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Comments on "A Standing Asymmetry Between Blame and Forgiveness"
By Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller

Thanks to our authors, Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller! In my comments today, I'll begin with a brief recap of the authors' main points. Then as fodder for discussion, I'll raise two potential objections. These two points will be related; I'll offer a suggestion for responding to the first worry, but a discussion of it will lead us toward the second worry.

Section I. Brief Recap

It is generally assumed in the philosophical literature on blame that it is possible for A to blame B even if A lacks the *standing* to blame B. In other words, there is such a thing as standingless blame. The authors note:

> We grow irritated with others who blame us without the requisite standing to do so, "precisely *because* they are *actually* blaming us" (p. 1, italics in original).

> One might lack standing to blame due to hypocrisy, for instance; the authors offer the example that one who is cheating on his own spouse might lack the standing to blame his friend for doing the same.

However, standingless *forgiveness* is *not* possible**.** One who lacks the standing to forgive cannot really forgive at all.

> In the authors' example, Emeko cannot be forgiven for cheating on his spouse (that is, Kimiko) by… the bartender. The bartender has no standing to forgive Emeko for the affair.

This points to an asymmetry between blame and forgiveness that calls out for explanation.

The authors' proposed explanation draws attention to the differences regarding the normative and non-normative functions of blame and forgiveness. They define a normative function as follows:

> "A normative function is a function instantiated by the creation, preservation, or alteration of some norm." (9)

> Blame's *non-normative* functions include: having a wrongdoer feel remorse, apologize, admit his fault, make amends, etc. (9). Blame's *normative* functions include: placing a *pro tanto* obligation on the wrongdoer to apologize, admit his fault, make amends etc. (9).

> For forgiveness, the *non-normative* functions include the overcoming of resentment and other hostile attitudes (10). The *normative* functions include e.g. relinquishing certain rights that the victim has with respect to the wrongdoer: the right to blame, to request an apology, to demand restitution, and perhaps the right to feel resentment (10-11).

According to the authors, "while blame does not require the fulfillment of its normative functions, forgiveness does" (p. 12). This, they propose, explains the asymmetry.

Section II. Points for Discussion

Worry #1. Does the authors' favored explanation (i.e. that genuine blame does not require fulfillment of its normative functions while genuine forgiveness does) provide a fully satisfying explanation of the target phenomenon? Or how might we expand upon it?

The authors anticipate, and briefly discuss, a version of this objection (p. 13). They write:

> One might press further: Why is it that forgiveness requires the fulfillment of its normative functions when blame does not? Perhaps the answer is simply that otherwise it wouldn't be forgiveness… Explanations can only go so far, and perhaps we have reached bedrock.

But I suspect we have not yet reached explanatory bedrock. Why is it that certain acts (like blame) can occur without fulfilling their normative functions, while others (like forgiveness) cannot really occur at all when their normative functions are not fulfilled? Surely if this is true, there must be some further explanation for this.

There are two things that remain potentially puzzling about the authors' explanation. The *first* is that an unexplained asymmetry remains. But *second*, the claim that genuine blame need not fulfill its normative functions might seem quite puzzling all on its own. The idea of a characteristic "function" seems to be tightly tied to *what makes something what it is*. How can blame (or anything else) that fails to fulfill a central "function" associated with it be genuine blame?

I'd like to venture a potential way of building on the authors' suggestion. Perhaps what distinguishes standingless blame from standingless forgiveness is that in typical cases, such blame still fulfills *many* of its diverse range of characteristic functions. Perhaps forgiveness possesses a narrower range of functions, where the normative function is more central to the nature of forgiveness.

In particular, when A blames B, this arguably fulfills a variety of *social* functions, whether or not it successfully fulfills the functions more specifically directed at individual B, including both the normative ones already mentioned by the authors (placing a *pro tanto* obligation on the wrongdoer, B, to apologize, admit his fault, and make amends) **as well as the non-normative ones already mentioned by the authors** (making B feel remorse, apologize, admit his fault, make amends).

Suppose A blames B for a transgression of a moral norm. Among all who witness the casting of blame, this social act may serve to discourage others from transgressing the norm in the future. And when others, apart from A and B, start to gossip about A's blaming B, this kind of talk may serve to reinforce a community's commitment to the transgressed norm. These functions of blame, as a social act, might be fulfilled (at least to *some* significant extent) whether or not A initially had standing to blame B. In fact, if A *lacked* standing due to hypocrisy, then subsequent discussion of the case might very successfully serve the social function(s) of blame by prompting condemnation of A's norm violation, too.

Yet perhaps forgiveness does not, even in ideal cases, fulfill similar *social* functions of affirming commitment to a transgressed norm. Forgiveness can repair a relationship between individuals, but hearing about forgiveness might not serve to reinforce a community's commitment to a norm. If anything, the great prevalence of forgiveness for transgressing a particular norm might serve to *undermine* a community's commitment over time to following that norm.

On the suggestion I'm sketching, standingless blame can be successful in fulfilling *many* of the functions of blame; these functions are largely social. Yet forgiveness that fails to fulfill its normative function, due to the lack of standing, fails to too great an extent in fulfilling its characteristic functions to be real forgiveness at all.

If this is right, though…

Worry #2. Does the distinction between "normative" and "non-normative" functions play a key role, after all, in explaining the alleged asymmetry between blame and forgiveness?

The authors had suggested that the asymmetry between the possibility of standingless blame but not standingless forgiveness is explained by the fact that real forgiveness must fulfill its *normative* functions, while blame need not.

This suggests that for the authors, the crucial difference between blame and forgiveness comes down to whether fulfillment of a *normative function* is essential to the act.

But how much does it matter, in explaining this asymmetry, whether the unfulfilled functions are normative or non-normative?

I have suggested that standingless blame may still fulfill a *great many* of its characteristic functions. Social functions such as discouraging violation of an existing norm, and reinforcing a community's commitment to it, presumably count as *non-normative* functions on the authors' view. (For what it's worth, I might be tempted to endorse a more liberal definition of "normative functions" than the authors give here.)

I also suggested that forgiveness might have a narrower range of characteristic functions, which primarily concern the relationship between the individuals involved. Forgiveness that does not fulfill its normative function, as the authors describe it, fails too much of its characteristic purpose to count as forgiveness.

Notice that we could make similar points about a variety of acts or events with characteristic functions, *whether or not any of them are normative functions*. For example, an "academic conference" that did not allow opportunities for the presentation of new work, or did not give researchers the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas, would presumably not be a real conference at all; too many core functions would remain unfulfilled. But a conference over Zoom, where many of these functions were still fulfilled, could count as a real conference even if it did not facilitate the specific function of allowing old friends to get together over dinner. That one function is (perhaps) not central to the nature of a conference.

In the case of blame and forgiveness, do we need to make a distinction between *normative and non-normative functions* to explain the asymmetry? Or do we simply need to draw attention to the *extent* to which standingless blame vs. standingless forgiveness can fulfill their characteristic range of functions?

I'll leave this as an open-ended question.

Takeaway: Thanks to Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller for leading us in a closer examination of the normative functions of blame and forgiveness, both as they arise in the contexts of particular relationships and as acts with broader social significance.