

LET'S SEE YOU DO BETTER: AN ESSAY ON THE STANDING TO CRITICIZE

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In response to criticism, we often say – in these or similar words – “Let’s see you do better!” Prima facie, it looks like this response is a challenge of a certain kind – a challenge to prove that one has what has recently been called *standing*. More generally, the data here seems to point a certain kind of norm of criticism: *be better*. Slightly more carefully: One must criticize x with respect to standard s only if one is better than x with respect to standard s . In this paper, I defend precisely this norm of criticism – an underexplored norm that is nevertheless ubiquitous in our lives, once we begin looking for it. The *be better* norm is, I hope to show, continuously invoked in a wide range of ordinary settings, can undergird and explain the widely endorsed non-hypocrisy condition on the standing to blame, and apparent counterexamples to the norm are no such counterexamples at all. I further contend that, given some plausible principles, my previous “moral commitment” account of the moral standing to blame will be extensionally equivalent to the *be better* norm.

1. Introduction

Let me begin this paper with some puzzling data. In response to criticism, many people often say, in these or similar words, “Let’s see *you* do better!” Consider the following cases:

The dragon. Lucy and Dan (both teenagers) are in art class; the assignment is to draw a dragon. Dan enters class slightly late, and is preparing to begin drawing. Before doing so, he catches a sideways glance at Lucy’s (admittedly shambolic) dragon; he says to Lucy, “Nice dragon Lucy!” Lucy responds: “Alright Dan, let’s see you do better!”

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The baseball players. Taylor and Chase are teammates on the baseball team. Taylor strikes out, and badly so. As he is returning to the dugout, Chase shouts at him, “Come on man, hit the stupid ball!” Taylor says, “Alright Chase, let’s see you do better!”

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

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

The house painter. Rebecca is undertaking some do-it-yourself house renovations, and is struggling to even out a coat of plaster. Her father Ross, an electrical engineer, stands by chirping various corrections and criticisms: “Not so much on the plate just there, love”, “Spread it a bit more evenly now,” and so on. Tiring of Ross’s complaining, Rebecca says, “Alright Dad, let’s see you do it better!”

At this point, you get the idea. As a first approximation, the data here is twofold: (a) we very often say such things, and (b) there is a feeling that if the critic *does* do better—for example, if Dan draws an impeccable dragon—then the criticism *stands*, whereas if the critic doesn’t, that criticism must be *retracted*. Prima facie, then, it looks like the response, “Let’s see you do better,” is a challenge of a certain kind—a challenge to prove that one has what has recently been called *standing*. As a first approximation, the thought here seems to be this: the critic can properly criticize (with respect to some standard) only if the critic is *better than* the criticized (with respect to that standard). More generally, the data here seems to point a certain kind of norm of criticism: *be better*. Slightly more carefully:

The *be better* norm of criticism:

One must: criticize x with respect to standard s only if one is better than x with respect to standard s .

In this paper, I defend precisely this norm of criticism.

But let me back up. There has been an explosion of interest in recent moral philosophy in the notion of the *moral standing to blame*. The central phenomena at stake in this literature is the following: just because a given wrongdoer is in fact blameworthy for a given wrong, it doesn't follow that *just anyone* is in moral position to *blame* her for that wrong. More particularly, the thought is that some blamers are not "in position" to blame, *irrespective* of the fact that the *content* of their blame may be true (and thus in that respect "fitting"). Philosophers writing under the guise of the "moral standing to blame" have articulated at least four conditions on having "moral standing," but the condition that has received the bulk of the attention is what we might call the *non-hypocrisy* condition.¹ As a first approximation, according to this condition, one has standing to blame a morally responsible wrongdoer only if—again, as a first approximation—one is not guilty of the very offence one seeks to criticize. Precisely how best to motivate and articulate a non-hypocrisy norm on standing to blame is a complicated affair. But the following is uncontroversial: if there is a standing norm on blame at all, then there is some appropriate non-hypocrisy condition on the standing to blame.²

But now the point. I do not have a full theory of blame. However, I do claim the following. In none of the cases described above—the *dragon*, the *baseball players*, the *students*, the *gardeners*, the *house painter*—does the critic morally *blame* the criticized. In other words, it is intuitively obvious that the cases described above do not involve *moral blame*—that is, the sense of blame in which blame is only appropriate or fitting if the target is *blameworthy*. In the sense of "blame" at issue in the literature on moral standing, it is a minimally necessary condition on "blame" that the blamer thinks that the blamee has acted *immorally*—that is, has violated some moral expectation. But consider. When Dan criticizes Lucy's dragon, is this because Dan thinks that Lucy has acted immorally in producing such a dragon? Does Dan believe—implicitly or otherwise—that Lucy has *done something wrong* in producing such a dragon? Of course not. Dan does not

1. Cf. Todd (2019). There I argued that the other conditions on "standing" are either conditions on something else, or instead reduce to the non-hypocrisy condition. We needn't take a stand on this issue in what follows.

2. Early reflections (relatively speaking, of course) on standing can be found in Wertheimer (1998) and Dworkin (2000). When the proper explosion began is slightly hard to determine, but Cohen (2006) seems a good place to locate it. For further reflections on the "positionality" of blamers, see, e.g., Tadros (2009), Duff (2010), Wallace (2010), Russell (2010), Radzik (2011), Todd (2012; 2018; 2019), Lippert-Rasmussen (2013) and (2021), Friedman (2013), King (2015; 2020), Watson (2015), McKiernan (2016), Herstein (2017; 2020), Rivera López (2017), Isserow and Klein (2017), Coates and Tognazzini (2018), McKenna (2018), Fritz and Miller (2018; 2019; in press), Rossi (2018; 2020), Roadevin (2018), Fritz (2019), Riedener (2019), Matheson (2019), Beade (2019), Edwards (2019), Seim (2019), Tierney and Telech (2019), Cornell and Sepinwall (2020), Piovarchy (2020; in press), Tierney (2021), Statman (2023), Todd and Rabern (2022), O'Brien (2022), Edlich (2022), Berkovski (2023), Isserow (in press), and Snedegar (in press a; in press b).

blame Lucy for her dragon; that would be absurd (not to mention unjust). And yet Dan has certainly *criticized* Lucy's dragon—and thus, in some sense, Dan has criticized Lucy herself. (Dan criticizes Lucy *by* criticizing her dragon.) So similarly in the other cases: there is no moral wrongdoing (no *moral failings*) even in the vicinity of these examples. And yet, in these examples, *a standing norm is still in place*.

Thus, considerations concerning the *positionality* of critics—of who is in position to criticize—are seemingly more general than considerations concerning the positionality of *blamers*. In short, all blame is criticism, but not all criticism is blame—and concerns about the “standing” of critics apply *more widely* than merely to *blamers*. But now we face a series of difficult questions. What, exactly, is the relevant norm pertaining to criticism more generally? And how does that norm relate to the non-hypocrisy norm on the standing to blame? These are the questions I address in this paper. I defend the *be better* norm of criticism, and I defend the thesis that the non-hypocrisy condition on standing to blame can plausibly be *derived* from this more general norm on criticism *per se*. The *be better* norm, however, faces a series of difficult objections. After laying out the conceptual options concerning the issues of this paper, I defend the *be better* norm from these objections, and turn finally to the crucial project of deriving the non-hypocrisy condition on blame from the *be better* norm in question. The end result is that the *be better* norm stands, and can explain the non-hypocrisy norm on standing to blame.

2. Four Options

I begin by briefly describing the four different options we must consider concerning the topics of this paper:

- (1) There is no standing norm on criticism *per se*, and no standing norm on blame.
- (2) There is no standing norm on criticism *per se*, but there is a standing norm on blame.
- (3) There is a standing norm on criticism *per se*, and there is a standing norm on blame, but the former does not ground the latter.
- (4) There is a standing norm on criticism *per se*, and there is a standing norm on blame, because the former grounds the latter.

In this paper, I defend Option (4). But why not (1), (2), or (3)? I take these options in turn.

Option (1) is the view of someone we might call the *resolute standing skeptic*. According to this kind of skeptic, there is not even a genuine standing norm

on (moral) *blame*. Now, anyone who thinks that there is no standing norm on blame is unlikely to think that nevertheless there *is* a standing norm on non-moral criticism. My goal in this paper, however, is not to argue against the resolute standing skeptic. My goal, instead, is to say that those who take seriously a standing norm on blame should *also* take seriously a standing norm on criticism more generally. Accordingly, in this paper, I simply assume that (1) is false.³

Option (2) is, I think, the position that is implicit in much of the recent literature on the standing to blame. Theorists in this vein take seriously a standing norm (or norms) on blame, but discuss this norm solely as a norm on blame *qua* blame—and seemingly never connect the standing to blame with the standing to criticize more generally.⁴ Of course, I am not aware of theorists defending a standing norm on blame explicitly *denying* that this norm applies to criticism more generally. The point, however, is simply that this connection is never made; the literature simply proceeds as if there were no such more general norm. However, since I am assuming that there *is* a standing norm on blame, my argument against Option (2) is simply that there is in fact a standing norm on criticism more generally. In the sections to come, building on the cases described above, I articulate and defend just such a norm.

The proponent of Option (3), however, agrees with me that there is a standing norm on criticism *per se*, and a standing norm on blame. However, according to Option (3), these norms are conceptually independent, in the sense that the former does not, in any way, ground the latter. Now, the best way to argue against (3) is simply to provide a plausible positive account of how the standing norm on criticism (together, perhaps, with other relevant facts) *does* ground a standing norm on blame—and to this project I eventually turn. However, conceptually, it seems that there is strong antecedent reason to regard (3) with suspicion—especially once we admit that blame is a *type* of criticism. That is, *criticism* stands to *blame* as genus does to species; again, all blame is criticism, although not all criticism is blame—indeed, blaming is a *specific way* of criticizing, just as being a horse is a specific way of being a mammal. (More on criticism shortly.) In this light, consider the following commitment of Option (3):

The standing norm on blame is *not* grounded in the standing norm on criticism, even though (i) there is a standing norm on criticism, and (ii) blame is a type of criticism.

3. For what I take to be defences of Option (1), however, see Bell (2013), King (2019), and Dover (2019). (For a reply to Dover 2019, see Brunero in press.)

4. Some theorists, however, have recently discussed whether there is a standing norm on *praise*; cf. Lippert-Rasmussen (2022), Jeppsson and Brandenburg (2022), and Telech (2022).

It is impossible to rule out this contention on conceptual grounds alone—but it seems implausible. More plausibly, if there *is* a more general norm of criticism, the standing norm on blame is in some way grounded in that more general norm.⁵ Thus, philosophers who think that the standing norm on blame *cannot* be grounded in a standing norm on criticism more generally are seemingly better off denying that there even *is* a more general standing norm on criticism: “standing” *only pertains to blame*. And here we are back to Option (2).

And thus we come to Option (4), the view I wish to defend. The challenge for Option (4) is clear. We must (a) explain and defend the standing norm on criticism, and (b) articulate how the standing norm on blame is grounded in the standing norm on criticism. To the first of these projects I now turn.⁶

5. This conclusion strikes me as plausible, but I concede that it isn't inevitable. Perhaps there are relevant differences between (mere) criticism and blame, such that the standing norm on the former cannot ground the standing norm on the latter. For instance, and anonymous referee points to Wallace (2010), on which we have an interest in being protected from blame because of what blame *is*—a reactive attitude expressing opprobrium. However, when we blame hypocritically, we take our own interests in being protected from blame to be more important than that of others, which violates the equal standing of persons—and this is why hypocritical blame lacks standing. However, we can ask: why do we have an interest in being protected from opprobrium? Two thoughts. First, it is intrinsically unpleasant (for most normal people), at least when expressed by those whose attitudes matter to us. Second, when expressed, it is a way of lowering our social status (however trivially) in some domain (however trivial), and we all have an interest in our status not being lowered. But both considerations also apply to criticism more generally. For most normal people, being criticized is intrinsically unpleasant, at least when expressed by those whose attitudes matter to us (*modulo* the fact that we often seek “constructive criticism” [although in constructive criticism, we might say, one's work is being criticized, but *one* is not being criticized; more on this below]). Further, to criticize an *agent* is likewise to (attempt to) lower that person's status (however trivially) in some given domain (however trivial). As far as I can see, then, the relevant considerations carry over to criticism more generally.

6. Note: a norm like *be better* just says who is *not prohibited for standing-based reasons* from criticizing. It doesn't say who is all things considered *enabled to criticize*. In general, however, I will tend to assume that those not prohibited for standing-based reasons from criticizing are not prohibited by any *other* reasons from criticizing, and are therefore enabled to criticize. A further note: it very well may be that, in the cases I describe in this paper, the critics are simply criticizing unnecessarily, or pointlessly, or even meanly—and that the critics shouldn't criticize in the given ways on these grounds alone. And so let me say the following. I am not saying, in this paper, that one can meanly criticize someone else, so long as one can do better than that person. Instead, I am saying that it is one thing (a bad thing) to criticize meanly, and an *additional* bad thing (albeit of a different kind) to criticize without *standing*. To the merely mean critic, one can say, “Hey, don't be mean!” But to the mean critic who *also* lacks standing, one can say, “Hey, don't be mean—and who are you to be criticizing me anyway? You're no better!” Of course, a question arises: why describe the cases at issue in this paper in such a way that the criticism can be interpreted as “mean” in the first place? Answer: without even a small hint of “meanness” (as in when John “grins sarcastically” in *The gardeners*) I fear that some readers will not interpret John's utterance as genuine *criticism of Jane*—and thus simply fail (or be more likely to fail) to have the intuition that John's (genuine) criticism of Jane is somehow inappropriate if John too can't keep orchids alive.

3. Be Better: Initial Observations

Let me begin with the following admission. At first blush, it can seem that the fact that one's critics can't do any better themselves is of no independent importance to the appropriateness of their criticisms. (It certainly isn't relevant to the *correctness* of their criticisms; but this point is agreed on by all hands.) That is, it can *seem* that the reply, "Let's see you do better," is something like a schoolyard defense mechanism: when you've been rightly criticized, simply throw up something about one's critics to deflect the attention on to *them* rather than *you*. And so let me address the following question. Why is it that we might *rightly* care about whether the person criticizing us can do any better? Why is that when we suspect that someone *can't* do better, we somehow *rightly* resent their criticism? Various answers suggest themselves; here is just one. Suppose Lucy and Dan, side by side, have independently just drawn dragons of equally poor quality. Nevertheless, Dan looks at Lucy's dragon and makes fun of it. What is it that is so irritating about *Dan's* criticism (beyond, of course, the intrinsic annoyance of being made fun of)? One suggestion is simple. Dan's criticism—unlike the criticism of someone else—seems to suggest that he is a *fault-finder*, and ungenerously disposed to be concerned with the wrong things. Lucy may think: fine, my dragon is admittedly poor—but why are you concerned with pointing out the faults in *my* dragon when the faults in your own dragon are (or ought to be) equally salient? Why is it that the faults of *my* dragon have caught your particular attention in this way?⁷ They would be salient to you, given the faults of your own dragon, only if you were *particularly interested in finding them*—and, we think, being particularly interested in finding faults in others is certainly some kind of vice.

Before moving on, it is worth noticing that the scenario as described is certainly psychologically unrealistic. In a context in which Lucy and Dan have both publicly drawn dragons of exactly the same quality, it is unrealistic to think of Dan now making fun of Lucy's dragon *in particular*—without any reference to his own. This would, practically, simply be creating a rod for his own back; Lucy would, of course, turn quickly back around on Dan, likely in anger, and point out how Dan's dragon is equally bad. And it is practically senseless (and perhaps vaguely pathological) to create a rod for one's own back, just for the sake of creating a rod for someone else's. In other words, it is only the pathologically critical who are so concerned to see someone else criticized that they would willingly see *themselves* criticized simply so that someone else may be criticized as well. For Dan's criticism to make sense, it would have to be that he values *Lucy's being criticized* more than he disvalues *himself being criticized*. Most of us, how-

7. Cf. King's (2020) account of standing in terms of norms of *attention*.

ever, would far prefer a situation in which we aren't criticized at all than a situation in which some other given person *is* criticized, but we are too. (Analogy: not many who are guilty of a crime would be willing to go to prison for that crime *only* to ensure that someone *else* is *also* punished for that crime.) *It is worse to be justly criticized than it is good to justly criticize.*⁸

To bring out the psychological implausibility yet further, consider a standard scenario in which a baseball player strikes out, thereby letting the team down. Now, no minimally sensible baseball player who has just struck out will easily find within himself the capacity to yell at the *next* player who strikes out; any player with even a modicum of sense will know that any such behaviour would invite a monumental backlash. A *star player* who never strikes out may eventually find himself without friends if he consistently yells at his teammates who *do* strike out—but the average player who just strikes out will find himself without friends *that very day* if he nevertheless yells at his teammates who *also* strike out. But then: I contend that it is precisely because we *accept the be better* norm that these scenarios are so unrealistic. It is not uncommon to find a star player that likes to yell at his less talented teammates when they fail; it is more or less unheard of to find an average player that likes to yell at his teammates for failing in exactly the ways he does.

Note further that a proper theory of the data at issue in this paper should be consistent with the observation that the “let’s see you do better” response can be deployed *third-personally*—that is, on behalf of someone else. Some interlocutors have registered their worry that they would feel *bad*—or somehow unvirtuous—if they employed this response to a given criticism. There are perhaps various reasons for this feeling, not all of which I can diagnose; I simply wish to note that this feeling is less likely to arise in the event that one deploys this response *on someone else’s behalf*. If Dan makes fun of Lucy’s dragon, then even agents besides Lucy can challenge Dan in the relevant way; a bystander who wishes to (in some sense) stick up for Lucy, or who otherwise simply thinks (or suspects) that Dan has no right to make the criticism he has made, can say to him, “Well, let’s see you do better Dan!”

8. These reflections may seem to suggest that the norm *don’t criticize when you’re no better* is ultimately some kind of *practical* norm, with approximately the same force as *don’t be stupid*—don’t criticize when you’re no better, because then you’ll be criticized too, and that’s a net loss! But two brief notes. First, criticism can be private, and also directed at agents who can’t criticize back, e.g., the dead. My claim is that, when the relevant critics are no better than those they criticize, their criticism is simply *intrinsically objectionable*—regardless of whether it is expressed or it isn’t. Second, by and large, in this paper, I do not pursue the question of what, if anything, *grounds* the *be better* norm; my aim is more simply to show that it is a proper norm. (I am open to the view that *nothing at all* grounds this norm; perhaps the norm is fundamental [cf. Todd 2019: 371].)

Finally, one note about the title of this paper. Note that, strictly speaking, the reply “Let’s see you do better” will only make sense in contexts in which the relevant acts are publicly *repeatable*. For instance, suppose Chase struck out three times during the last game, which Taylor missed due to a family emergency. Catching up with Chase, Taylor says, “You struck out *three times*? Come on!” Here it makes little sense for Chase to say, “Well, let’s see *you* do better.” The game is in the past, and the circumstances of the test—that particular pitcher on that particular day—are unrepeatable. But this doesn’t imply, of course, that the *be better* norm is not in place. Instead, it shows that if Chase suspects that Taylor *could have done no better*, Chase would have to content himself with the reply, “Yeah, well, trust me—you couldn’t have done any better.” And at this stage we simply encounter all the vagaries inherent in the judgment that Taylor could have done no better in a situation he never in fact had to face. Needless to say, if Taylor insists that he *could* have done better in that situation, but Chase disagrees, there is no decisive way of resolving this dispute. Once more, however, this doesn’t imply that the *be better* norm isn’t in place; this simply implies that—as with many moral norms—it is sometimes difficult (or even impossible) to settle when they have been violated, and when they haven’t been.⁹

4. Objection 1: An Epistemic Error-Theory

At this stage, I want to address one potential competing diagnosis of the cases described at the outset of this paper. One might contend that the reply, “Let’s see you do better,” is not exactly a demand that the critic prove that he or she has *standing* to criticize. Rather, it is a way of indirectly attempting to get the critic to withdraw the criticism by coming to appreciate that the criticized is not properly objectively *criticizable*—in particular, it is an attempt to get the critic to see that the task at hand is *harder than the critic appreciates*. And once the critic appreciates that the relevant task is sufficiently difficult, the critic will (or should) come to appreciate that the criticism was unfitting, and thus that he or she must retract it. Fundamentally, then, the “Let’s see you do better” reply is not a *standing-based* reply to

9. One might think that the lesson of this paragraph is that the proper norm of criticism is not *be better*, but instead *be such that you could/could have done better*. But my point is that, given the right understanding of the *could*, this norm is the same as the *be better* norm; to be such that one could do/could have done better, in the relevant sense, *is* to be better. Unfortunately, here I must sidestep issues about the contextual variability and sensitivity of the modal *can*, and the associated question of which sense of “can” is the relevant one. All I can offer here is the unhelpful truism, “It depends on the context.” In this scenario, that Taylor has faced similar pitches before and done very well appears relevant; that had Taylor been given years professional training, he could have done better appears irrelevant.

a critic, but a *criticizability-based* reply. Consider the parallel distinction in the case of blame. Certainly one way — perhaps the standard way — of rejecting someone’s blame is by contending that what one has done is not really *blameworthy*, whether because it wasn’t wrong, or whether because, even if it was wrong, one had some given excuse for doing it. What is distinctive of a *standing-based* reply to a blamer, however, is that the blamee *does not contest* (which is not to say *concedes*) his or her blameworthiness (Cohen 2006: 119); instead, the blamee’s point is that *even if I am blameworthy*, you in particular are in no position to blame. In short, according to this objection, at a deeper level of analysis, “Let’s see you do better” is a really just a way of saying “What I’ve done here is not objectively criticizable.”

First a concession. I concede that “Let’s see you do better” is *ambiguous* between this non-standing-based challenge, and a standing-based challenge. Consider once more moral blame. As I previously (2019: 359) observed concerning the “non-hypocrisy” condition, sometimes we may point to our critics’ past behaviour, not as a way of showing that they lack *standing*, but as a way of attempting to undermine their judgment that what we’re doing is wrong in the first place. Consider the case of a teenager who protests to her parents, “Well, I know that *you* went to parties where there was alcohol when *you* were young.” Such a protest is ambiguous between the following: (a) yes, maybe this is wrong, but *you* are in no position to blame me, having done this yourself, and (b) the fact that you did this when you were young (and are fine now!) shows that this is a normal thing for people of the relevant age to do. The first protest is standing-based; the second isn’t. So similarly here. Challenging our critic to perform the relevant task herself may be a way of trying to get that critic to see something *objective* or *person-neutral* about that task — or, I contend, it may be a way of trying to get that critic to see something *person-relative* about that task, viz., that *even if* that task is objectively not that difficult, anyway *the critic* is in no position to criticize, because *the critic too* falls below the objective standard in question.

Suppose Chase is facing a moderately talented pitcher (relative to the level of play at issue), and has just struck out. Taylor is now up to bat facing the same pitcher, and *also* strikes out. Now consider what would explain the total strangeness, in this context, of Chase’s criticizing Taylor for striking out. Plausibly, nothing “epistemic” can (by itself) explain this strangeness — that is, there is nothing that Chase is *not aware of* that might explain this strangeness. Having just struck out (and, perhaps, having a great deal of relevant experience at this level of play), Chase is, indeed, in perfect position to appreciate precisely how difficult it is (or isn’t) not to strike out against this pitcher. In this context, Chase may be in privileged position to *judge* or *recognize* that Taylor is bad batter, objectively speaking (supposing he is) — but what he *isn’t* in a position to do is to *criticize* Taylor’s batting, being no better himself. It is this fact that would explain the strangeness of Chase’s nevertheless criticizing Taylor.

5. Objection 2: Criticizing versus Pointing Out

This final point—one concerning the distinction between *recognizing* a fault and *criticizing* a fault—brings us to our next objection. Consider the following dialogue from the 1940 film *Edison the Man*:

Thomas Edison: That spring is too strong. It won't work.

Workman: I'd like to see you make a better one.

Thomas Edison: Well, a fellow can tell a bad egg without being able to lay one.¹⁰

Now, Edison certainly seems to have a point. Thankfully, however, my defense of the *be better* norm of criticism does not commit me to disagreeing with Edison. In particular, I concede that the workman's reply is inappropriate—but this is because it isn't clear that Edison's statement is a *criticism* of him and his spring. If Edison is simply *pointing out* that, as a matter of fact, the workman's spring is not going to work, it is of course beside the point for the workman to reply that he would like to see Edison do better. Edison is right: a fellow can *tell* a bad egg without being able to lay one; but it doesn't follow that a fellow can *criticize* a bad egg without being able to lay one. To bring out the contrast here, consider the following modified dialogue:

Thomas Edison: Look, I doubt anyone could do any better, least of all me, so I'm not criticizing you; but I should point out, before you go further, that that spring is too strong—it isn't going to work.

#Workman: Oh really? Let's see you do better.

It is patently obvious that if someone tells you "I'm not criticizing you, but I just wanted to note that . . .", it is inappropriate to respond, "Well then, let's see you do better." (More on this in the following section.) In other words, if someone says to you, "OK, let's see you do better," one way to deflect this response *just is* to say that one is not doing the thing subject to the norm now being invoked; one is not *criticizing*. The very infelicity of the workman's response in the second dialogue is strong evidence that, once more, we *accept* the *be better* norm, and suggests that the diagnosis concerning the first dialogue is the *ambiguity* of Edison's

10. As referenced here: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LetsSeeYOUDoBetter>.

statement. By saying “It won’t work,” Edison *could* be criticizing the workman, or he could be merely *pointing out* that what he’s done won’t work.

My defense of the *be better* norm thus crucially relies on some felt distinction between *recognizing* and *advising* that someone or something falls below some relevant standard, and *criticizing* that someone or something for falling below that standard. A similar distinction arises with respect to blame. Observe that, in the case of blame, it is often difficult to tell when one is being *merely advised* that something one is doing (or has done) is wrong, and when one is being *blamed*.¹¹ Here I borrow a trenchant observation on this score due to Neal Tognazzini (2019), who relates the following anecdote. Tognazzini told his partner that he was teaching Peter Singer’s famous work on our moral obligations towards the global poor, and noted that, according to Singer, we should all be donating at least 10 percent of our salaries to charity. To which his partner replied, “Well, does *he* donate that much money to charity?” (As it happens: yes.) But now: what is the point behind this (seemingly *ad hominem*) question? Arguably, it is this. By saying that we should all be donating 10 percent of our salaries to charity, Singer can *seem* to be *blaming* those of us who *do not* do so—but if he doesn’t do so himself, then he is in no position to blame.¹² In other words, *just by saying*, “We should all be donating 10 percent of our money to charity,” this can *seem* to amount to one’s *blaming* those who *do not* donate in this way to charity. Now, this strong implication can be cancelled—but the point is that it must be cancelled. That is, one *can* say

Look, I don’t do this myself, so I’m not blaming anyone here, but I do think we should all be donating at least 10 percent of our salaries to charity.

Here one explicitly cancels what would otherwise be pragmatically implied by one’s assertion of the claim that we should all be donating 10 percent of our salaries to charity, *viz.*, that one blames those who fail to do so. And note that it plainly makes no sense to respond to the above with anything like, “Well, you’re in no position to say that that’s what we should do—you don’t do this yourself!” The speaker may be in position to *say* that this is what we should do without being in position to *blame* us if this is *not* what we do. So similarly for criticism more generally. I may be in position to *say* that your spring is inadequate relative to the standard of working for the job at hand, without being in position to *criticize you* on account of your spring that it is inadequate for the job at hand.

11. Cf. Wallace (2010: 317), who distinguishes between “moral advice” and “moral criticism” (which is, for Wallace, *blame*).

12. For a very different take on the relevance of Singer’s compliance with his own moral advice, see the extended discussion in Burgess-Jackson (2020).

Perhaps what is wanted here is some distinction between criticizing a non-agential *thing in the world* and criticizing an *agent*—in other words, some distinction between criticizing the work, and criticizing the workman, or criticizing the painting, and criticizing the painter. As I see it, such a distinction *can* appear in our natural language judgments concerning “criticism”—but, as ever, these judgments are delicate. However, consider first the following, which, presumably, everyone agrees is infelicitous:

(5) I'm saying that all your paintings are bad paintings, but I'm not criticizing your paintings.

That, of course, makes no sense. To say my paintings are bad paintings *is* to criticize my paintings. But what about:

? (6) I'm saying that your paintings are bad paintings, but I'm not criticizing you.

Now, (6) is certainly a confusing thing to say. If someone tells me that all my paintings are bad, this seems to simply be another way of saying that I am a bad painter—and to say that I am a bad painter is, it would seem, to criticize me, *viz.*, as a bad painter. As I noted above, one typically criticizes the painter *by* criticizing the paintings; and it is hard to sense a gap between the two. However, there is a reading of (6) that arguably does make sense—and this is one in which the speaker does not judge that my paintings are a *reflection of my deficient capacity to paint*. Consider:

(6*) Yes, his paintings are bad paintings, but you know why? He was threatened that if he ever made a good painting, he'd lose his home. So all this time he's been deliberately making bad paintings. So his paintings are all bad, but we have no idea whether he's a bad painter.

Now the point. In (6*), one is arguably criticizing the paintings, but not the painter. One can do this insofar as one can judge that a certain deficient outcome may be *someone's doing*, but nevertheless that *someone's doing* which is deficient may not be a reflection of their deficient *capacities to do*. What we have, then, is a distinction between “deficiency” (or “falling below a standard”) of two different sorts. In particular, we have deficiency in paintings (however this is to be understood or otherwise measured), and deficiency in capacities to paint.

It is worth observing here that, on *this* score, there is no relevant parallel with the case of blame. In the case of blame, there is no parallel distinction between,

say, blaming an action and blaming an agent—indeed, it is obvious that any such distinction is hopeless. After all, we do not “blame” actions in the first place. Instead, we blame *agents* on account of their actions (or perhaps their characters, or their beliefs, or . . .). In other words, there is only one possible fit *object* of the attitude of blame, and that is an *agent*. However, one can indeed criticize pieces of art—and one can also criticize artists. Again, typically, one criticizes artists *by* criticizing some relevant pieces of art. But it makes no sense at all to suggest that one blames some art, and therefore also some artist—or that one blames an artist *by* blaming their art. One can criticize an artist by criticizing their art, but one cannot blame an artist by blaming their art.

This distinction forces a clarification of the *be better* norm. In particular, it forces a restriction on what we are allowed to substitute for *x*. The thought here plainly isn’t that one is in position to criticize a painting only if one is better than . . . that very painting, or in position to criticize a spring only if one is better than . . . that very spring. The thought, instead, is that one is in position in to criticize a painter with respect to some standard *by* criticizing a painting only if one is better than that painter with respect to that standard. Thus to clarify:

One must: criticize agent *x* with respect to standard *s* only if one is better than agent *x* with respect to standard *s*.¹³

Return then to Edison and the spring. My suggestion is that Edison can recognize that the spring is deficient relative to some standard of working for the job at hand, but that the spring’s being deficient in this respect needn’t be *evidence* of some criticizable deficiency *in the workman’s capacities*. In other words: Edison can recognize that the workman’s capacities do not themselves fall below any relevant standard for workman’s capacities—but that some doing of the workman (even in his capacity as a workman) falls below some *other* kind of standard. Which is other words for saying what is perhaps more simple to say: Edison can recognize that the workman’s spring won’t work, but not be *criticizing* the workman, because Edison needn’t be judging that such a workman is *supposed* to be able to fashion such springs that *do* work. However, if Edison is indeed *criticizing* the workman precisely by criticizing his spring, then—with

13. In practice, no one confuses the nature of the norm in the imagined way; anyway, the result of any such confusion is, shall we say, startling:

Those apartments are awful—way too tiny and cramped. # Alright, wise guy, but you’re not so big yourself.

That’s a lousy spring; its tensile strength is far weaker than what it needs to be.
Yeah, well, your own tensile strength is not so hot either, tough guy.

a certain *proviso* to come—the workman's reply comes into force: *let's see you do better*.

6. Objection 3: Self-Criticism and Inconsistency

The points made above can also indirectly help us reply to a different kind of objection, one involving how the *be better* norm interacts with self-criticism, and the question whether *self-criticism* can render *other-criticism* unobjectionable. Consider an objection as follows:

While there might be something objectionable about Dan criticizing Lucy (and only Lucy) for her bad drawing if he couldn't do any better, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the following scenario: Dan and Lucy both draw dragons of the same quality, and Dan comments "Oh jeez, Lucy, we're both terrible artists." But it seems like Dan's criticism in this scenario would violate the *be better* norm, since Dan is not better than Lucy with respect to dragon-drawing abilities.¹⁴

My reply to this objection is that what this objection describes as "criticism" is not really criticism, but something else—something not properly subject to the *be better* norm.

Let me begin, not with criticism *per se*, but by revisiting a point just made from a slightly different angle. Consider the following exchange:

Jones: Disappointing. There's hardly anyone at the party.

Jim: I blame the weather.

Jones: Oh come on, Jim. Just the other week *you* forgot to send the invitations, and hardly anyone came *then*. So you're really in no position to blame here.

Needless to say, Jones is confused; indeed, the confusion on display here is so unlikely as to be comedic. When Jim says that he blames the weather, what this means—to some first approximation—is that Jim thinks that the salient explanation of this negative outcome is the weather. But there is no standing norm on judging (or expressing the judgment) that the salient explanation for some negative outcome is *F*. However many parties one's culpable negligence has ruined, this in no way compromises one's position to judge (and express the judgment) that the

14. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for this objection, which I have reproduced here verbatim.

weather is the salient explanation of what ruined *this* party. What this instead compromises is something else, something like one's position to take a kind of hostile attitude towards someone who *also* has been negligent in a parallel way.

The point here is this. There is no standing norm on expressing the judgment that *S* is blameworthy. Similarly, there is no standing norm—and ipso facto no *be better* norm—on expressing (directly or indirectly) the judgment that *S* is criticizable. Now, there is a difference between asserting that there is a response to an argument (or asserting something that implies that there is a response to an argument), and responding to an argument. Similarly, there is a difference between asserting that there is a criticism of someone (or asserting something that implies that there is a criticism of someone) and criticizing that someone. My claim is that in the above sort of case, Dan has asserted that there is a criticism (that is, some kind of shortcoming) of Lucy (or something that implies that there is a criticism of Lucy). But—on a natural interpretation of this type of exchange—Dan has not criticized Lucy. He has thus not violated the *be better* norm.¹⁵

Imagine a context in which there's a dispute about whether our baseball team has good hitters. I think that actually no one on our team is good; as evidence, I dig up definitive statistics detailing our high individual strike out rates. I say:

Look, I strike out all the time, so I'm not criticizing anyone here, but I do think that what this shows is that we are pretty bad hitters, and that's something we just have to accept. We're bad hitters.

To my ears, this statement (and the parallel statements considered earlier) sounds perfectly natural, and perfectly coherent. But imagine the following (wounded, defensive) reply:

What do you mean you aren't criticizing anyone here? You just said—or certainly implied—that I'm not a good hitter!

Again, to my ears, this reply is confused. I did assert, "We're bad hitters", and, yes, this does imply that *you* are a bad hitter. It doesn't follow that I have criti-

15. Of course, as ever, much depends on the subtleties of the case. Perhaps Lucy believes that she is a good artist, and that her dragon is great—and perhaps this is common knowledge between Lucy and Dan. In this scenario, Dan's assertion may be a thinly veiled put-down, or attempt to put Lucy in her proper place—and in that scenario, it may be that Dan *does* violate the *be better* norm. In this scenario, Dan makes his criticism and *doesn't care* that he fails to meet the *be better* norm; he just wants to take Lucy down a peg, even if he's taken down a peg too. Then again, subtleties are subtle: in this sort of scenario, it is natural to interpret Dan's criticism as really pertaining to Lucy's *overconfidence*: he isn't really criticizing her qua *bad artist*, but qua *bad artist who can't see she's bad*—and *he* at least knows that he's bad, unlike silly Lucy. In this case, his real criticism doesn't violate the *be better* norm. More on this latter subtlety below.

cized you. In other words, I can respond as follows: “Well, I’m just stating the facts, or the facts as I see them, and those facts do say something negative about you; but one can state the facts in this way without criticizing.” And perhaps this is all that is happening in the (re-imagined) Dan and Lucy case.

The lesson is that the *be better* norm *only pertains to the attitude explicitly disavowed* in my speech above—and it seems plausible that this attitude is *not* present in the imagined scenario. At this point, we can apply this lesson to some prominent discussions of the non-hypocrisy norm on standing to blame, and further clarify the *be better* norm, and how it relates to *self-criticism*. In particular, note that Fritz and Miller (2018) (cf. also Wallace 2010) argue that it is the (dispositional) *inconsistency* of the would-be blamer that undermines that blamer’s right to blame. In other words, according to Fritz and Miller, what undermines one’s standing to blame with respect to norm *N* is an unfair *differential blaming disposition* with respect to *N*. In the paradigmatic case, one is disposed to blame others for violating *N*, but not disposed to blame oneself. This implies that one (implicitly at least) denies the equality of persons with respect to *N*, which, according to Fritz and Miller, grounds one’s right to blame; the person with the differential disposition thus forfeits the right to blame.

A central claim undergirding this account is that even if one culpably violates some norm, one can have the standing to blame others for violating that norm, *so long as one also blames oneself*. The *be better* norm says otherwise. In other words, if we both violate a given norm, the fact that I blame myself for violating that norm does not, all by itself, make me better than you with respect to meeting this very norm. Indeed, as concerns the *be better* norm, the fact that I blame myself appears to be perfectly irrelevant.¹⁶

16. Again, the subtleties are subtle. Suppose Neal feels like Chris is blaming him for not replying to his emails on time, but Chris often fails to reply to *his* emails on time as well. An exchange ensues. Chris clarifies: “I’m not upset that you don’t reply on time—that’s only human; I’m upset because you don’t reply on time *and you don’t even realize it.*” In this case, if Chris blames himself for not replying on time, this of course implies that Chris *does* realize that he doesn’t reply on time—and thus that, in *this* respect, Chris is indeed better than Neal, and thus that Chris’ criticism meets the *be better* norm. But this doesn’t imply that, if both *S* and *S** violate *N*, and other things are equal, then if *S* blames himself for violating *N*, but *S** does not, then *S* is better *with respect to violations of N* than *S**. At most it implies that *S* is better than *S** with respect to some *other* norm, e.g., the norm (call it *N**) that one shouldn’t violate *N* but not even recognize that one does so. Note: in practice, it seems common for the akratic wrongdoer to blame the non-akratic wrongdoer in parallel fashion: “Yes, I sometimes break down and eat meat, but I’m not angry with you for merely eating meat; I’m angry because you just eat meat *and don’t even feel badly about it.*” In *this* kind of way, according to a *be better* account, the akratic wrongdoer has the standing to blame the non-akratic wrongdoer—though of course the akratic wrongdoer will not have the standing to blame fellow akratic wrongdoers. If, despite my vegetarian principles, I break down and order meat, I cannot blame my fellow akratics who *also* break down in similar fashion; I’m no better! Although perhaps I *am* better than those do not even have to *break down* to eat meat.

The proponent of the *be better* norm can say that this kind of inconsistency-based theory of standing rests on a subtle misdiagnosis of the key data discussed above. What is plausible is that it normally violates conversational norms to express the judgment that someone else is blameworthy without also acknowledging that one is blameworthy too (if one is). And one can render one's expression of this judgment inoffensive—or certainly much less offensive—if one acknowledges one's own blameworthiness in the same breath. But what this shows is merely that *expressing the judgment of blameworthiness* is objectionable only if applied inconsistently—or, equivalently, that there is no *be better* norm on merely expressing this judgment. However, when it comes to *blaming*—where this is more than merely expressing the judgment of blameworthiness—matters appear very different. Consider two akratic vegetarians who both, on the same day, break down and order meat. And now imagine:

I feel really badly about breaking down and ordering the meat, and I blame myself. Let me add, of course, that I blame you too—you really shouldn't have done that either.

I admit that this seems perfectly fine, depending, of course, on the manner and tone of the speaker. But this is precisely because the “blame” here appears to have no further force than “I think you are blameworthy too.” But now imagine:

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

This kind of blame, even were it to be otherwise proportionate and deserved, cannot be rendered appropriate by one's *also* being hostile with oneself (Cf. Cohen 2013). And it is only blame in *this* sense that is subject to a standing norm. Once we focus in on the relevant senses of blame and criticism, we can see that the inconsistency-based theory of Fritz and Miller is giving us the wrong result,

A final note. In this paper, I have set aside the difficult question of how the standing to criticize might ever be *regained* (cf. Todd 2019: 357–59). Standing has an obvious temporal dimension. If I blame you for akratically ordering meat, it is of at best questionable relevance to point out that, five years ago, I did the same (assuming that I never have since). “You're no better; five years ago, you did the same.” “Yes, I was no better *then*, but I am better *now*.” Perhaps, as we often say, I am now a “different person”, i.e., different for purposes of evaluating whether I violate the *be better* norm. Self-blame and/or guilt may be relevant to *becoming* better (i.e., becoming this different person), even if they do not, by themselves, *make* one better.

and *be better* is giving us the right one.¹⁷ It isn't your disposition to be inconsistent that undermines your standing to criticize me; it is the fact that you are no better.

7. Objection 4: Professionals and Amateurs

And now, finally, we come to what I consider to be the core challenge for the *be better* norm of criticism. And this is that the case involving Edison considered above—even once clarified—can nevertheless seem like a simple counterexample to that norm. After all, suppose Edison clarifies that he *is* criticizing the workman. And the workman replies, "Well, let's see you do better." Might Edison not simply reply that, well, *he is not a workman*? In order to respond to this difficulty, I contend, we are going to have to be careful about what it is we are criticizing the relevant agents *for*.

But let's back up. In addition to the case just mentioned, consider further the following:

The gallery. Suilin is in a fancy art gallery. She says, "Gosh, these paintings are dreadful. The color scheme is all wrong." Improbably overhearing her from behind a hidden screen, the artist emerges to say, "Well you certainly don't like my paintings, that's for sure—but let's see *you* do better!"

17. There is one further key issue raised by self-criticism we must address—or at least mention. And this is that, perhaps surprisingly, a straightforward application of the *be better* norm would imply that self-criticism is never appropriate. If in order to be in position to criticize, one must be better than the criticized, then plainly enough no one will ever be in position to criticize *herself*, since for no x is x ever better than x . Todd and Rabern (2022) have recently defended exactly this result as regards moral blame—and my sympathies are similarly with the view that, because self-criticism always violates *be better*, self-criticism is—happily!—always inappropriate. (You wouldn't tolerate criticism from someone who is no better; why then tolerate criticism from yourself? Silence the inner critic, who is no better than the one being criticized!) In this paper, however, I cannot defend this controversial thesis; again, see Todd and Rabern for the relevant arguments. (See Fritz & Miller in press for some replies.) If this result is thought to be unpalatable, then the most natural way forward is to simply restrict the *be better* norm so that it doesn't apply to cases of *self*-criticism:

One must: criticize some distinct agent x with respect to standard s only if one is better than x with respect to standard s .

Todd and Rabern (2022: 113) allege that such a restriction is unduly *ad hoc*. Whether we should accept merely this restricted principle, or instead the result that self-criticism is always inappropriate, is a question that must lay outside the scope of the present paper.

Variant: Improbably, the artist recognizes Suilin as her old acquaintance from high school art class, and retorts, “Yeah, well, I’ve seen your own paintings, Suilin, and we both know that these are a lot better than anything *you* could do.”

The filmmaker. Roland is a filmmaker whose latest film was just trashed by Jane’s review in the *Times*. In an outburst, Roland says, “These lazy critics think they’re so damn clever—but, you know, they’ve never produced a single worthwhile piece of art in their lives; all they can do is just sit around sniping at others. Hell, I’d like to see any of them make a film half as good as the one I just made. I’ll listen when I see these bastards do better themselves.”

The kitchen install. Pavel is a professional tradesperson and kitchen installer, recently hired to renovate someone’s kitchen while she is away. Pavel’s friend Charlie—himself a teacher—happens by, and comes in to have a look at Pavel’s progress. Charlie says, “Pavel, I’ve got to say that this isn’t very good. Look, the doors aren’t even on straight—and look, the tiles are uneven too.” To which he replies: “Yeah, well Charlie, it is a lot better than you could do.”

Now the point. Why aren’t the above cases simple counterexamples to the *be better* norm of criticism? Intuitively, in every such case, the relevant invocation of that norm is simply absurd. In every such case, it seems, the critic has available a roughly similar—and decisive—reply:

Suilin: “Well, I’m not saying I could do better—but then again, I’m not putting forward my art in a professional art gallery.”

Jane: “Well, I’m not saying that I could make a better film—but then again, I’m not putting films out there as being of professional level quality.”

Charlie: “Well, I’m not saying that I could do better—but then again, I’m not a professional tradesperson.”

The upshot is that we seem to have counterexamples to the *be better* norm, counterexamples that point to a more general lesson. In order to criticize artists, I don’t need to be a better artist myself. In order to criticize filmmakers, I don’t need to be a better filmmaker myself. In order to criticize athletes, I don’t need to be a better athlete myself. In order to criticize tradespeople, I don’t have to be able to be a better tradesperson myself. The norm, it seems, has just given us the wrong results.

But this is too fast. My reaction to the above cases is simple. What we have here are not appeals to an illicit norm of criticism. What we have here are illicit appeals to that norm. The way I wish to bring out this point appeals to a move familiar from other areas of responsibility-theory. In particular, we must be very careful to specify what it is that—at a deeper level—the above persons are being criticized *for*.¹⁸ That is, we need to specify more clearly the nature of the criticisms in question. My contention is that once we see what the criticism really is in these cases, we'll see that there is no reason to think that the relevant critics do not in fact satisfy the *be better* norm of criticism—and it is *this* that explains the oddness of the above replies to the given critics.

I begin with the following important observation: no analogue of the replies just considered is available to our critics in our first set of cases. In response to Rebecca's challenge, for instance, Ross can't say, "Well, sure, I can't do any better, but I'm not saying I could—I'm not any kind of professional plasterer." That's of course right. But then again, neither is Rebecca. The simple observation here is that, in the first set of cases, the critic and the criticized are both "amateurs" who are, in some important way, subject to the same expectations. Now, when we move to *amateur-on-professional* cases, something important seems to have changed, and the response from the professional ("let's see you do better") seems to misfire. Now, there are two competing diagnoses of this change we might consider. The first is that, when we move to amateur-on-professional cases, the *be better* norm no longer applies. This is equivalent to saying that the *be better* norm is not a norm on criticism *per se*, but is instead a norm on merely on what we might call *peer-criticism*, where two people are "peers" with respect to a standard just in case both such persons are expected, in the relevant way, to live up to that standard. Thus:

Be better than peers:

One must: criticize some peer *x* with respect to standard *s* only if one is better than *x* with respect to *s*.

But whereas I endorse *be better than peers*, this is because, ultimately, I endorse the more general principle, *be better*. And so let us consider a second diagnosis

18. Cf. debates about the status of the so-called "Frankfurt-style" counterexamples to the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP). Some defenders of the principle have responded to the cases roughly as follows: once we pay careful attention to what the relevant agent is responsible *for* in these cases (e.g., as in van Inwagen [1983], some "consequence-particular" rather than a "consequence-universal"), we'll see that the relevant agents were in fact free to avoid responsibility for that very thing. Needless to say, I take no position here on PAP and the Frankfurt cases; this is just a comparison. The defense of PAP (arguably) requires engaging subtle questions concerning what *precisely* the relevant agent is criticizable for; the defense of *be better* is in this way similar.

of this change. The second diagnosis maintains that, when we move to amateur-professional cases, it isn't that the *be better* norm no longer applies. Rather, it is that the *criticism* at issue subtly does meet that norm (at least when appropriate). In other words, we have two competing explanations of the mistake the professionals are making in the second set of cases: (a) the professionals in the above cases are illicitly appealing to a norm that doesn't apply in the relevant context (they are appealing to a norm like *be better than peers*—but the critic and the criticized aren't peers), or (b) the professionals in the above cases are misconstruing (by illicitly overinflating) what it is that they are being criticized *for*. Option (b) would preserve the simple norm of criticism: *be better*. I favour option (b).

Let us begin by considering Charlie's criticism of Pavel. And let us distinguish between what we might call the *surface* criticisms in this case, and the *real* criticism. The surface criticisms: *these doors aren't straight; these tiles look bad; the plaster is uneven*. The real criticism: *you are trying to pass off work of non-professional quality as work of professional quality*. But now the point. The problem with Pavel's reply—that Charlie is no better at installing kitchens than he is—is thus that Pavel has responded merely to the *surface criticisms* to which he has been subjected, but is not responding to the *real* criticism. Perhaps Charlie couldn't tile any better. That may be, and had Charlie said, "Pavel, this is bad even for an amateur," that may be relevant. But the real criticism is that he's represented himself as a professional but now isn't delivering work commensurate with being a professional.¹⁹ And it is thus absurd for Pavel to attempt to say that Charlie is no better at installing kitchens than he is. That just misunderstands the criticism. In other words, with respect to the *real* criticism, there is no reason to suppose that Charlie is no better than Pavel; there is no reason to think that Charlie *also* represents himself as a professional and then doesn't deliver professional quality work.

One way to see that what I have called the *surface* criticisms are indeed merely *surface* criticisms is to simply observe that Charlie's reaction to *the very same job* would be very different, if he thought, say, that the job was a first-time "practice run" of Pavel's young apprentice; indeed, in that case, Charlie might have found himself saying, "Hey, wow, these tiles look really good!" What this seems to show is that, when Charlie initially uttered, "Pavel, these tiles look bad," what he *meant* was something like, "Pavel, these tiles look bad *for a professional job*,"—which, if it is to be a criticism *of Pavel*, is other words for saying, "Pavel, you're passing off work that isn't up to professional standards as being of professional standards." (If Pavel isn't a professional, or he *is* a professional but, for some

19. Of course, we could articulate this same general idea in different ways. The point here is just that when Charlie is criticizing Pavel *by* criticizing Pavel's kitchen installation job, he is criticizing Pavel *qua* professional tradesperson, not *qua* *amateur* tradesperson. He's saying that Pavel is subject to criticism in virtue of this job because Pavel, as a professional tradesperson, is supposed to be able to produce work of a higher quality.

strange reason, the job he is doing is not meant to be a professional job, then the fact that the tiles aren't good for a professional job is of course no criticism of Pavel.) Thus again: *that* is the real criticism of Pavel.

Now consider the filmmaker. There is something pathetic about the unfortunately common phenomena of a filmmaker who reacts to negative reviews by saying that he'd like to see the film critics do better themselves, *even if* such a filmmaker is right—as such filmmakers tend to emphasize—that it is much easier to criticize films than to make them. But we have, again, two possible explanations of what is pathetic about this reaction. The first is that this amounts to a pathetic appeal to what is *in itself* a pathetic norm—the norm that, in order to criticize, you have to be better yourself. The second explanation, however, is the one I favour. What is pathetic here is precisely the filmmaker's idea that this norm will protect him from criticism if he makes a bad film. We have a pathetic attempt to hide behind a norm that is *in itself* perfectly good—or a pathetic attempt to act as if a norm condemns a piece of criticism which it simply doesn't condemn.

Look at it this way. To make a film and submit it publicly for the world to see is to *take a risk*. But if, when criticized, a filmmaker says, "Alright, you critics—let's see *you* make a better film," the filmmaker is thus revealed to be someone who wants it both ways. If his film is received well, then he expects to receive all of the accolades that accrue to someone who makes great films. But if it is received badly, then he expects to be able to implicate that he is just some sort of amateur who never meant to suggest that his work is especially worthy of esteem. In other words, he expects to say: since this was just the product of an idle amateur, it must be *judged as* the work of an amateur—so if you think that what I've done is *bad even for an amateur*, then, since you too are amateur, *let's see you do better*. But this is pathetic. If you put your work forward as being at the level of a professional, you can't then retreat to the safety of the claim that it is good for an amateur. Maybe it is. But we weren't criticizing your film as being bad for an amateur (in point of fact, it may be astoundingly good for an amateur). We're criticizing it as being bad for a professional—and thus, at the deeper level, we are criticizing *you* for seeing fit to *suggest it* as being good for a professional (or, perhaps, for producing something at this level, despite having the talents and resources of a professional). *That* is our criticism of you. If you say to *that*, "Let's see you do better," then we have a ready reply: we at least wouldn't put forward material like *this* as of professional-level quality (or, perhaps, that we would do better if we had the given talents or resources). In other words, once we are clear about the nature of the criticism, we can observe that our criticism *does in fact* meet the *be better* norm. And we can see that the professional's use of "Let's see you do better" is a pathetic attempt to inflate our criticism into something it wasn't.

Once clarified in this way, the "Let's see you do better" retort is out of place, in the above cases, not because *be better* is a mistaken norm, but because there is

no reason to think that the real criticisms at issue fail to meet that norm. A helpful way to bring out this point is to observe how the “Let’s see you . . .” reply is pre-emptively blocked if the critic specifies his or her implicit criticism more concretely. Consider:

Suilin: Sheesh, these paintings are really bad—well, they’re great for a high school art show, and certainly they’re much better than I could do, but they’re hardly worth displaying in a fancy gallery!

Artist: Well, let’s see you do better.

The artist’s retort now makes no sense; is the artist alleging that Suilin indeed *would* pass off such paintings as worth displaying in such a gallery? But that, presumably, is something for which (ordinarily) the artist would have no relevant evidence. Of course, the artist may be reasonably confident that, however “bad” her paintings are, it is unlikely that some apparent tourist can do better. Thus, in principle, she is in position to challenge a tourist on *that* score. But that is not the score on which she has been challenged. Her retort thus verges on the incoherent. Similarly, consider:

Charlie: Sheesh, Pavel, this kitchen is looking pretty bad—I wouldn’t try to pass off this kind of work as professional installation.

Pavel: Well, let’s see you install a kitchen that looks better.

Again, Pavel’s retort now plainly makes no sense; Pavel has simply *ignored* Charlie’s criticism, and responded to some *other* imagined criticism—namely, “Pavel, this isn’t even good for an amateur.” If Charlie says that his job is so bad that it isn’t even good *for an amateur*, then indeed Pavel’s reply makes sense (or at least doesn’t so clearly *not* make sense): “OK, if this isn’t decent for an amateur—well, you’re an amateur, so let’s see *you* do better then.”

The intuition now is not that the “Let’s see you . . .” reply is absurd, in the above cases, because, really, the critic needn’t be *able* to do better (and the *be better* norm is false); the intuition is instead that that reply is absurd because, once the nature of the criticism is clarified in this way, there is clearly now no reason to think that the critic *does not* meet this norm. Once we distinguish between the mere *surface criticisms* (to which the *be better* norm doesn’t apply) and the real criticism (to which it does), the *be better* norm emerges perfectly intact. Thus, the *be better* norm provides us with an elegant way of seeing how *all* agential criticism is subject to one and the same norm of criticism, and how

the latter set of cases is, at a deeper level, perfectly continuous with the first set of cases, cases in which the invocation of a *be better* norm seems to be perfectly in order.

8. Grounding the Non-Hypocrisy Norm on Blame

So ends my defense of the *be better* norm of criticism. I turn now to our final issue: what is the relationship between this norm of criticism and the non-hypocrisy norm on the standing to blame? At some level, my story here can be as brief as it is simple. The relationship between these two things is that the latter is simply a more specific instance of the former. There is a *be better* norm on criticism; to blame is to criticize; thus, one must blame a certain agent with respect to some standard only if one is better than that agent with respect to that standard. And that is other words for saying: if you are no better at meeting a certain standard than the person to be blamed, then you are in no position to blame. Thus, the non-hypocrisy condition on standing to blame follows immediately from the *be better* norm of criticism. We thus have a defense of what I above called Option (4).

The realization that one can derive the non-hypocrisy condition from more *general* norms on criticism puts pressure on certain conceptions of “moral standing” in the literature. For instance, consider the following. I have previously given what we might call a *moral commitment* account of moral standing: “one has moral standing to blame a given wrongdoer if and only if one is morally committed to the values that condemn the wrongdoer’s actions”, where “moral commitment”, I said, consists, minimally, in “endorsement of the relevant value as a value, and at least some degree of motivation” to comply with it. (2019: 357) But suppose that, in response to Lucy’s challenge, Dan tries to draw a dragon and does no better than Lucy. Intuitively, his criticism no longer “stands”, and now he must withdraw it. But the problem, then, for Dan’s criticism of Lucy’s dragon was not anything like that Dan’s failure to draw a good dragon reveals Dan to be insufficiently committed to the value—say—of drawing good dragons. Dan’s commitment to excellent-dragon-drawing is neither here nor there. What is relevant is simply that *Dan is no better than Lucy* with respect to meeting the standard in question. In general, what seems to matter here is not one’s abstract “commitment” to a given norm, but one’s concrete ability to comply with it.

The gap between the *be better* norm of criticism and the moral commitment account of the moral standing to blame is either a problem for the former, or for the latter, or, perhaps, both. In the spirit of reconciliation, however, I want to

conclude by suggesting a way of bridging this gap—that is, of explaining why the moral commitment account of the standing to blame is at least *prima facie* plausible, but can also plausibly be derived from a *be better* norm of criticism. The suggestion is the following. Note that, in the first set of cases, there is a certain kind of gap between the agent's *motivation* or *desire* to perform the task in question, and the agent's *actually performing* the task in question. When it comes to drawing a dragon, or not striking out, or keeping orchids alive, or getting a paper published, or evening out plaster, there may be a substantial gap between one's *motivation* and *desire* to do these things, and one's actually doing them. Intuitively, one could be *fully committed* to keeping the orchids alive, and yet, due to insufficient gardening know-how, not be able to keep them alive. One could be fully committed to hitting well in baseball, and yet, due to insufficient physical skill, not be able to hit well in baseball.

But is *morality* like this? The question is a difficult question, of course—but there is at the very least a strong case that it isn't. Succeeding in morality—unlike succeeding in gardening—does not demand of an agent more than what is in that very agent's control. More to the point: if meeting a certain standard is beyond the capacity of a certain agent, then that agent's meeting that standard is *not a moral requirement*. Thus, when it comes to morality, the relevant "gap" observed in the first set of cases seems to disappear. Intuitively, the fact that Jane's orchids have died certainly doesn't show, by itself, that Jane isn't committed to the value of keeping her orchids alive. However, the fact that Jane *lies to me* does indeed tend to show that she isn't committed to the value of not lying to me. She could be fully committed to keeping orchids alive, and yet not keep them alive—but she couldn't really be fully committed to not lying to me, and yet lie to me. If she were fully committed to not lying to me, well, she wouldn't. That's because *not lying* is a mere moral requirement (for normal adult agents at any rate), and meeting that requirement is open to any normal, adult agent that is in fact committed to meeting that requirement. But it is simply false that, if only she were fully committed to keeping the orchids alive, she would.

I can sum up as follows. My previous "moral commitment" account of the moral standing to blame will be *extensionally equivalent* with a *be better* norm of criticism, so long as we maintain that, in morally responsible, adult human agents, genuine *commitment* to a moral standard (or value) entails *actually complying* with that standard (or value). Said differently: if we maintain that (in normal adults) non-compliance with a norm entails non-commitment to that norm, then the "moral commitment" account of standing ends up converging upon a *be better* norm of criticism. In any case in which you are a normal adult, and you don't have the standing to blame me, that will be a case in which you are *no better* than me, and also a case in which you are not genuinely committed to the

values that condemn what I did—otherwise, you wouldn't have violated them, in which case you *would* be better than me (who did). Thus, the plausibility of the moral commitment account of moral standing is in fact no difficulty for the *be better* norm, and vice versa: that there is a deeper, more fundamental *be better* norm is no problem for the *extensional adequacy* of a moral commitment account of the moral standing to blame.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended a *be better* norm of criticism—an underexplored norm that is nevertheless ubiquitous in our lives, once we begin looking for it. The *be better* norm is, I hope to have shown, continuously invoked in a wide range of ordinary settings, can undergird and explain the widely endorsed non-hypocrisy condition on the standing to blame, and can be defended—so I say—from all of the most obvious objections it faces. However, if you think that I have made a mess of the issues discussed above, then I have one simple response. And you can guess what that may be.

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