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Abstract

Theories of moral responsibility have often assumed that praise does not require justification in the way that blame might. In line with recent accounts, this article argues that praise does require such justification. Oppressive praise is an erroneous attribution of moral or normative responsibility that contributes to the production and reproduction of oppressive and dominating structures. This article provides a taxonomy of oppressive praising practices. Oppressive praise will track and enforce oppressive norms. It can be categorized into that which misrecognizes an agent as either (1) less deserving of praise (“underrecognition”) or (2) more deserving of praise (“overrecognition”) than would be consistent with nonoppressive norms. Two further normative concerns are addressed: first, the conditions under which disingenuous praise will be oppressive; and second, where issues of standing to praise do and do not arise.

Keywords: oppressive praise, political responsibility, moral responsibility

Theories of moral responsibility have often neglected an exploration of the role of praise. It has frequently been considered as simply an opposite to blame or, rather, as its positive correlative. Philosophers have too often assumed that praise does not require justification in the way that blame might, as it is ostensibly a nonharmful and nonpunitive practice. R. Jay Wallace (1994, 61) has gone so far as to assert that praise doesn’t have a central defining feature in our responsibility practices. Against this prevailing view, I shall argue that praise does require justification. The recent accounts of Michelle Ciurria (2020) and Jules Holroyd (2021, 19) have indicated how practices of responsibility are not insulated from social and political dynamics. Praise that is levied in line with oppressive norms and expectations can reinforce or entrench oppression. Crucially, erroneous attributions of moral responsibility through oppressive praising will produce and reproduce oppressive and dominating structures. This paper builds on existing accounts by arguing that oppressive praise aligns with oppressive expectations and by specifying a taxonomy of oppressive praise.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 sets out praise's role in practices of responsibility and argues that praise requires special justification. Section 2 sets out a taxonomy of oppressive praise, finding it to either over- or underrecognize an agent's deservingness of praise by aligning with oppressive norms. In section 3, I consider instances of disingenuous praising and consider whether issues of standing arise with relation to praise.

1. Praise's Role in Our Responsibility Practices

Philosophers offer varying accounts of two of the key social practices which hold agents socially, politically, and morally responsible: praise and blame. Both practices have an important role in signaling normative and moral standards—in praising someone, agents acknowledge that they have acted in a morally or normatively desirable way. Praise is a central reactive attitude associated with moral responsibility; it is a response to and recognition of an agent's responsibility for a morally and/or normatively desirable action. This article will demonstrate that praise is an important practice used to signal, reinforce, and develop moral responsibilities. Ordinarily, praise is not levied where an agent is merely fulfilling a normative or moral duty. Praise is usually levied for particularly desirable behavior which exceeds expectations. The inverse applies in the case of blame. A praiser or blamer will be expressing their commitment to the standards which underlie their assessment. David Shoemaker and Manuel Vargas (2021) have explored this signaling function in relation to blame. They argue that blaming signals a commitment to a social group and that group's constitutive norms. This commitment is said to explain in part why blame is levied even in costly contexts for the blamer (Shoemaker and Vargas 2021). I argue this extends to practices of praise.

One reason that praise has been comparatively undertheorized is that the promise of praise has eclipsed its potential pitfalls. Praise can signal a moral or normative standard and, given that it is often desired, can motivate agents to act in accordance with that standard. Moreover, praise is often considered less costly to levy than blame. While levying praise does cost something in emotional time and energy, it is in many instances less damaging than blame to agents' emotions and relationships. Like blame, praise can carry social risks of exclusion; praise for emerging "woke" norms may lose an agent favor with a more conservative crowd, for instance. However, an agent may feel there are fewer social risks associated with praising their housemate for dutifully taking out the bins compared with blaming her for the previous neglectful weeks of allowing rubbish to build up. Praising children, for morally right things, instils in them a sense of what is morally right and develops their virtues. This is an example of how praise signals and develops moral responsibilities. In this sense, praise has an important pedagogical role in cultivating the uptake of

moral responsibilities.¹ Similarly, we show our friends, loved ones, and colleagues that we recognize their virtues by praising them. This helps social cohesion and reinforces our commitments to uphold group values. Praise is an attractive and, in many instances, a morally appropriate practice. It would even stifle our sensibilities to completely withhold our praising practices, which are often generated unthinkingly.

Praise, then, does not only indicate a backward-looking assessment of responsibility. The practice can indicate and to some extent reveal the normative standards of the day reflexively (i.e., both to the agent undertaking the practice as well as to those subject to it and those observing it). In this sense, it is a both backward- and forward-looking notion which shapes our ability to recognize and respond to moral and normative reasons. Praise, like blame, can also work to “scaffold” responsibility by improving agents’ sensitivity to reasons and making them more likely to take up action. In the terms of Victoria McGeer and Philip Pettit (2015, 168–69) when describing blame, I argue praise too will be part of transitioning agents from a generic capacity to act to a specific capacity to act. That is, it will assist agents in identifying the relevant moral or normative standards and scaffold their likelihood of adopting those standards. The practice of praising, then, is a key site of enquiry when considering a social group’s moral or normative standards (from here on, “moral ecology”).

Praise, then, is key both in holding others responsible and in identifying the moral and normative standards which a member of a social group is to be held responsible for upholding. Praise is used to affirm the moral and normative standards of a social group, even in conditions where the standards are newly emerging and in the process of being identified. Since Peter Strawson’s (1974) “Freedom and Resentment,” philosophers offering accounts of moral responsibility have sought to delineate the normative conditions that need to be satisfied for someone to be held responsible in a justified way. Put otherwise, the focus is on when it is appropriate for agents to be subject to the reactive attitudes associated with praise or blame. For Strawsonians, responsibility is a matter not of metaphysics but of our social and normative functioning. It is a socially embedded practice. Our social practices (including of responsibility), given their nature, are not insulated from social and political dynamics.² Praise, then, may be levied in accordance with social and political standards that fail to track ideal moral or normatively desirable goals.

¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

² Ciorria (2020) and Holroyd (2021) identify this critique. I do not claim that non-practice-dependent theories of responsibility would enjoy insulation from social and political dynamics. I focus, however, on the practices as I seek to offer an account of how praise can be reformed to better achieve emancipatory goals.

Given the emphasis on the reactive attitudes of agents who themselves produce and reproduce the structural context in which they act, such practices are at risk of entrenching and reinforcing oppressive norms. Where agents hold each other responsible in accordance with moral or social norms, there is a risk that judgements will be in line with oppressive but widely held norms. Similarly, our social practices—including practices of responsibility—will be affected by background oppressive structures, and this could lead agents to (implicitly or explicitly) judge others by standards in line with oppressive expectations, assuming, for instance, that certain groups are more or less blameworthy or praiseworthy given their social position. This carries the risk of signaling and scaffolding oppressive norms, which in turn will reinforce and reproduce structures of oppression.

2. Oppressive Praise

Oppressive praise will track and enforce oppressive norms. I will argue that oppressive praise can be categorized into that which misrecognizes an agent as either (1) less deserving of praise (“underrecognition”) or (2) more deserving of praise (“overrecognition”) than would be consistent with nonoppressive norms. Drawing on Ciurria and Holroyd’s important initial work, I offer a series of cases to illustrate each type so as to specify a taxonomy.

I begin with cases of under recognition. In these cases, praise is linked to expectations aligned with oppressive norms. As a result, praise is applied or is absent in a way that suggests an agent has less ability than is the case. I offer two illustrative cases: (1) “ableist praise” and (2) “missing praise.”

Case 1: Ableist Praise

Stella Young (2014), in her TED Talk entitled “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much,” describes her younger self as being an average student with no notable extracurricular interests. One day, someone approached Young’s parents to tell them that Young was “an inspiration” and proposed she should be nominated for a “Community Achievement Award.” Young and her parents were confused, as they could not attach this praise to any particular achievement. Young has a physical disability. This fact bore little on her ability to go to school and participate in social life. Young deduced from this praise that this person had an expectation that, owing to her disability, Young was less educationally and/or socially capable than her able-bodied peers. Why, otherwise, would she be praised for achievement comparable to her peers? This praise under-ascribed Young with the relevant type of capacity for educational and social achievement.

Case 2: Missing Praise

Missing praise occurs where a double standard is in place or, rather, where an agent belonging to a privileged group is recognized for work that an agent from a disadvantaged group would not be equally recognized for. Recent empirical research in social science carried out by Doerer, Webster, and Walker (2017) found that double standards occur in hiring as a consequence of status differentiation based on gender and on race. In their study, participants ranked men and women as well as Black and White candidates on the basis of their competence and suitability for fictitious professional roles. They found “good evidence for activation of a double standards process in choices, competence, and suitability ratings” (Doerer, Webster, and Walker 2017, 38).

In this case, there is an underrecognition of the competence and suitability of women and Black candidates. Their qualifications and experience are seen as unpraiseworthy by comparison to similar attributes in socially privileged agents. Assuming that the professional attributes on which the supposed applicants were judged are of merit, there is missing praise and a double standard in place which reinforces the oppressive expectation that women and Black candidates are less competent and professionally suitable.

I now turn to cases where there is an overrecognition. In these cases, praise is given in scenarios which imply greater merit than is in fact deserved. This reflects an oppressive expectation whereby agents with the duty to act in line with emancipatory goals are not recognized as such and are seen instead as acting supererogatorily or in ways that otherwise exceed normative and moral expectations. I offer here two illustrative cases: (1) “respecting pronouns” and (2) “the millionaire donor.”

Case 3: Respecting Pronouns

Sam, a nonbinary person, asks colleagues to adopt “they”/“them” pronouns when referring to them. Some colleagues struggle with this task, having until now never knowingly encountered a nonbinary person and having a habit of using binary pronouns. However, the colleagues who adopt the pronouns are praised by Sam and others. This high praise continues over time. This is an overrecognition; the high praise appears to signal that adopters of the pronouns are exceeding morally and normatively relevant expectations. Nonbinary persons represent a marginalized societal group, and the harms of misgendering work to empower those who undermine their identity claim as well as, more broadly, to those who identify as male or female. Similarly, praise which erroneously signals that adoption of avowed pronouns is supererogatory is oppressive.

Case 4: The Millionaire Donor

Ciurria (2020, 180–81) takes on the case of a millionaire donor in her book *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Responsibility*, citing an essay by David V. Johnson (2019) that critiques how blame and praise function to reinforce systems of economic power and domination. In this essay, Johnson offers the recent example of the praise given to François-Henri Pinault. Pinault is a businessman who pledged 100 million euros to the reconstruction efforts of Notre-Dame Cathedral following the fire which damaged it in 2019. Johnson notes that this donation amounts to 0.3 percent of Pinault's overall wealth and would correlate to a donation of €840 from the average French household. Johnson goes on to argue that not only is Pinault receiving praise that would not be mirrored for a French household that made an €840 donation but also that this reflects an ideology of problematic meritocracy. Johnson attributes this praise to the notion that rich people deserve their wealth and cannot be blamed for spending it as they wish, which sits in contrast to the account of economic oppression he sets out. Johnson argues that the praise serves to undermine the notion that rich people have benefitted from societal forms of economic oppression and erodes the notion that there are redistributive or structurally transformative moral obligations on rich people, such as would be in line with emancipatory goals. If this line of reasoning is accepted, we can see here an overrecognition. Pinault is receiving praise for action that, if considered by the normative standards of emancipatory goals, does not exceed expectations. The oppressive expectation that rich people do not have obligations to society and deserve their wealth in spite of unequal or unjust economic arrangements is reinforced by this praise.

3. Disingenuous Praise

There is a further way in which praise can over- or underrecognize an agent, as yet unexplored in the literature. This will be where the praise is disingenuous. Disingenuous praise appears to be harmful in two scenarios, (1) where it fails to acknowledge the genuine merit of the praisee (misfiring praise) and (2) where it seeks to imply an unjustified merit in the praiser (undeservedly appropriative praise). Disingenuous praise is harmful to the individual agent on the receiving end. Let's consider these potential pitfalls of praise.

Misfiring praise will follow the same pattern of over- or underrecognizing an agent. For instance, praising a woman for her contribution to a work project, rather than recognizing her as having led the project, would underrecognize her efforts. Similarly, praising a man for having led a project to which he only contributed would overrecognize his efforts. Misfiring praise will be oppressive where it tracks oppressive norms and can also be disrespectful in other contexts for failing to appropriately attribute responsibility. While I term this praise disingenuous, it is not intentional disingenuity that makes the praise objectionable. Misfiring praise is oppressive

because it aligns with oppressive norms by over- or underrecognizing an agent's capacity for action in a relevant normative or moral regard. It will be disingenuous as praise if levied for an action that was not taken by the agent subjected to praise and this has been wrongly construed by the praiser (either intentionally or unintentionally).

As regards the second form of disingenuous praise—undeservedly appropriative praise—this relates to an issue of standing to praise. Some philosophers have advocated for the use of praise, and for the special justification of blame, on the basis that requirements of standing do not apply in the former where they do in the latter. For instance, one might argue that hypocritical praise, unlike hypocritical blame, does not cause problems of standing, citing that one agent praising another for something they themselves had achieved is unrestricted. For instance, one agent who has become vegan in an attempt to lessen their carbon footprint praising another agent who has taken the same actions raises no concern. Similarly, one may praise another agent for an achievement which both agents contributed to, unlike in cases of blame. One founder of a successful climate-change NGO may praise their cofounder for the work that they have done together. Similarly, on first blush, there seem to be no concerns about praising an agent for an action not taken by the praiser. A person who has not become vegan praising a vegan friend seems to raise no concerns. On the other hand, Nathan Stout has argued that there are concerns related to an agent's standing to praise. Stout (2020, 219) offers the example of his own hypothetical discomfort should he receive praise for his work from Donald Trump:

When given by an upstanding, decent member of my moral community it serves to elevate me in various ways, but when given by someone who regularly, and with malice, flouts the standards of that community it may serve, instead, to lower my status in the eyes of others, to create distrust among my fellows, or to damage my own view of myself or my work.

It appears that the harm identified here by Stout relates to the hypothetical identification of Stout's own values with the moral character of the praiser. This could be comparable, for instance, to a case whereby an imaginary agent has grown up estranged from her father. She rejects that her father would like to praise her for the woman she has become. The reasons for this relate to standing. As the father took no active role in her development, she may feel he does not deserve to praise her. In both of these cases a more detached form of praise may be compatible. If the father were to offer praise which acknowledged his own detachment from the achievements of his daughter, such as "You have become a wonderful woman *in spite of* me and my behavior," or similarly in Stout's case, if Trump were to tweet, "*In spite of* my own

worldview and commitments, the work of Stout is commendable,” it seems the issue of standing would fall away. What is odious in these cases is the attempt of the praiser to unjustly attach themselves to the person or standards which they are praising.

It may be that all praise is appropriative, given its signaling nature. This is an advantage of praise when praise is used to serve emancipatory goals. In the act of praising, agents are more likely to adopt the standards underlying their words when engaged in the practice. Praise demonstrates not only that there is a normative standard but moreover that the praiser believes it to be valuable. A problem arises only where the praiser has acted in such a way that they have invalidated their ability to levy such praise (as in the cases above). In these cases the praise will appear disingenuous, given the conflict between the praiser’s actions that have undermined the (met or exceeded) standard for which they are praising and the attempt of the praiser to align themselves with those standards. The issue is resolved where the praise is detached from the praiser to recognize the better character of the person praised. The praise is no longer made appropriative. This, then, is not a question of standing; it is a question of appropriation. To muddy the waters between the character of the praiser and the content of their praise is to elide this distinction. Attachment of the praiser to the praise, where this is unjustified, implies an overrecognition of the praiser as regards some relevant norm. This may or may not be oppressive, depending on whether that over-ascription tracks a background of oppressive norms.

Conclusion

I have argued that oppressive praise aligns with oppressive background conditions such that an agent is either over- or underrecognized. Oppressive praise is an erroneous attribution of moral or normative responsibility that contributes to the production and reproduction of oppressive and dominating structures. I have also shown that there are normative problems associated with disingenuous praise, where it misfires to over- or underrecognize an agent’s deservingness of praise in line with oppressive norms. I have identified that praise has an appropriative character and dismissed that this poses issues of standing so long as that praise is not unduly signaling a merit in the praiser. Praise, like blame, is central to practices of responsibility. This article has sought to impress the importance of theorizing when praise is and is not appropriate. This taxonomy sets out how oppressive praising practices can hold agents morally responsible in ways that over- or underrecognize agents in ways inconsistent with nonoppressive norms.

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