notice of it. He does not call; he does not ask how she is doing etc. This behaviour could be interpreted as Sam not having the attitudes and intentions that would be expected of him given their close relation, and therefore as flouting the norms of his friendship with Jane. In contrast, we are not obliged to care as much about the well-being of the people we are not in such close relationships with. We would not be flouting the same norms were we not to ask how the person next to us on the tram is doing or taking them home for a cup of tea if they look troubled.

What the account we are looking for needs to be able to do, however, is to explain what constitutes these norms, and why it seems to be the case that only those bound by the norms have the standing to blame someone for breaking them.

One way to go about this is to see the relational norms as constituted by expectations and demands. Antony Duff proposes that what determines the appropriateness of an instance of blame depends on how the judgment of blameworthiness rests on the expectations and demands arising from the normatively laden description or role of the persons involved [Duff (2007), p. 19]. In the example above this would mean that the normatively laden description of Sam as a ‘friend’ gives rise to certain expectations and demands from Jane. Sam is thus not just responsible to Jane for what he has done (or failed to do), but he is responsible *in virtue of* the normatively laden description ‘friend’. What Duff’s tripartite account of responsibility provides us with is an understanding of the normative significance of our relations with others. Close relationships give rise to expectations and demands. In other words, certain relations ap-

pear to constitute norms that determine how we can expect and demand people to treat us when we stand in this specific relation to them.

One might challenge this view along the lines of Bell's objection to the standard account above – that relationship-specific norms are always overridden by universal moral norms – and ask why we are not all responsible just in virtue of the normatively laden description of 'moral agents.' What expectations could be added to a personal relationship that is not already covered by the description of 'moral agent', we might ask, and shouldn't the expectations and demands arising from the description of 'moral agent' override those arising from special relationships?

To explain further how relations such as friendship are constituted by special norms, I want to consider T.M. Scanlon's point that the normative ideal of relations such as friendships, are *contingent* on certain attitudes [Scanlon (2008), pp.132-135]. This is not true of the relationship we have to each other simply in virtue of being moral agents. If the relationship is contingent on and constituted by the attitudes we have to each other, as Scanlon argues, the normative significance of the relationships, identified by Duff, will change in accordance with the attitudes. In other words, what we owe to each other as relations change as our attitudes towards each other change.

These observations unveil friendships and other close relationships as complex processes. The norms operative in personal relationships are not entirely imposed on the relationships from society or our inert nature as free and rational agents but are largely up to the participants of the relationship in question. This is not true of the relationship we have to each other simply in virtue of being moral agents: The obligations we have towards other moral agents and patients are more static and independent of our attitudes. This is not to say that our understanding of our moral obligations cannot change over time as we expand our understanding of morality, it is just to say that it is not up to an individual to set the norms for her relationships with the rest of the moral community based on her changing attitudes towards others. As an attempt to explain the causality of the norm formation, I suggest that it starts with the attitudes we have towards each other; from these attitudes expectations and demands arise, and establish a normatively laden description or role that, in its turn, gives rise to the relationship's specific norms

The conclusion we can draw from this is that, given the special nature of the norms of conduct within close relationships as constituted by our attitudes towards each-other, violations of these norms should be

viewed differently from violations of universal moral norms. If our relationships are constituted by norms that arise from our intentions and attitudes towards each other, only those actively taking part in a relationship – those having intentions and attitudes – can break and be bound by the norms. These norms are also separable from universal moral norms in the sense that they only have to do with those who take part in the relationship; that is, they are norms that have to do with the attitudes we have towards each other and the actions that express these attitudes. They are therefore distinguishable from universal norms and we can avoid the danger of not having standing to blame someone for murder, for example. Murder is not the kind of action that is governed by relationship-specific norms.

It is important to note that the distinction I am making here is not between *relationship-specific norms*, and *moral norms*, but between *relationship-specific norms* and *universal moral norms*. And it should be specified that relationship-specific norms are also universal in the sense that anyone who stand in a relationship where the norms apply, will be bound by them. This also means that violations of relationship-specific norms often are violations of moral norms. This specific type of moral norm, however, does not bind everyone equally, but only those who are part of the relationship in question. It is thus not the *seriousness of the wrong* that is the scale upon which we determine whether anyone has standing to blame or not, but the *scope of the norm* that is being broken. Many relationship-specific norms appear to be moral in virtue of being relationship-specific, but some can also be considered moral norms in all instances.

To move on to the other challenges outlined above, I think that the normativity of personal relationships can tell us something about what is wrong with meddlesome blame. To develop this further I will flesh out the account of blame I have been operating with. I am here relying on a functional account of blame that I will call, following Angela Smith (2012), p.43, The Moral Protest Account.<sup>7</sup>

The Moral Protest Account of blame is best understood by seeing moral wrongdoing as a claim implicit in the wrongdoer's behaviour. If one accepts that wrongdoing makes a statement about the moral status of the victim (that the victim can be treated this way), blame can be seen as a protest of this claim [Hieronymi (2001), p. 546, Smith (2012), p. 42]. As Matthew Talbert has argued, seeing blame as protest can also amount to seeing blame as an affirmation of rights [Talbert (2011), p. 106]. From this perspective, blame is a way of standing up for and protecting one's rights. In the same vein, drawing on Bernard Boxill's 1976 paper "Self-Respect and

Protest”, Angela Smith writes “What is protested [through blame] is ‘an outrageous falsehood’ concerning the moral status of the victim; protest ‘affirms’ what the wrongdoer’s action denies” [Smith (2012), p. 42]. Through protesting the wrong done towards oneself one can re-enforce one’s rights and one’s moral status. Blame as protest can also re-enforce rights by addressing the moral community at large, or even as private blame only for the sake of the victim. It has also been argued [Fricker (2016)] that an overarching goal of blame is to reach alignment of moral understanding and of moral reasons. Thinking of blame as something that aims to reach alignment of our understanding of right and wrong fits well with the idea that blame protests moral wrongdoing. It is plausible that what we want from the wrongdoer when we blame, and thereby protest the wrongdoing, is for her to acknowledge the falsity of the claim implicit in the wrongdoing. By acknowledging the falsity of the claim, the wrongdoer also acknowledges the superiority of the victim’s moral judgment, that the bad action is in fact wrong. On this account, then, blame as protest, enforces the victim’s understanding of right and wrong. Further, one might argue that if blame has as a function to align moral understandings, and can be used to enforce the victim’s moral understanding, this means that blame can be a technique of control. As both Fricker and Radzik point out, we must therefore be wary of the potential abuse of blame to enforce a dangerous or damaging understanding of right and wrong [Fricker (2016), p. 181, Radzik (2011), p. 588].

I suggest that meddling can be seen as a form of abuse of blame, and perhaps as a form of paternalism. Meddling in others’ personal relationships interferes with the participants’ freedom to develop their own relationships, and thus with their agency and right to privacy. As Radzik points out, drawing on the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, there are substantial reasons to regulate who has the standing to blame. She writes: “Rules such as this would play some role in limiting the power of public opinion (which, as Mill reminds us, is usually the power of a particular social class, and, we might add, gender and sexual orientation) to shape family life, better allowing for the benefits of self-development and social experimentation” [Radzik (2011), p. 588]. When a stranger blames someone for breaking a relationship-specific norm, they interfere with the people who take part in the relationship’s own right to go through the process of holding each other responsible, and thus their right to determine and develop the norms of their relationship.

What I have presented here is one possible route by which to argue that meddling blame is morally wrong in certain limited situations. In addition, this account explains why it can be advantageous to operate with the concept of ‘standing’ when attempting to decide whether an instance of blame is morally appropriate. Having standing means that you stand in the right relation to the wrongdoer, that you are bound by the requisite norms, and thus that you can gain the privilege to blame the wrongdoer for breaking the norms. The account I have presented does not hang on the use of the concept of ‘standing’; in fact, everything I have argued for could be explained in other terms than with the use of this concept. However, I think there are advantages to having and using this concept, as it helpfully captures the fact that the relation we stand in to the wrongdoer and victim of a moral wrong matters when we contemplate the propriety of an instance of blame. Arguing that there is no such thing as ‘standing’, and that we could just as well talk of norm violation without invoking this concept, would only amount to a verbal dispute, and it would not help us get any closer to understanding when blame is appropriate.

## VI. OBJECTIONS

### 6.1 *Epistemic access*

In a recent paper Amy McKiernan (2016) defends the meddling condition (or business condition, as she calls it) against the objections posed by Macalester Bell (2012), by pointing to considerations pertaining to our general lack of epistemic access to the reasons motivating the behavior of individuals with whom we do not share a personal relationship. On her account, a potential blamer – on pain of being a bystander to the relationship – lacks the necessary epistemic access for appropriate blame. The worry is nicely brought out through one of the classical examples in the discussion on meddling, first given by Angela Smith (2007):

For example, it may be inappropriate for me to express moral criticism to a stranger I meet at a party, who manifests demeaning and dismissive attitudes towards his wife (say, by repeatedly interrupting her and ignoring or ridiculing her contributions to the conversation). Since I do not know this person, or his wife, an explicit reproach on my part would be presumptuous and meddling, even if critical attitudes towards him are perfectly warranted [Smith (2007), p. 478].

Bell disagrees with Smith's conclusion that it would be inappropriate to express blame to the husband in the example above, for three reasons: First, she does not think that it is an obvious violation of the wrongdoer's privacy. Further, instead of it being a violation of the wrongdoer's privacy, expecting would-be blamers to divulge information about their relationships with the wrongdoer in order to establish that they have standing, would be a violation of the *blamer's* privacy. Lastly, Bell argues that even if it would be a violation of the wrongdoer's privacy, it would still be appropriate to blame them (because the positive functions of blame override the concern for privacy).

McKiernan, on the other hand, defends the view that it would be inappropriate to blame the wrongdoer by arguing that we do not have enough information about the wrongdoer and the situation in question [McKiernan (2016), p. 150]. McKiernan agrees with Bell in that intervention would not be restricted on the basis of respecting the privacy of the husband. What she finds troubling in Bell's account however, is that Bell does not consider the position of the wife. What would expressed blame do to the wife? McKiernan imagines two possible negative outcomes. One is that it would diminish the agency of the wife, by depriving her of the possibility to confront the husband herself (perhaps after the dinner party). The second is that it could worsen the potential abuse. As McKiernan writes: "It is well known that calling attention to relationship abuse can heighten the abuse in the future" [Ibid., p.151]. McKiernan concludes that the most important reason to maintain the meddling condition is the blamer's lack of epistemic access to the consequences of the blame.

In addition to the two negative outcomes identified by McKiernan – diminishing agency, and accelerating abuse – we can imagine that lack of knowledge of the relationship and the norms they have agreed to within it, could lead to lack of agency in a different way. Imagine a scenario where the presumably abusive comments from the husband actually are part of a regular playful bickering the couple regularly participates in, and where the wife normally will reply with similar behavior. Blaming the husband could then be seen as limiting the couple's right to self-determination of the relationship-specific norms, and thus to diminishing agency not just for the wife, but also for the husband.

McKiernan's point is an important one, and I agree that the epistemic considerations should matter when we decide whether an instance of blame is appropriate. Nonetheless, McKiernan's contribution seems to change the direction of the discussion: The negative consequences she

envisages do not pertain to meddling in particular. In all instances of blame we will be faced with the problem of epistemic access. We cannot know the true reasons why people act the way they do, what intentions they have, whether they are acting from culpable ignorance or out of bad will etc. This is why, in the discussion on meddling, it is always assumed that we already have enough knowledge to determine whether the wrongdoer is decidedly blameworthy. Considerations about blameworthiness come prior to considerations about standing. Further, and importantly, considerations about the procedure of blame and the consequences of blame are also separate from consideration on standing. As mentioned in the introduction: If blaming the wrongdoer would cause more harm than good, blame might be inappropriate. Concerns about the possible negative outcome of blame do therefore not have to do with meddling in particular. Diminishing agency, however, does, but this is not an epistemological concern; even if we had all possible knowledge about the relationship and the context of the situation, we could be wrong about whether we have standing to blame, and thus risk diminishing agency.

McKiernan's concern is important, nonetheless, because in most instances of blame in real life, we do not have access to this information and we cannot say for certain that the wrongdoer is blameworthy. Epistemic access, however, might be added to the list of conditions, in addition to standing, that we have to meet in order for our blame to be appropriate.

## 6.2 *Transitivity of relationship-specific norms*

A second worry could be that my account of relationship-specific norms can seem counterintuitive in certain cases. In the example from the introduction – where Mary confides in her friend Paul about her affair – it might seem, on my account, as if Paul does not have standing to blame Mary either. Mary has only broken norms constitutive of her relationship with her partner, not norms constitutive of her relationship with Paul. Similarly, it would seem, on my account, that we do not have standing to blame one of our friends for what they have done to one of our common friends. This rings false, one might argue, as it seems intuitively right that we should have standing to blame our friends for what they have done to a friend we have in common.

There are (at least) two ways of responding to this worry. One is to bite the bullet and argue that we do not have standing to blame our friends for what they have done to their other close relations. This is not



an unimaginable position. When you confide in a friend, the last thing you need might be for them to blame you. Perhaps what we need from friends in this situation is support and understanding, not blame. And perhaps the relationships we have to one another are so different and separate from each other that we would be violating our friend's right to agency or privacy by blaming them for how they are treating another friend.

I don't find this reply entirely convincing. The reason for this is that our close relations often overlap. I find it hard to imagine people going through life and never introducing their partner to their friends, or their friends to their family, or to other friends. Another possible response could thus be to expand on my account of relationship-specific norms such that they can be transitive. On this account the norms that govern the relationship you have with one friend A also govern the relationship you have with a friend B who is also a friend of A's. This means that if you wrong one friend you break a norm that govern your relationship with other friends, and that gives the other friends standing to blame you.

Another way to explain this last reply could be to argue that one of the norms arising from close personal relationships arises from the expectation that we call our friends out on their bad or objectionable behavior. We would then be breaking a relationship-specific norm were we *not* to blame our friends for how they treat their friends, even if this behavior does not affect us directly.<sup>8</sup>

## VIII. CONCLUSION

From a greater perspective we have, on the one hand, arguments for the importance of blame in our moral lives. If one accepts the view that blame has an important and positive function in our moral lives – be it as moral protest, a re-assertion of moral norms, a tool to settle disagreement, or a way of standing up for one's values – considerations that restrict when one ought to blame, like the meddling consideration, might be interfering with the function fulfillment of blame. On the other hand, however, blame needs to be restricted somehow because it is a practice rife with pathologies. We can blame too much and too often, and because blame can be controlling and paternalistic, we need propriety conditions beyond the settling of blameworthiness. Meddling is one of the pathologies of blame, but accounting for the badness of it is an exer-

cise that risks putting too strong restrictions on blame. In many cases we ought to blame, even if we do not stand in a close relationship with the wrongdoer. In this paper I hope to have showed that there are ways to restrict blame and still protect its valuable function in our lives. When the moral wrong in question is a violation of a relationship-specific norm, only those bound by this norm gets the privilege to blame the wrongdoer. This account protects the wrongdoer, and the victim, from becoming victimized; from having their right to privacy violated, and from having their agency diminished. All the while leaving open the possibility for people to appropriately blame each other for moral wrongs that are not violations of relationship-specific norms.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a controversial topic, and the literature is rife with disagreement on the conditions an agent must meet in order to count as “morally responsible” or “blameworthy” for something. I will not get further into these details here, what I am investigating in this paper are the propriety conditions on blame that goes over and above blameworthiness and moral responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> D’Arms and Jacobson are interested in the fittingness and propriety of emotions. Whether or not blame necessarily involves emotions is a disputed matter in the debate. I think it makes sense to talk about the fittingness and propriety of blame regardless of what one thinks blame involves. If one thinks that blame is simply a judgment of blameworthiness, for example, the same fittingness conditions would apply to such a judgment. Conditions on propriety however, would first become relevant when the blame is expressed. In cases of

meddling it is thus expressed blame we are talking about. Unless indicated 'blame' will from here on mean 'expressed blame'.

<sup>3</sup> It might turn out that what makes blaming wrong when one lacks standing due to hypocrisy and complicity, or moral community, is something else than what makes meddling blame wrong. I will not explore this here, but Patrick Todd (2017) argues along these lines.

<sup>4</sup> I will bracket the question of what 'standing' amounts to for now and get back to it below. It might seem odd to start with the question of what is wrong with standingless blame, given that I have not yet defended the notion of 'standing'. This is however the way the topic is treated in the literature, and I believe that starting with the question of what is wrong with standingless blame will shed some light on what we mean when we talk about 'standing'.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Angela Smith for clarifying this distinction to me.

<sup>6</sup> See Macnamara (2015), and Fricker (2016) for accounts of why private blame can count as blame proper.

<sup>7</sup> Other proponents of versions of this account are McGeer (2012), Talbert (2011) and Hieronymi (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Thanks, again, to Angela Smith for suggesting this response to me.

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