

# Meddlesome Blame and Negotiating Standing\*

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## 1 Charges of Meddling

It is often inappropriate to blame wrongdoers if their wrongdoing is not our business. Direct blame in these cases may be met with a charge of *meddling* and a dismissal, or brushing off, of blame.<sup>1</sup> For example, even if your teenage son is blameworthy for snapping at you when you ask him to be home by eleven, as a mere acquaintance, it would be objectionably meddlesome for me to blame him. Both he and you may bristle if I were to do so, telling me to mind my own business and otherwise dismissing or ignoring blame from me.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>My focus will be on direct blame—blame to the wrongdoer’s face. It is most plausible that anti-meddling norms concern this kind of blame, and more controversial whether there are anti-meddling norms on private blame or blame to third-parties. To preview, I consider two kinds of grounds for anti-meddling norms on blame. The first concerns values associated with privacy and intimacy for both the wrongdoer and the victim (sections 3 and 5). The second concerns respect for the victim in their efforts to find vindication after being wronged (section 4). It is typically only direct blame that threatens these values, either by interfering in relationships or by undermining the victim’s efforts to find vindication. In cases in which non-direct blame, such as blame to third-parties, does threaten these values, I suspect that anti-meddling norms will have some force.

<sup>2</sup>For dedicated discussions of meddlesome blame, see, for example, Radzik (2011, 2012, fc); McKiernan (2016); Seim (2019). There are also several discussions of meddlesome blame in recent work about the standing to blame more generally: see, e.g., Smith (2007), p. 478, Bell (2012), pp. 269-271, Todd (2019), pp. 348-350, Herstein (2020), p. 9, King (2019, 2020), Lippert-Rasmussen (2023), pp. 125-135.

Though most people accept that there are anti-meddling norms on blame, in any particular case charges of meddling and corresponding dismissals of blame can be contentious. One reason for this is that the content and applicability conditions of anti-meddling norms are difficult to specify. Linda Radzik (2011) articulates this thought well: “We are frequently unsure what counts as our business and what does not. We puzzle over the severity of the wrong, the intimacy of our relations to the victim and wrongdoer, whether other bystanders are more intimately related to the main parties ... and other factors” (591). Consider the following example:<sup>3</sup>

**Argument.** You keep in touch with your sister and her family, but are not particularly close. At Thanksgiving dinner, your sister and her husband are having an argument about some matter concerning their daughter. As things get somewhat heated, you notice that her husband is being a little unfair and dismissive of her concerns, and speaking to her a bit unkindly—not being aggressive or demeaning, but clearly acting wrongly.

Some readers will judge that it would be objectionably meddlesome for you to directly blame the husband in this case; others will disagree. It’s true that the subject of the disagreement and the way the spouses treat one another is, in an important sense, between the two of them. On the other hand, the wrongdoing occurs in public, and she is your sister. But again, you are not particularly close to your sister and her family. Cases like this (feel free to substitute your own) show that determining the content and applicability of anti-meddling norms on blame can be difficult.

Another important but less widely discussed reason why meddling charges can be contentious is that it is often not settled in advance whether some instance of blame would be meddlesome. Anti-meddling norms are not always objective or otherwise pre-established. They can clearly vary between communities, but even within one community, as Radzik (fc), p. 2 of preprint, notes, they are often in flux. I don’t think this point should be very controversial, though sometimes work on meddlesome blame and the ethics of blame more generally proceeds as if the task were simply to articulate and justify anti-meddling norms. For example, after observing that “It is not always obvious whether the conditions determinative of standing obtain (e.g., is it or isn’t it “your business?”)”, Herstein (2020) quickly adds that “there is a truth-value to propositions about who does or does not have standing” (18). He acknowledges that there’s sometimes no clear way to

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<sup>3</sup>I have here adapted a popular example in this literature from Smith (2007), p. 478, involving a husband being demeaning and dismissive toward his wife at a party. However, many people find this an unconvincing case of meddlesome blame, since the husband’s behavior is blatantly sexist. So I have amended it to one that I hope will better illustrate the point that it can be genuinely difficult to know whether blame would be meddlesome in many cases.

determine what this truth-value is, but I argue here that things are, in a way, worse than that: sometimes it is just not settled in advance who does or does not have standing, or whether blame would be meddlesome. Similarly, Smith (2007) and Nagel (1998) emphasize the importance of developing a proper sense of what is and what is not our business. This suggests (though does not imply) that there are some objective norms or at least pre-established facts concerning what is and what is not our business and we just need to figure out what they are. This is undoubtedly important, but if there may be no pre-established fact of the matter about whether some wrongdoing is your business, then this won't be enough for a full account of meddlesome blame.

My concern is with an important upshot of this point. If it isn't always settled in advance whether blame would be meddlesome, then, I argue, it is sometimes up to those involved to decide whether blame from a given third-party would be meddlesome. Some charges of meddling in response to blame are best understood not as pointing out violation of some pre-existing norm or boundary on appropriate blame, but rather as putting forward a new norm, or setting a new boundary.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that the grounds or justification of anti-meddling norms—namely, concerns of privacy, intimacy, and the importance for both the victim and the wrongdoer of coming to terms with the wrongdoing—support the claim that victims and wrongdoers often have the prerogative to *designate* some wrongdoing as not the business of some third-parties, rather than merely point out that it is not.

I will also discuss a wider issue that this brings out: norms of criticism, including but not limited to anti-meddling norms, are often up for negotiation. It is especially important that we are able to negotiate and come to a shared understanding of what the norms of criticism are going to be in our close interpersonal relationships. I argue that people in a relationship have a significant degree of latitude here, but there are limits and important ethical considerations arise. This points toward a new area of inquiry within the ethics of criticism. In addition to trying to articulate and justify objective or pre-established norms of criticism, we should think about how to evaluate different norms people may hope to establish and about how to navigate negotiations of these norms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This is not to say that people who respond to blame in this way are always *consciously* trying to establish a new norm or boundary. The claim is just that charges of meddling may be made in the absence of a pre-established norm, and in many of these cases we can understand such charges as ways of putting forward a new norm, even if the person issuing the charge has not consciously and intentionally set out to do so. Broadly social norms of this kind are often not put forward or established in such a deliberate way.

<sup>5</sup>Radzik (fc) makes a similar point. She notes that since norms on criticism are often in flux, “we need some conceptual tools to help us describe and evaluate different practices” (p. 2 of pre-print).

## 2 Standing to Blame

My main concern is meddlesome blame, and how to understand charges of meddling in response to blame. But these issues are important for recent debates about the *standing* to blame, so in this section I will briefly discuss how to understand my main claims as they relate to standing. When we lack the standing to blame, it is for one reason or another not our place to blame, even if the wrongdoer is blameworthy. The most widely discussed condition on having standing to blame is that blame from you would not be hypocritical.<sup>6</sup> But another paradigmatic way of lacking standing to blame is for the wrongdoing to be none of your business, such that blame from you would be objectionably meddlesome. Thus, responding to blame with a charge of meddling is a way of challenging the blamer’s standing.

Responding to blame by challenging the blamer’s standing is a way of *dismissing* that blame, refusing to engage beyond the dismissal. In particular, such dismissals are refusals to respond to the blame in typical ways, for example by expressing remorse or explaining yourself to the blamer. A typical way of dismissing blame is to ask, “Who are *you* to blame me?”; this phrase can be apt both when the blamer is being hypocritical and when they are being meddlesome.<sup>7</sup> One of my central claims in this paper is that charges of meddling can be an attempt to put a new norm in place, or draw a new boundary that excludes the blamer from having standing, even if there was no pre-existing norm when the blame was issued. So dismissing blame via a charge of meddling need not involve pointing out violation of a pre-existing norm or lack of standing to be reasonable or successful.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the paper, I will return to the question of what my claims here imply about whether the blamers have standing in the relevant cases.

There is as yet no universally accepted conception of what the standing to blame is, and I do not need to take a firm stance on this question. In the rest of the paper, where I mention standing, I will not rely on any particular account. But to help situate this paper within this literature, I’ll show how to frame my arguments in terms of an emerging and promising account of standing. Several authors have recently argued that standing is (at least in part) a privilege-right.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See, for a sampling, Cohen (2006, 2012); Wallace (2010); Bell (2012); Friedman (2013); Isserow and Klein (2017); Fritz and Miller (2018, 2019, 2022); Rivera-López (2017); Todd (2019, *ming*); Piovarchy (2020); Herstein (2017, 2020); Edwards (2019); Lippert-Rasmussen (2023); Dover (2019b); O’Brien and Whelan (2022); Snedegar (*fc*).

<sup>7</sup>For discussion of dismissing blame due to lack of standing, see Herstein (2017, 2020); Edwards (2019); Edlich (2022); Snedegar (2024); Lippert-Rasmussen (2023).

<sup>8</sup>Note that if this is right, there is an important disanalogy between dismissing meddlesome blame, in some cases, and dismissing hypocritical blame, since presumably we cannot put in place a new norm that classifies blame as hypocritical—whether blame is hypocritical is not plausibly up to the wrongdoer or their victim.

<sup>9</sup>See Edwards (2019); Fritz and Miller (2022); Radzik (*fc*); Lippert-Rasmussen (2023). Some

On a standard account of rights, this means that having the standing to blame is not having a duty not to blame. On this view, my main claim about standing is that in some cases, there is no pre-existing fact of the matter about whether some individuals have the privilege-right to blame, or whether they have a duty not to blame. Rather, the people involved—specifically, the wrongdoer and the victim—can decide who has this right. This means that in these cases the victims and wrongdoers have a *normative power* to affect what duties and permissions others have with respect to blaming the wrongdoer.<sup>10</sup> Attempts to grant or deny this right may not always succeed, of course; in section 6 I argue that new boundaries on blame are often established by negotiation between the relevant parties, rather than simply by fiat from one person. While it may initially sound odd to think that others may have the power to decide (either by fiat or through negotiation) whether we have the right to blame wrongdoers, I argue that reflecting on the values that ground anti-meddling norms supports this picture.

It is also worth briefly sketching how to understand my claims in this paper on a view that is skeptical about the standing to blame, like that of Matt King (2019, 2020). King holds that we can explain the inappropriateness of blame in the relevant cases with no appeal to the standing to blame as some status or right that someone can lose. Rather, he thinks that those who blame inappropriately simply “have more reason not to blame than to blame” (King (2019), p. 268. In cases of meddlesome blame, the blamers have good reason not to blame that are provided by norms governing what we should be attending to and whether and how we should attend to or get involved in the lives others.<sup>11</sup> I am more optimistic than King that there is important theoretical work for a distinctive notion of standing. But the questions I am interested in still arise on this skeptical view, and the conclusions in this paper are compatible with it. On this view, my arguments are that wrongdoers and victims can often decide which norms of attention and involvement are at work in matters concerning them, and that these norms are sometimes up for negotiation. If so, then there may be no pre-existing fact about whether a given potential blamer has these kinds of reasons not to blame. Rather, the people involved can set their own boundaries and thus give these reasons. So the main issues in this paper clearly bear on debates about the standing to blame,

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of these authors also hold that having standing involves having a claim-right against the target of blame that they respond to your blame or give it uptake.

<sup>10</sup>Here I am relying on the standard Hohfeldian categorization of rights; see, e.g., Wenar (2023).

<sup>11</sup>Also see Seim’s (2019) discussion of a skeptical challenge to standing: “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” (15); Seim does not accept this skeptical picture, however.

but do not depend on accepting that there is such a substantive normative status that we might have or lack. Fully integrating my claims into a particular theory of the standing to blame, or a skeptical alternative like King’s, would require more work, but for now I will focus on developing and defending those claims.

### 3 Meddlesome Blame, Privacy, and Intimacy

Meddlesome blame is often wrongful because it involves breaches of *privacy* or *intimacy*, and the value of privacy and intimacy is what justifies norms against meddling in many cases. We can see this by noting that anti-meddling norms on blame most plausibly apply in cases in which the wrongdoing only harms the wrongdoers themselves, or in which the wrongdoing is in the context of a special relationship, like a family, friendship, or marriage—relationships which tend to be protected from outside interference by norms of privacy and intimacy.

I need to discuss one important complication regarding meddlesome blame and privacy. Though meddlesome blame is often understood as a violation of privacy, the connection is not straightforward, at least on some understandings of privacy. One popular view of privacy is the *informational* conception, where privacy protects our ability to control who has access to information about us, and so our ability to keep things hidden from certain people.<sup>12</sup> But meddlesome blame does not characteristically involve inappropriately obtaining information about the wrongdoer. Someone may innocently obtain knowledge of your wrongdoing—it might be public knowledge—but nevertheless inappropriately blame you for it because it is not their business. Whether or not something is your business often concerns whether you should be *attending* to it (cf. King (2020)) or whether you should be *getting involved*, rather than whether you should know about it. So the kind of privacy at issue in meddlesome blame is not typically going to be informational privacy. Instead, it will concern either what aspects of you and your life others should be attending to (cf. Gavison (1980), pp. 442-443), or what Allen (1988) and Radzik (fc) refer to as *decisional* privacy—one’s ability to decide for oneself what to do without undue outside pressure or interference.<sup>13</sup> I am assuming

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<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Parent (1983) and more recently and closer to the topic of this paper, Gaukroger (2020).

<sup>13</sup>See Herstein (2020), p. 9, n. 28, who observes that norms of privacy may sometimes demand the “reserve” of others, where by this Herstein means “behaving as if we are unaware of another or of their actions even though we are aware, and they know we are, and we know that they know that we are”. See also Owens (2022), p. 223, fn. 1: “In theory, I can learn virtually anything about you without violating your privacy, and I can violate your privacy without learning anything I did not already know in some legitimate fashion”. It may be relevant, at least in some cases, whether the wrongdoing takes place in private or in public, even assuming we know about both sorts. The fact that the wrongdoing was committed behind closed doors may count against

here that blaming someone does constitute a kind of interference in that person's decisions. It is not of course a physical restraint, and the wrongful decision has typically already happened by the time the blame occurs. But still, I think we all hope that blame is effective in getting people to act differently in the future, and that the prospect of being blamed can act as a deterrent—though I am not making the consequentialist claim that this is the (only) point or justification for blame.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, I argue that given this grounding of anti-meddling norms in considerations of privacy or intimacy, we should expect there to be cases in which it is not settled in advance whether blame would be meddlesome. Moreover, at least many such cases will be ones in which the parties involved—most obviously, the victim and the wrongdoer—get to decide whether blame from a given third-party would be meddlesome. In such cases, a charge of meddling may be aiming to set a boundary on blame, rather than point out a pre-established one.

The nature and justification of norms of privacy and intimacy is an important topic in its own right, and I cannot give these questions a full treatment here. But typically, such norms are taken to set off spheres of activity, attitudes, and information and protect them from various kinds of interference by outsiders. As Nagel (1998) puts it, norms of privacy protect “private life from the crippling effects of the external gaze” (17). A central point of such norms is to protect or enable the development of certain values that can be undermined by outside interference. These include things like autonomy, the development of a self-conception, expression of one's individuality, freedom to decide together what our relationships will look like, including norms and expectations for one another, and generally developing a sense of how we want to live—as individuals and with those close to us. All of these valuable things can be undermined by interference, including criticism, from others.<sup>15</sup>

Further, some take privacy to be necessary for establishing intimate relationships with others. Part of forming an intimate relationship with someone is giving that person access to information about you, licensing them to pay certain kinds of attention to you, or being open to their influence in a way that differs from how

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blaming for it, even if you (innocently) know about it, because there's a general presumption that we should at least often behave as if we don't know about things that happen behind closed doors. But it is very important to note that this kind of appeal to the “public/private divide” has been heavily criticized by feminist writers as protecting abusers; for classic work on this see MacKinnon (1989).

<sup>14</sup>On this point, see Nagel (1998): “[T]he power of public opinion can be as effective an instrument of coercion as law in an intrusive society” (27) and Waldron (1981): “[M]erely telling someone that he should not do A may be a highly effective way of getting him to stop A-ing” (30). See also Gaukroger (2020), pp. 422-423.

<sup>15</sup>Many authors explain the wrongfulness of meddlesome blame by appeal to these kinds of values. See, e.g., Radzik (2011) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2023), pp. 134-135.

you relate to others. Radzik (fc) argues that one thing that is valuable about privacy norms is that they allow for differences in who has standing to blame you for certain kinds of wrongdoing, thus partly constituting the higher degree of intimacy of the relationship with these people. The general thought here is that spheres of privacy are valuable not only because of who they exclude but also because of who they include.<sup>16</sup>

Norms of privacy and intimacy protect individuals and relationships from outside influence in many different ways. Thus, much of what I say in this section will apply not only to meddlesome blame but to meddling more generally, including meddlesome advice, meddlesome questions, and so on. If my arguments here are right, then we will have significant discretion in deciding for ourselves when advice and questioning is meddlesome, and the relevant norms will not always be settled in advance of decisions from those involved. I think this is very plausible, but will focus on meddlesome blame. This is in part because I think this point is an important intervention in the recent literature on the ethics of blame. Further, since our interest in calling out wrongdoing seems stronger than our interest in making sure others make the most rational decision or in learning all we can about them, it is more surprising to claim that others have the power to decide when we can appropriately blame than that they can decide when we can appropriately advise or inquire. But it is also because norms against meddlesome blame are among the most important anti-meddling norms.<sup>17</sup> Within limits, cases in which individuals or those in a relationship have to navigate wrongdoing can be especially important in the development of the values that support anti-meddling norms and of the relationship more generally. In the case of wrongdoing within a relationship, it's a truism—whether or not it's always *true*—that relationships can be made stronger by going through the process of moral repair after wrongdoing. Doing so can build intimacy and let people in the relationship go through the valuable process of deciding for themselves how wrongdoing will be dealt with in their relationship. In many cases, social support of various kinds is vital to this process. But still, it is ultimately the individuals involved who have to move forward (or not) with the relationship, so it is important that they have the space to decide together how to do so.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Here I am treating privacy and intimacy as two different kinds of grounds for anti-meddling norms on blame. But as the discussion in this paragraph suggests, many people think that privacy and intimacy are not exactly separate values. Rather, the thought is, roughly, that privacy is necessary for intimacy. I don't think much hinges on this for my purposes. On this kind of point, see, for example, Fried (1970); Rachels (1975); Schoeman (1992); Innes (1996); DeCew (1997), and others.

<sup>17</sup>In addition, some of the arguments later in the paper specifically concern cases of wrongdoing, and so meddlesome blame is the most relevant kind of meddling.

<sup>18</sup>See Radzik (2011), pp. 593-594 and Williams (2013), pp. 354-355.



In the case of individuals, those who defend a “right to do wrong”—not the same as a right against meddlesome blame, but plausibly related—insist that having the space to make certain wrongful choices without interference from others is crucial for the protection of autonomy and development of individuality.<sup>19</sup> There are very important limits here, and the range of choices such a right plausibly protects is quite narrow.<sup>20</sup> They are typically taken to involve things like political affiliation, personal attachments, charitable causes, and so on that can be important to one’s identity but do not typically lead very directly to harms to others—or, when they do, it becomes much less plausible that one has a right to non-interference. Note that these kinds of things are also some of the areas in which blame would most commonly be considered meddlesome.

There is much more to say about norms of privacy and intimacy. For the purposes of this paper, the most important point is this: norms of privacy and intimacy are not always pre-established or objective. There are some things which are plausibly always or at least by default protected by such norms, e.g., norms against rifling through a couple’s love letters or an individual’s browsing history. But for many kinds of activities, attitudes, and information, the boundaries of privacy and intimacy are up to the people whose privacy and intimacy is at stake. Different people can reasonably draw different boundaries, but once those boundaries have been drawn, encroaching on them is inappropriately meddlesome. Nguyen and Strohl (2019) give a nice example, not involving blame, to illustrate this feature of norms of intimacy:

Thi Nguyen and his spouse have odd pet names for each other and a funny dance they do when one of them is sad. Are their friends allowed to witness, use and transmit those pet names and that funny dance? There is no independently grounded fact of the matter; it simply depends on where the couple decides the boundary should be. Once the boundary has been set, it generates normative constraints for others. (988)

We could imagine similar examples involving privacy. In fact, Nguyen and Strohl (982-983) give another nice example, focusing on intimacy, but it equally well shows how boundaries of privacy can be set by the people involved. They observe that couples can keep their love letters private, decide to share them with their friends, or even publish them for anyone to see. Reading a book of love letters

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<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Waldron (1981); Radzik (2011); Herstein (2012); Gaukroger (2020); Williams (2013).

<sup>20</sup>Feminist critiques of privacy point out that privacy can be used to shield abusers from intervention, if the abuse happens within the confines of a marriage or family. See MacKinnon (1989) and Allen (1988).

published by a couple does not constitute a breach of privacy, whereas digging through their possessions to find their carefully hidden letters does.<sup>21</sup>

The picture I'm proposing can recognize some fixed boundaries of privacy and intimacy, and corresponding objective or pre-established norms. The values that justify norms of privacy and intimacy plausibly set some relatively hard limits—some kinds of behavior will nearly always undermine them in ordinary circumstances. For example, eavesdropping on someone's phone calls, looking into the windows of their house, reading their medical records, offering up unsolicited relationship and parenting advice to strangers, or certain attempts restrict people's decisions concerning their own health and bodies will generally undermine or interfere in people's ability to decide for themselves what kind of public face they'll present, to develop and express their individuality, and to decide for themselves what the norms and expectations in their relationships will be. Further, some norms may be fixed by the nature and well-established social understandings of the kind of relationship at issue. It may just follow from what it is, in our society, for two people to be married that outsiders should not try to initiate a conversation about their sex life.<sup>22</sup> Many such norms are both defeasible and waivable, but plausibly they are pre-established, in the sense of being in place before the couple decides where to draw their boundaries.<sup>23</sup>

But importantly, there is also a significant space in which there are not pre-existing norms of privacy and intimacy. The abstract values that ground norms of privacy and intimacy will not precisely determine a full set of such norms.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>As Nagel (1998) and Owens (2022), Chapter 9, emphasize, norms of privacy not only prescribe *discretion* in our monitoring of others, but also *reticence* in what we reveal to others. But still, norms of reticence are not fully determinate. They allow for some people to be more reticent than others, and also for some people to be more insistent on reticence from others, in certain domains, than others. For example, Ron Swanson once declared, "The less I know about other people, the happier I am".

<sup>22</sup>Thanks to Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for discussion of this point.

<sup>23</sup>See Thomson (1975), p. 302, for discussion of waiving rights to privacy. What I have in mind here is that many privacy norms, while fixed in the sense of being in force without the person whose privacy is at stake having to insist on them, can be waived or, perhaps better, suspended if that person consents to, e.g., having their old love letters read.

<sup>24</sup>See Scanlon (1975), who claims that norms of privacy are "conventional in an important sense: our zone of privacy could be defined in many different ways; what matters most is that *some* system of limits...should be generally understood and observed" (317-318). Adams (2020) argues that we find a similar structure regarding social practices of obtaining and exercising authority over others: "Given the values at stake, given the sort of authority being exercised and over whom it is being exercised, we can make a claim about how authority practices ought to be. There are, of course, limits to the level of detail that abstract considerations of this sort will give about actual practices. There remains a great deal of space for particulars regarding historical and cultural forms, preferences for value rankings, and similar matters to determine how actual social practices of authority look in particular contexts. But this is within the constraints set by our best understanding of the values at stake: authority practices that render people too eager

For example, the values at stake very plausibly do not determine whether it is a breach of privacy or intimacy for friends of Thi Nguyen and his spouse to use the pet names they have for one another or to do their funny dance. More generally, there is lots of room for reasonable variation of specific norms within the limits set by these values; the variability of norms across time and place is evidence for this. Operative social norms can also, of course, violate these hard limits. Privacy norms that protect domestic abusers from criticism and punishment put a boundary in, objectively, the wrong place.<sup>25</sup>

If this is right, then there is space for those involved to decide on the specific norms that they want to be in force in their interactions with others. But I think we can go further here: it isn't just that the values underdetermine the norms, such that many more specific norms need to be fixed. Rather, the values at stake support giving those whose privacy and intimacy is potentially at stake some control over where their own boundaries lie. These values can be best promoted and protected when people are able to draw (some of) their own boundaries of privacy and intimacy. If norms of privacy and intimacy were all pre-established and imposed on individuals and those in special relationships, that would remove some measure of autonomy to decide how they relate to others, what kind of a person they are, or what kind of relationship they have. Some people, couples, etc. may prefer to be very private while others may prefer to be very open to the eyes and influence of others, and, within limits, many choices here will be reasonable.

Above I noted that even for well-established norms of privacy and intimacy, the people involved can often consent to their violation, or waive the corresponding rights, in specific cases. Could we similarly promote and protect the relevant values by holding that the values at stake do determine a full set of privacy and intimacy norms, but allowing that people are free to waive many of the pre-existing norms, or consent to what would otherwise be breaches of privacy and intimacy?<sup>26</sup> This sort of picture may still have important implications of the kind I am interested in for theorizing about meddlesome blame. In particular, it still gives those involved a kind of prerogative to decide whether blame from a given person would count as meddlesome in many cases.<sup>27</sup> This is also a compelling account of what is

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subjects, or infringe too far into their self-determination, or impose hierarchies of gender or race, are unjustified" (567).

<sup>25</sup>See, e.g., MacKinnon (1989).

<sup>26</sup>Nguyen and Strohl (2019) sometimes write in a way that suggests this kind of picture. For example, they say "the protections afforded by interpersonal intimacy can be insisted upon or waived by the participants in an intimate relationship" (982). I think it is important for their account of cultural appropriation that we understand their examples as cases in which there is no pre-existing fact of the matter, rather than as one in which there are norms in place that can be waived. But discussing their account of cultural appropriation would take us too far afield.

<sup>27</sup>Lippert-Rasmussen (2023), p. 131, n. 41, makes a related point: "[T]here are certain cases in which the "none of your business" reply is warranted and others where it is not. However,

happening in some cases. For example, there is plausibly a pre-existing norm against reading others' love letters. Nguyen and Strohl's (2019) case in which a couple decides to share their love letters with others is naturally read as a case in which the couple has consented to what would otherwise be breaches of the relevant well-established privacy and intimacy norms.

But a picture on which we are handed a fully determinate package of privacy and intimacy norms and then waive or insist on each of them, applied generally, would be less attractive from the perspective of the values at stake than the kind of picture I'm proposing. The values of things like autonomy, self-expression, and deciding what kinds of relationships one will have are better respected if we can decide for ourselves, within limits, where the boundaries of privacy will lie, rather than picking and choosing from a pre-supplied list. The alternative picture is also not very attractive in many cases, including the use of Nguyen and his spouse's pet names and funny dance. It does not seem plausible that there are norms in place independently of Nguyen and his spouse's decision about where the boundary will be. That is, it is not very plausible that there is a general, pre-established norm, *do not use other couples' pet names for one another*, that Thi and his spouse decide whether to insist on or waive. Rather, the values associated with intimacy and privacy give Thi and his spouse the ability to set their own boundaries, putting in place norms like *X can use these pet names, Y cannot use these pet names*, etc. More generally, rather than working within the confines of a pre-established set of privacy and intimacy norms, the value of deciding for ourselves how to live is best promoted and respected when we can shape the norms governing our relations with others as we see fit, to a significant extent.

I have been arguing that what counts as a breach of privacy or intimacy is sometimes up to the individuals whose privacy or intimacy is at stake. If so, then since anti-meddling norms on blame are often grounded in considerations of privacy or intimacy, we should expect it to sometimes be up to the individuals involved whether blame from a given third-party would be meddlesome. The boundaries of meddlesome blame are among the boundaries of privacy and intimacy that we are sometimes able to draw, and people can reasonably make different decisions here. Suppose that one parent has too much to drink one evening, so that the other parent has to deal with their restless newborn alone all night. Would it be meddlesome for friends of the couple to blame the former? Plausibly, it is up to the couple to decide where the boundaries lie. They may decide it's just between

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consent and pledges can modify this area. They can both expand and contract it". The idea is that my consent to your blaming me for some kind of wrongdoing can make doing so permissible even if it would otherwise be meddlesome. Similarly, if I promise to stay out of your relationship with your mother, then even if blaming you for some wrongdoing involving your mother would otherwise be non-meddlesome and appropriate, my previous promise may make it inappropriate, and perhaps meddlesome.

them and that their friends should stay out of it, or they may not. A charge of meddling, telling a critic to mind their own business, may in these cases be an attempt to establish an anti-meddling norm and corresponding boundary on blame, rather than a complaint that the critic has crossed a pre-existing boundary.

Some authors, e.g. Bell (2012); Seim (2019), have attempted to account for the inappropriateness of meddling blame by appeal to the fact that many of the norms operative in our relationships are *relationship-dependent*: they are constituted by the attitudes those in the relationship take toward one another. The idea is that since the content of these norms is up to those in the relationship, only they (i) are bound by them, and (ii) can hold one another to account for their violation. Thus, those not in the relationship cannot appropriately blame those in the relationship for violating these norms. The point I am making here is different. The privacy and intimacy-based norms I am discussing may similarly be up to those involved, but they also apply to those not in a special relationship with the victim or wrongdoer; in fact, governing the behavior of those not involved is part of the point of such norms.

In the next two sections I will offer further support for this picture. I'll argue first that, in addition to considerations of privacy and intimacy, victims should often be given a special prerogative to decide who has standing to blame those who wrong them. I'll then more closely examine the more controversial claim that in some cases wrongdoers themselves have the prerogative to decide who has standing to blame them.

## 4 The Victim's Prerogative

Charges of meddling in response to blame often come from the wrongdoer themselves. This is not surprising since successful or merely unchallenged charges of meddling give the recipient of blame a way to dismiss that blame and refuse to engage with the blamer. But frequently, the charge of meddling comes from the *victim* of the wrongdoing. In the example **Argument** from the beginning of the paper, it is easy to imagine your sister's husband objecting, were you to blame him for being unfair during their argument, but it is also easy to imagine your sister herself objecting, telling you to mind your own business. Such an objection may be based on considerations of privacy or intimacy, and as I have just argued, it may be up to your sister to decide where the boundaries of privacy and intimacy lie. But there is a further reason to think that the victim of wrongdoing will often have the prerogative<sup>28</sup> to set boundaries on blame, and not merely object to breaches

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<sup>28</sup>Govier (2002); Govier and Verwoerd (2002) use the phrase 'the victim's prerogative' to refer to the distinct but related idea that victims have priority concerning forgiveness of those who wrong them.

of pre-existing boundaries.

First, note that victims often have a special priority in blaming those who wrong them. Having this priority can be important for victims to regain or preserve self-respect, as someone who can stand up for themselves and who deserves respectful treatment from others. As Radzik (2011), p. 597 argues, “it would be wrong for a bystander to sanction a wrongdoer if her doing so would interfere with the victim’s ability to find vindication in the aftermath of wrongdoing”.<sup>29</sup> Blaming someone puts pressure on them to engage with you about their wrongdoing—for example, to explain themselves or express remorse to you. But in some cases this would divert the wrongdoer’s attention from apologizing and making amends to the victim, or suggest that they need to settle things with *you* before settling things with the victim. The victim’s priority in blaming seems to be supported by the same line of thought that supports giving victims a special priority in forgiving, or in deciding when the wrongdoer has made sufficient moral repair.<sup>30</sup> Giving the victim priority in initiating and setting the terms of moral repair recognizes their unique position as the victim of the wrongdoing. Insofar as the purpose of moral repair is, in significant part, to make things right for the victim, they plausibly will be best placed to know what that will involve. Even if we think they do not know what kind of moral repair would be best for them, stepping in on their behalf can be objectionably paternalistic. Relatedly, one harmful aspect of lots of wrongdoing is that the victim is treated disrespectfully, as if they don’t matter.<sup>31</sup> Sidelining them in setting the terms of moral repair continues this disrespectful treatment.

In addition, Priest (2016) argues that in many cases, continuing to blame once the victim of the wrongdoing has forgiven displays a kind of disrespect for the victim. These are cases in which we blame *on behalf of* the victim. Blaming on behalf of the victim, just like doing various other things on behalf of someone else, typically requires their consent. Doing so without their consent will very often be disrespectful. Priest also argues, though, that more detached blame, not on behalf of the victim, can be appropriate even once the victim has forgiven. Think of blaming your sister’s husband not on her behalf—“how could you treat her like that?”—but instead just for being a jerk. The issues here are subtle, but plausibly respect for the victim does not require giving them priority in coming

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<sup>29</sup>McKiernan (2016) makes a similar point.

<sup>30</sup>On the victim’s priority in forgiving, see, e.g., Swinburne (1989), p. 88, MacLachlan (2017), Chaplin (2019), and Priest (2016). As Priest notes (p. 620, note 1), the question of whether only victims have the standing to forgive is a controversial one. But even those who think that third-parties can have the standing to forgive often think that victims still have a special priority here, for example that it is often inappropriate to forgive before the victim, or, as Priest argues, that continued blame from third-parties can be inappropriate after, and because, the victim has forgiven.

<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Murphy (1988); Hieronymi (2001); Helmreich (2015) for work that makes use of this view of wrongdoing.

to and expressing these kinds of judgments about those who mistreat them, and this will often be a kind of blame.<sup>32</sup> Still, the important point is that victims do seem to have a special priority in blaming those who wrong them in at least some important ways, and jumping in to blame anyway, ignoring this priority, can be meddlesome.<sup>33</sup>

Once again there are clearly limits here, and sometimes we should step in on behalf of a victim, especially if they are unable to blame. More generally, third-parties often need to provide various kinds of social support to aid victims in confronting those who wrong them and finding vindication. This will often involve joining them in blaming those who wrong them.<sup>34</sup> But this is all compatible with recognizing that victims have a default priority in blaming those who wrong them.

Importantly, this default priority does not simply demand that we stay out of it when we aren't the victim of wrongdoing. The same kinds of reasons that justify giving victims priority in blaming—the importance to the victim of regaining or preserving self-respect and finding vindication—also supports giving them the prerogative to *set the terms* of how the wrongdoing is dealt with. This includes deciding who can, and who cannot, blame on their behalf, and how they should do so.<sup>35</sup> They may decide that blame of the person who wronged them from, for example, a close friend or from others who have suffered similar wrongs will not undermine their self-respect, and this kind of support may help them find vindication and move on from the wrongdoing. Since anti-meddling norms, in some cases, are grounded in or justified by respect for the victim's priority in blaming, we should expect them to be, in some cases, set by the victim.<sup>36</sup>

In **Argument**, your sister may have the prerogative to decide which third-parties have standing to blame her husband. For example, though she would object to blame from a stranger, she may be happy for you as her sister to blame her husband. But importantly, she may *not* be happy for you to do so. She

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<sup>32</sup>Thanks to Jade Fletcher for helpful discussion of this point.

<sup>33</sup>In such a case, the victim may complain not merely that it is not the blamer's business but, more positively, that it is *her*, i.e., the victim's, business. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this helpful point.

<sup>34</sup>See Walker (2006), pp. 166-167, Edlich (2022), and Priest (2016). I have also been helped here by reading some work in progress from Patrick Winther-Larsen.

<sup>35</sup>The claim here is that victims can often decide whether a given third-party has standing to blame the person who wronged them, and so whether or not blame from a given third-party would be meddlesome. This is related to, but importantly distinct from, the question of whether victims can appropriately tell third-parties to *stop* blaming those who wrong them, for example because they have forgiven the wrongdoer. See Priest (2016) for discussion of the appropriateness of third-party blame after the victim has forgiven. She suggests that blame in such circumstances may be considered meddlesome, among other things (623).

<sup>36</sup>Theorists working on solidarity have made important progress in thinking through issues like this; see, e.g., Kolers (2016) on the importance of deferring to victims.

may attempt to set a narrower boundary of privacy or intimacy in this case, or reasonably judge that, for her, maintaining self-respect requires confronting her husband herself. In many versions of this case, either decision will be reasonable. And once she has set a boundary on blame, encroaching on it will be meddlesome.<sup>37</sup>

There will be limits here, since victims are not infallible. They can make mistakes in both directions. First, they may try to deny standing to blame to those who have it, or for wrongs which are everyone's business. It is unfortunately easy to think of real-life cases in which victims of abuse themselves inappropriately (though often blamelessly) try to shield their abusers from blame from others, because of, for example, the abusive dynamics of the relationship or internalization of oppressive norms.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, they may try to recruit others to blame those who wrong them even when those others lack standing, according to pre-existing or objective anti-meddling norms. For example, a spouse who tells a stranger at the next table about some relatively minor failing on the part of their partner and asks, "Can you believe they did that?", inviting the stranger to join them in blaming their spouse, will often be acting inappropriately. Relatedly, in cases in which the wrongdoing is an instance of ongoing, systemic injustice, individual victims may not have the same level of discretion as they do in other cases. This is because, plausibly, other members of the oppressed group or other victims of similar wrongdoing have a special standing to blame the relevant wrongdoers, even if they were not themselves the victim in a particular case.<sup>39</sup> But none of this undermines the point that, in addition to more general considerations of privacy and intimacy discussed in the previous section, respect for victims sometimes requires granting them the prerogative to set boundaries on who can appropriately blame those who wrong them. Rather, it just means that we should investigate these limits in theorizing about the ethics of blame.

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<sup>37</sup>Priest (2016), p. 630, considers a case like this in a slightly different context, but also holds that if the wife has explicitly told one of her relations not to blame the demeaning husband, then they should not do so. One reason she might do this is a desire to set narrow limits of privacy or intimacy. Another is to give her the chance to confront her husband herself, on her own terms.

<sup>38</sup>See MacKinnon (1989), for example.

<sup>39</sup>Smith's (2007) example of the demeaning husband may be such a case. There is of course much more to say about this issue than I can say here, and it will likely have serious implications for the ethics of blame. For relevant discussion, see Govier's (2002) discussion of secondary and tertiary victims of wrongdoing. Also see MacLachlan (2017), who argues that certain third-parties can legitimately take a wrong done to another person personally, in the course of defending third-party forgiveness. Thanks to Marianna Leventi and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for drawing my attention to this point.



## 5 The Wrongdoer's Prerogative

My main claim so far is that, in many cases, those involved in the wrongdoing, most obviously, the victim and the wrongdoer, have some say in where the boundaries of meddlesome blame lie. The considerations concerning privacy and intimacy discussed in section 3 will apply to both victims and wrongdoers.<sup>40</sup> In the previous section, I argued that there is additional reason to think the victim has the prerogative to set such boundaries since respect for the victim supports giving them priority in blaming those who wrong them and in setting the terms of moral repair. In this section I focus on wrongdoers and defend the more controversial claim that they have the prerogative, in some cases, to set boundaries on who can appropriately blame them.

We have already seen that charges of meddling from a wrongdoer may be based on considerations of privacy, and that these kinds of considerations are sometimes appealed to in defending a “right to do wrong”. The thought is that privacy norms help protect one from scrutiny of and interference in certain kinds of decisions that are important for the development and expression of one’s individuality, even if those decisions are wrong. For example, some decisions about what to do with one’s excess income—spending it on unnecessary luxuries or donating it to ineffective charities or certain political groups—can be morally wrong. But, within important limits, one arguably has a right to non-interference, including direct blame, when it comes to these decisions. Other potential examples include wrongs to oneself, such as taking harmful drugs. The basic thought is that there are some decisions that constitute relatively minor wrongs, or wrongs that do not directly cause much harm to others, but can be important for developing or expressing our individuality or what kind of person we are. In such cases, interference in the form of blame is often taken to be meddlesome. I’m not interested in fully defending a right to do wrong here, and any particular application of such a right is going to be controversial. But if there are such cases, then wrongdoers will be able to legitimately complain that blaming them for these wrongs is meddlesome, and so dismiss such blame.

Most importantly for my purposes, if something like a right to do wrong can ground charges of meddling, then it is often up to the wrongdoer to set the boundaries of meddlesome blame. This is because such a right is meant to protect decisions that are constitutive or expressive of who we are, and to a significant extent, we can decide which kinds of decisions are important in these ways. I may

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<sup>40</sup>What if there is a disagreement between the victim and the wrongdoer about where the boundaries are to lie? In the following section, I briefly discuss the kind of negotiation of norms of criticism that those in relationships often have to undertake. In cases in which the victim and the wrongdoer are not in a close relationship such that we should not expect them to work out, between the two of them, what such norms are to be, things are more complicated. One important question is whether victims have priority in setting the boundaries.

not care very much about the particular charitable donations I make, and so not object to blame for giving ineffectively or to problematic organizations; I may even welcome it, since it helps me do better. On the other hand, someone else may take the choices they've made about where to donate their money to be very important to them, and so set this as a boundary on blame and charge those who blame them with meddling. We may also decide that we're open to blame from some people for these decisions—for example, people with whom we share an evaluative outlook or take to be role models—but not others. These boundaries can reasonably be drawn in different places by different people. So if we accept that there is a right to do wrong without interference in the form of blame, and that blame in these cases is meddling, then we should recognize that wrongdoers can sometimes set boundaries on who can blame them, and not simply complain when blamers cross pre-existing boundaries.

Another kind of example comes from Radzik (fc). Suppose that Ben's mother has recently been diagnosed with cancer. To receive treatment, she will need to make frequent drives into the city, which are long and stressful for her, even in the best of times. Ben does not have responsibilities that require him to be at home, but he gets anxious driving in big cities and prefers to be in his own home. He knows his mother would benefit from his help during her treatment, but nevertheless he doesn't offer to help.<sup>41</sup>

Radzik judges that Ben's neighbor, Andy, with whom Ben is friendly but not really friends, lacks standing to blame him for this, whereas Ben's wife does have standing to blame him. I think this judgment is probably right in many versions of this case. But in some versions, this may not be so, and most importantly, it will be up to Ben to decide. He may decide that certain aspects of his relationship with his mother are the business of friendly acquaintances like Andy, or that this doesn't so much concern his relationship with his mother but rather his own selfishness, which he does take to be Andy's business. Or he may decide that his relationship with his mother is not even the business of his wife. Instead, it's just between him and his mother, or perhaps his immediate family. Some proposed boundaries would be unreasonable, violating objective or pre-established limits. Ben cannot decide that it is not his *mother's* business. But in many versions of this case, a range of such decisions do seem reasonable, and so it is up to Ben—who we are granting is acting wrongly—to decide where the boundaries of meddling blame lie.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>For a somewhat similar case, consider the example of the man who will not donate a life-saving kidney to his brother in Driver (1992). Driver's judgment is that this is *suberogatory*: morally bad but not morally forbidden. I think another reasonable judgment about this case is that the action is wrong, or forbidden, but that most of us lack standing to blame him for it and that to do so would be inappropriately meddling.

<sup>42</sup>It's worth reiterating here that I am talking about norms against direct blame. Andy can

The reasons for this are familiar from section 3: considerations of privacy and intimacy ground anti-meddling norms, but it is often up to those involved to set the boundaries of privacy and intimacy. It is important to protect relationships from outside interference in setting expectations for one another and dealing with wrongdoing. But it is also important that those in the relationship are able to decide which aspects of their relationship will be so protected, and from whom, and which aspects will be more open to outside influence, and to whom it will be open.

While I suspect it will be relatively uncontroversial to think that victims of wrongdoing often have the prerogative to set boundaries on who can blame those who wrong them, the claim that wrongdoers themselves have the prerogative to decide who can and who cannot blame them may seem objectionable. One important worry is that wrongdoers may set the boundaries so narrowly that anyone who would realistically blame them will lack standing to do so, such that they in effect get away with their wrongdoing. In fact, this is a familiar practice in everyday life. Wrongdoers regularly respond to blame not with an apology or expression of remorse, but rather a dismissal of blame, often through a charge of meddling. Blamers are told to stay out of it, to mind their own business, that it is a free country, and so on. The concern is that the view I am proposing licenses this clearly objectionable behavior.

The reasons I gave for thinking wrongdoers will sometimes have this prerogative involved considerations of privacy and intimacy. It's an assumption of this paper that such considerations can ground anti-meddling norms, and that wrongdoers can sometimes legitimately complain that blame is meddlesome. I argued that boundaries of privacy and intimacy can sometimes be set by those whose privacy or intimacy is at stake. Given these claims, wrongdoers will, in some cases, have this prerogative. Unless wrongdoing always involves forfeiting one's various rights to privacy, I do not see why we should deny that wrongdoers sometimes retain this prerogative, with respect to certain kinds of wrongdoing and certain potential blamers.

The concern that wrongdoers may remove or deny the standing of anyone who would blame them shows that the limits of the prerogative need to be investigated. Again, there are some relatively hard limits on the prerogative of both the wrongdoer and the victim. There are certain kinds of wrongdoing that are not protected from blame, at least from certain people, by anti-meddling norms. But there is a fairly significant space where it is not determined independently of the boundaries set by those involved whether blame would be meddlesome or not. It is unfortunately a familiar fact that wrongdoers will often try to misuse standing norms to escape blame, and the existence of this kind of space is likely to be exploited

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plausibly have appropriate blaming attitudes towards Ben.

in this way. But nothing I have said here licenses this kind of misuse of standing norms as appropriate.

## 6 Negotiating Standing

I've argued that whether or not blame is meddlesome may not always be determined in advance, and that victims and wrongdoers sometimes have the prerogative to decide where the boundaries of meddlesome blame lie. In this section I discuss a more general upshot of this claim: anti-meddling norms, and norms of blame and criticism more generally, will often be *up for negotiation*.

Return to Radzik's (fc) example of Ben who does not offer to help his sick mother. Radzik judges, very plausibly, that while Ben's neighbor may lack standing to directly blame him for this, his wife does have standing. But suppose Ben attempts to dismiss blame from his wife, charging her with meddling: "Look, it really isn't your business—this is between my mother and me". In some marriages, the kind of boundary Ben is attempting to set here may be in place. The spouses may not get involved in most issues concerning how the other relates to their parents. But suppose that in this case, Ben's wife disagrees, and insists that it is her business. Or to take another case, consider **Argument**. Suppose you blame your sister's husband for treating her unkindly during the argument, and that your sister tells you to stay out of it, that it is not your business. It's easy to imagine that you might disagree, saying, "You're my sister, it is my business!".

On one interpretation of these kinds of cases, the disputants disagree about what the norms of criticism are, or where the boundaries lie. That may be what is happening in many cases like this. But another possibility is that they are disagreeing about what the norms of criticism in the relationship *are to be*. The charge of meddling and the denial of this charge would then amount to moves in a negotiation.

Suppose that Ben and his wife have not been married for very long, and so have not had occasion to work out the norms dictating whether and how they will get involved in these kinds of cases. This can lead to disputes like the one between Ben and his wife, where they are not really disagreeing about what the norms are but rather negotiating what they will be. Or imagine a different version of **Argument**, in which you are closer to your sister and her family and have often criticized her husband for being unfair and unkind during arguments. Suppose that your sister has, in the past, been happy for this support. But after a while, she begins to feel that she needs to deal with things on her own, or that you are beginning to insert yourself into her marriage a bit too much. She may tell you to mind your own business as a way of trying to set a new boundary, which you might

not be so happy to accept.<sup>43</sup> You may, for example, respond by saying something like, “I’m your sister, of course it’s my business”, or “Well, I’m making it my business!”. Again, you may be disagreeing about what the norms already are. But my suggestion is that in many cases we can instead interpret responses like this as moves in a negotiation about what the norms will be; note that a literal reading of the second response, that you are *making* it your business, suggests this interpretation. These responses have a pre-emptive flavor that makes them somewhat uncooperative moves in a negotiation. But this negotiating tactic of insisting on your preferred outcome without offering much justification is common, since it puts pressure on your interlocutor to simply accept your preferred outcome without further argument.

Working out together what these norms are to be is an especially important task for those in close relationships. Many authors have observed that, to a significant extent, those in relationships need to decide for themselves which norms will be operative in the relationship, and that this point has bearing on how those in relationships hold one another responsible.<sup>44</sup> An underappreciated aspect of this is settling on norms of criticism for the relationship. I suspect that many disputes in such relationships are not really, or only, about first-order issues—what the expectations are, whether these expectations have been met, etc.—but rather about which failures should attract criticism and which should be let go. In addition, we need to work out which outsiders to our relationships will have standing to blame us for certain failures within the context of those relationships. The people involved will sometimes explicitly and consciously enter into such a negotiation, perhaps prompted by the recognition that they have conflicting views about what the norms are or should be. But often it will not be immediately transparent to the people involved that they are negotiating what the norms are to be rather than disagreeing about what norms are already in force. This lack of transparency is a familiar feature of the process of establishing these kinds of broadly social norms.<sup>45</sup> The people involved may simply assert the conflicting norms they take to be in place, and perhaps offer justifications for them if challenged. In the ideal case, they will eventually settle on something they can agree to, but often the

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<sup>43</sup>Compare Nguyen and Strohl (2019) on norms of intimacy: “Intimacy is flexible—relations of intimacy can be extended, outsiders can be granted temporary or long-term insider status, insiders can be exiled, and boundaries can be re-drawn” (991).

<sup>44</sup>See, e.g., Williams (2013); Seim (2019); Bell (2012); Tsai (2018).

<sup>45</sup>Compare, for example, gender norms. These are undoubtedly at least in significant part the result of ongoing, society-level negotiation. But most of this negotiation is implicit, and it is not transparent to most people that such a negotiation was or is happening. Thanks to Jade Fletcher here. Calling the norms of criticism social norms is not intended to suggest that they are not important or that they are not morally significant. Violating these kinds of norms is very often a moral mistake. But going into detail about the nature of social norms and their relationship to morality would take me too far afield.

negotiation will be ongoing, and even previously settled norms may be up for re-negotiation. This interpretation of these disputes, according to which we are often coming to agreements (or failing to do so) about how things will go in our relationships rather than trying to discover the pre-existing, correct norms seems plausible in many cases. The outcome is often more like deciding on a plan, or coming to a compromise, rather than discovering that one or both parties were mistaken.

I have focused on standing norms regarding meddlesome blame. But this point is more general: there are many norms of criticism, and coming to an agreement about what they will be in our various relationships is very important. For example, some people may wish to put in place boundaries on when and how criticism should be issued, e.g. only in private, or not at the dinner table, or not in the middle of a dispute about some unrelated issue, or *only* during such disputes, etc. Negotiations concerning these kinds of norms will often be mixed in with straightforward disputes about what the norms of criticism (already) are, as well as disputes about the first-order norms, the violation of which may call for criticism. This is to reiterate a point made by Dover (2019b), that an important aspect of moral disputes generally concerns questions about the ethics of criticism, including “norms about how morally fraught conversations among equals should be conducted” (400).

This sort of negotiation raises important questions for the ethics of blame. If the people involved often have the prerogative to set their own boundaries on blame, our theorizing will need to take account of this fact. In addition to the familiar task of articulating objective norms of criticism—what constitutes hypocritical blame, what sorts of epistemic conditions must be met to be justified in issuing blame, and so on—we should think about how to evaluate different norms people may put forward or adopt, as well as which kinds of moves in the negotiation are legitimate, when there is no objective norm to be found. Once we acknowledge that norms on blame may be settled by negotiations between the relevant parties—the victim, the wrongdoer, the blamer, and perhaps others—we need to know what conditions have to be met for such a negotiation to put a new norm in place. One natural answer is that a new norm will be put in place when the relevant parties reach a consensus. But there are at least two problems with this answer. The first is that consensus may be hard to achieve. Where we do not have consensus, this view would imply—not implausibly, I think—that the norms of criticism remain in flux. A second problem is that it may not always be clear who the relevant parties are—who has a say in what the relevant norms of criticism are? This seems likely to be up for debate in many cases, and itself subject to negotiation.

We can get a sense of how complex this theorizing will be by noting two considerations that are appealing in the abstract, but which will plausibly conflict in many cases. First, note that those who are attempting to set a boundary of privacy

or intimacy often have a kind of default (and so defeasible) authority. Often, they do not need to justify drawing the boundary where they want to draw it, in the absence of a compelling challenge. If someone does not want to engage in some generally acceptable kind of physical contact between friends, like hugging, or does not want to discuss their childhood with colleagues, they do not typically need to offer any justification to put such a boundary in place. Since it is their privacy or intimate relations with others at stake, they get to decide where the boundary is. This would seem to imply that those attempting to draw boundaries on blame, based on privacy or intimacy, will often enjoy this kind of default authority. But where the person attempting to draw a boundary is the wrongdoer themselves, we might run into conflicts with another plausible claim, which is that *victims* should be given a kind of default priority in deciding who has standing to blame those who wrong them—as I argued above, this is what appropriate respect for victims seems to demand.

I do not know how to say anything very systematic about how to resolve these kinds of conflicts. This complexity is unavoidable in trying to understand and evaluate our blaming practices. Nevertheless, by bringing into view the considerations that support giving victims and wrongdoers the prerogative to set boundaries on blame, as well as the kind of negotiation that is required in settling on these boundaries, we should be in a better position to make progress.

## 7 Implications for the Standing to Blame

As I explained in section 2, responding to blame with a charge of meddling is a challenge to the blamer’s standing to blame. My main claim about these challenges to standing is that, in the case of meddling, they need not be based on the violation of a pre-existing norm. Rather, the challenge can be an attempt to put a new norm in place.

A successful challenge to standing that is based on violation of a pre-existing norm—for example, in a clear case of meddling or hypocrisy—succeeds in dismissing or brushing off the blame, and so justifies the blamed party in refusing to engage further with the blamer about the wrongdoing. They are not under an obligation to explain themselves or to express remorse to the blamer, whereas those who are blamed by people who have standing ordinarily are under these kinds of obligations. Challenges to standing that are not based on violation of a pre-existing norm but rather are attempts to put in place a new norm can succeed in a similar way. When the new norm is successfully put in place, either because it goes unchallenged by the blamer or as a result of negotiation, the blamed party is not under obligations to respond to the blamer in the typical ways.

This raises the question of whether the blamer had standing when they issued

the blame. This is somewhat complicated. Insofar as there was no norm in place when the blame was issued, they did not violate a standing norm. But once the new norm is in place, the blamer lacks standing and so should not continue to blame; they also should not insist that the blamed party engages with or responds to the initial blame.<sup>46</sup> This means that we might issue blame that does not violate any existing standing norms, and yet have our blame reasonably dismissed. This will seem surprising given recent work on the standing to blame which tends to identify cases in which standing norms have been violated in part by asking whether blame can be reasonably dismissed.<sup>47</sup> But my arguments here suggest that we pull these two things apart.

In introducing the main ideas in section 1, I described the relevant situations as ones in which there is no prior fact of the matter about whether blame from a given person would be meddlesome, and so whether they have standing to blame. On one way of understanding meddlesome blame and the standing to blame generally, this is not quite right. If we have standing to blame *by default*, unless some norm says that we do not, then the blame, when issued, is not meddlesome and the blamer has standing since they do not violate any pre-existing norm. But I can maintain my central claims that charges of meddling are often a way of drawing a boundary rather than pointing out violation of a pre-existing one and that, as a consequence, anti-meddling norms will be subject to negotiation. Even if the blamer had standing when the blame was issued, as discussed in the previous paragraph, once the new boundary has been drawn, the blamer should not continue to blame the wrongdoer and should not insist that they respond to the initial blame in the usual ways (by expressing remorse, etc.).

Alternatively, we might hold that in a range of cases the relevant parties must decide on their boundaries before we can say who does and does not have standing. So at least in these cases, we do not have (or lack) standing by default. Rather it is genuinely not settled whether we have standing. This second view is analogous to the way Nguyen and Strohl (2019) describe norms of intimacy. It is not that friends of Thi Nguyen and his spouse can use the pet names unless and until the couple says they cannot. It is also not that they cannot use the pet names unless and until the couple says they can. Rather, it is just not settled whether friends

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<sup>46</sup>This is slightly oversimplified since there may be cases in which, all things considered, we should blame, despite lacking standing to do so. Similarly, there may be cases in which the blamer should nevertheless continue to blame, even if a new boundary has been successfully drawn. As many authors have observed, lacking standing to blame counts against blaming but is not necessarily decisive; Fritz and Miller (2018), p. 119, are particularly clear: “[B]ecause standing is only one consideration in the ethics of blame, the fact that *R* does not have the standing to blame *S* for violations of *N* does not mean that it would be inappropriate for *R* to blame *S* for violations of *N*.”

<sup>47</sup>See especially Edlich’s (2022) discussion of the *deflection test* (213) and Snedegar (fc).



can use the pet names until the couple decides one way or the other. I argued in section 3 that this extends to norms of privacy, as well. If so, then insofar as anti-meddling norms are grounded in considerations of privacy and intimacy, it seems most plausible to understand them in the same way. Nevertheless, perhaps the first view, according to which we have standing by default, will prove preferable overall. But again, even on this first view my main claims about charges of meddling and negotiating norms of standing will hold.

An important question is how potential blamers should respond to this possibility. If there were only pre-existing norms against meddlesome blame, then we would just face the familiar challenge of figuring out what those are and whether they apply to the case at hand. But if wrongdoers or their victims can set new boundaries in response to our blame, things are (even) more complicated. We may not always be able to avoid successful charges of meddling, even if we comply with all the pre-existing norms. Having our blame successfully dismissed by a meddling charge does not necessarily mean we have done anything wrong since such charges need not rely on violation of a pre-existing boundary to be successful. But if we hope to avoid having our blame dismissed, in addition to developing a sense of what (already) is or is not our business, we should also be sensitive to situations and considerations that could justify the drawing of a new boundary that would designate blame from us as meddlesome. For example, even if there is not a pre-existing norm against blaming a friend for donating to ineffective charities, some people may reasonably draw a boundary that classifies such blame as meddlesome. If this is right, then part of developing a sense of what is and isn't your business is knowing that your friend might (but also might not) decide that blaming them for the donation would be meddlesome.

Awareness of this possibility may lead us to refrain from blaming even if there is not a pre-existing norm against doing so, or to moderate our blame in various ways. Importantly, though, we can be overly cautious here. Awareness of and especially uncertainty about standing norms often make us hesitant to blame. This can be desirable in some circumstances. But given the importance of blame in standing up for ourselves, others, and our values, we should often be willing to face the potential discomfort that comes with blaming, including the risk of having our blame reasonably dismissed as meddlesome.<sup>48</sup>

An important lesson from the literature on the ethics of blame is that blaming well is difficult. If what I've said here is right, then it may be even more difficult than that literature suggests. Even carefully attending to what is and is not our business may not shield us from having to engage in uncomfortable negotiations

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<sup>48</sup>For relevant discussion, see Dover (2019b,a); Bell (2012); O'Brien and Whelan (2022); on concerns about being overly non-judgmental generally, see Watson (2012). These authors are critical of standing norms in part because they encourage keeping quiet rather than initiating important and edifying moral conversations.

about who has standing to blame in a wide range of cases. But I think reflection on ordinary blaming interactions shows that this should not be surprising.

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