**On the Significance of Praise[[1]](#endnote-1)**

(Forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*)

**Abstract**

In recent years there has been an explosion of philosophical work on blame. Much of this work has focused on explicating the nature of blame or on examining the norms that govern it, and the primary motivation for theorizing about blame seems to derive from blame’s tight connection to responsibility. However, very little philosophical attention has been given to praise and its attendant practices. In this paper, I identify three possible explanations for this lack of attention. My goal is to show that each of these lines of thought is mistaken and to argue that praise is deserving of careful, independent analysis by philosophers interested in theorizing about responsibility.

*“Praise undeserved is satire in disguise”*

*– Alexander Pope*

**Introduction**

In recent years there has been an explosion of philosophical work on blame. Much of this work has focused on explicating the nature of blame or on examining the norms that govern it, and the primary motivation for theorizing about blame seems to derive from blame’s tight connection to responsibility. Moreover, it is common in the literature on moral responsibility to make reference to praise or praiseworthiness, and most theorists seem to agree that praise is connected – in some manner that is typically left unanalyzed – to responsibility as well. However, it is surprising, given the philosophical attention that blame has drawn, that no extended treatment of praise exists in the contemporary literature on moral responsibility. Indeed, in the only extant edited volume devoted to the philosophy of blame (Coates and Tognazzini 2013) praise does not receive so much as an index entry.[[2]](#endnote-2) The reasons for this lack of attention are not entirely clear, but I think that we can identify three strands of thought that might furnish an explanation. First, many seem to think that praise is simply blame’s opposite and, therefore, that an analysis of blame will suffice to tell us all we need to know about praise. Second, one important feature of blame is that it raises a number of normative problems, but it seems as though there are no corresponding problems with the “ethics of praise.” Finally, it seems also to be the case that philosophers just don’t think that praise stands to illuminate theoretical work on responsibility in the way that blame might. Indeed, in one introductory text Garrath Williams justifies the disproportionate focus on blame by asserting that blame simply “has a closer connection than praise to matters of intense philosophical interest, including freedom, responsibility and desert.” My goal in this paper is to show that each of these lines of thought is mistaken and to argue that more attention ought to be paid to praise by philosophers interested in theorizing about responsibility.

**§1. Asymmetries between Praise and Blame**

To begin, I will address a view that is implicit in much of the literature on blame, namely, that an analysis of praise is rendered unnecessary by a full analysis of blame given that praise is merely blame’s positive correlate. This view is, I think, false, and this can be shown by bringing out two very important asymmetries between them. These asymmetries suggest important differences in the natures of praise and blame, and, therefore, that praise is worthy of more extended analysis.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Consider, first, the types of actions that typically elicit blame. Often these will involve moral wrongdoing of some kind, but they need not. The friend who forgets to call you on your birthday and the spouse who shows no excitement in the face of his partner’s achievements are each blameworthy in some sense despite the fact that neither has committed any moral wrong. What seems to elicit blame in these cases, then, is a failure to meet some standard or expectation that one is appropriately held to. If this is the basis for blame, and praise is blame’s positive analog, then one would expect it to be the case that praise is fitting when one acts such as to live up to these same standards and expectations. I’ll focus here on the moral case, and will suppose, as I think many do, that a responsible agent:

1. is blameworthy when she intentionally does the wrong thing for morally bad reasons, and;
2. is praiseworthy when she intentionally does the right thing for the right reasons.

Speaking in generalities so as to avoid committing to any particular theory of blame or of responsibility, (1) seems rather uncontroversial. We may, of course, have good reasons not to blame a person who intentionally does the wrong thing for morally bad reasons (more on this below), but it seems unproblematic as a general conception of the type of action that warrants blame even if it admits of certain exceptions.

However, as a conception of the type of action which warrants praise, (2) does appear controversial, and this points to an asymmetry between praise and blame. Suppose that I promise to meet a friend for drinks, but when the time comes I, finding myself tired from a long day of work, regret making plans and consider cancelling. Nevertheless, I decide to keep my promise judging that this is the right thing to do, given that I made a promise and that I value our friendship. Here I’ve done the right thing for the right reason, but surely keeping a promise that I now find inconvenient does not make me worthy of moral praise.

We might, then, think that praise is only deserved in cases where the agent’s actions are supererogatory. So, one might say, blame is deserved when one fails to meet a standard, praise is deserved when one goes above and beyond that standard, and cases in which the standard is met are cases where neither praise nor blame are warranted. If this is right, then we still have a kind of symmetry between praise and blame. It is not difficult, however, to come up with cases that seem to show that this picture is also mistaken. Take Peter Singer’s (1972) classic example of the boy drowning in a pond. It is widely agreed that one is obligated to wade into the pond and save the boy even at modest material cost to oneself. However, it seems intuitively correct to say that one is also praiseworthy for having done so. It would be perfectly intelligible to us were the boy’s family to heap praise upon the person who wades into the pond to prevent the boy from drowning, but in doing so the person who saves the boy is merely doing the right thing for the right reasons. If praise is warranted here but is not warranted in the case of my keeping my promise to my friend, then there does seem to be a genuine asymmetry between praise and blame in the types of actions that warrant them.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The second crucial asymmetry between praise and blame lies in the role that the emotions play in our conceptions of them. Many theorists, taking their cue from P. F. Strawson (1962/2003), hold that genuine blame requires that the blamer experience one or more blaming emotions (e.g. anger, resentment, indignation, etc.).[[5]](#endnote-5) The central point here is that blame’s force comes, in part, from its emotional quality and that a conception of blame which does not give a necessary role to the blaming emotions misses something significant about the nature of blame. Dispassionate blame, on this account, is no blame at all.

I am sympathetic to this view, though I won’t defend it at any length here.[[6]](#endnote-6) I bring attention to it merely as a means of shedding light on another point at which our thoughts about praise and blame diverge. While there is something intuitively appealing about the claim that blame requires the experience of a blaming emotion, there is no such appeal in the case of praise. I do not wish to be read as arguing that praise is *typically* dispassionate, but it is clearly true that we often praise people without experiencing a prototypical praising emotion (admiration, say). This is often true in cases where we are praising an individual for an accomplishment that we find to be trivial or that we care nothing about. In such cases, we often congratulate the person or commend them on a job well done, but we do so without any experience of positive affect. For example, I once had a student announce in class during a “get to know you” exercise that her Instagram account had over 17,000 followers. In an expression of praise, I congratulated her on this accomplishment, but, try as I might, I couldn’t find even a trace of admiration in myself while doing so.

Even more significant is the fact that we also often praise others while feeling decidedly *negative* emotions toward them. Call this “begrudging praise.” To see this, consider the case of competitive rivalry. It is an altogether common experience to praise our rivals when we are bested in competition. Imagine, for example, two boxers who have a longstanding rivalry such that each considers the other an enemy. One fighter throws a devastating punch and knocks the other out. It is easy to imagine the defeated fighter getting up from the mat and telling the victor, through gritted teeth, that he’d done an exceptional job in delivering the knockout blow. He hates that he must praise his enemy, but he feels compelled to do so. Several things stand out about this case. First, it seems like a perfectly ordinary event in the context of competition. Second, it is likely that the defeated fighter is not feeling admiration for or pride in the winner but resentment, or even hate, instead. Finally, this admission that his enemy has performed exceptionally seems like genuine praise. In fact, it may well be the best kind of praise that one can receive. We often relish the praise of our rivals, and we do so, in part, because we know how difficult it is for them to praise us.

These cases suggest that, unlike blame, praise does not require that one feel the prototypical praising emotions. Moreover, even if one rejects the idea that emotions like anger or resentment are necessary components of blame, it is striking that the case of begrudging praise lacks a clear counterpart on the blaming side.[[7]](#endnote-7) This on its own suggests an important asymmetry between the two.

In this section, I have tried to show that there are important asymmetries between the nature of praise and blame. These asymmetries suggest that praise warrants a careful, independent analysis, but they do not yet provide full motivation for doing so. In order to show this, it must be the case that an analysis of praise can prove philosophically important beyond a mere interest in conceptual analysis. The following sections aim to demonstrate the importance of understanding praise by bringing to light some important normative issues that it raises and by showing that it has a theoretical significance for philosophical accounts of responsibility.

**§2. The Ethics of Praise**

In the previous section, my focus was on drawing out asymmetries between praise and blame. In the present section, I will aim to do the opposite. It is commonly thought that praise and blame are asymmetrical in the sense that blame raises several normative problems that praise does not. That is, many philosophers agree that there may be cases where an agent is deserving of blame but that, all things considered, it would be wrong to blame her. Very little attention has been given, however, to the ethics of praise. My goal here is to show that some of the same issues that are discussed regarding the ethics of blame are also present in the case of praise – that there may be instances where it is wrong, all things considered, to praise a person.

I’ll begin by mentioning a type of wrongful praise that is acknowledged in the literature, namely praise that is made wrong for rather mundane consequentialist reasons. J.J.C. Smart makes this point nicely, saying,

Praising a person is thus an important action in itself – it has significant effects. A utilitarian must therefore learn to control his acts of praise and dispraise, thus perhaps concealing his approval of an action when he thinks that the expression of such approval might have bad effects, and perhaps even praising actions of which he does not really approve. (1973, pp. 49-50)

Examples of this point are not hard to come by. It seems perfectly reasonable to think that we ought not to praise a person for some of his accomplishments if, for instance, we justifiably believe that in doing so we will cause him to become overconfident and to stop striving to improve or preparing for future challenges. Praise in such a case would be detrimental to the person’s well-being, and this would seem to provide us with a moral reason not to praise him. Thus, it seems clear that consequentialist considerations can provide moral reasons against praise in the same way that they also tell against blame. So far, so good.

There are, however, two additional normative considerations that, I think, apply to instances of praise – one that is overlooked in the literature and one that is explicitly denied. I’ll take these in order in what follows. First, many have thought that one important normative issue regarding expressions of blame regards hypocrisy on the part of the blamer. Angela Smith describes this issue as one of moral standing, saying,

[O]ur standing to actively blame another for a moral fault can depend in some cases upon the condition of our own moral character. Certainly when it comes to expressions of moral criticism, the fact that we share a moral fault with the agent can undermine our authority to explicitly reproach her for it. (2007, p. 479)

Coleen Macnamara makes this same point when she writes,

Your resentment toward someone who has in fact done wrong may nonetheless be morally untoward because of your hypocrisy, that is, because you are an unrepentant violator of the precise norms to which you are holding your target.” (2013, pp. 152-3)

Importantly, however, no one, to my knowledge, argues for a similar conclusion in the case of moral praise. This is perhaps not surprising if we take a structurally identical case. While we may think that it’s clearly true that Bob, a serial cheater, has no grounds to blame Sally for cheating,[[8]](#endnote-8) it is clearly false that Alice, a regular charitable giver, has no grounds to praise Joe for giving to charity. I grant, then, that there is no problem of hypocritical praise so understood.

However, I maintain that Smith’s general point regarding the significance of the blamer’s moral character *does* raise an issue in the case of praise, albeit somewhat differently. Smith makes her point regarding hypocritical blame by focusing on the blamer’s lack of authority. The problem, on her view, is that hypocrisy undermines one’s authority to blame. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll grant Smith this point. Setting aside the issue of authority, however, we might also think that hypocrisy undermines blame’s *significance* in an important sense as well.[[9]](#endnote-9) The reason for this is that blame matters more to us when it comes from someone whom we respect, or someone with high moral character. When Bob blames Sally, this doesn’t *matter* to Sally in the way that it would were it to come from someone else. Bob’s blame expresses his disapproval of Sally’s cheating, but who cares what Bob thinks about that anyway?

While the problem of undermined authority has no correlate in the case of praise, the problem of altered meaning or significance surely does, and this suggests that the moral character of the praiser plays a normative role in deciding whether to express one’s praise. Expressions of praise from those we deem to be of low moral character have a much different import than praise from those who are morally upstanding. Take, for example, the following hypothetical praise of my work in ethics: “This guy’s work is simply the best. Everyone agrees. He’s got some of the best words.” I would be quite flattered, indeed, to see these words printed in the review section of a philosophy journal. I would be utterly horrified, however, to see them appear in Donald Trump’s twitter feed. Stipulating, for the sake of argument (and ego), that my work is deserving of praise, it matters to me from whom this praise is given. 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. This suggests that although the traditional problem of standing may not arise in the case of praise, something akin to it does.

Finally, many have argued explicitly that blame and praise differ insofar as blame raises problems of fairness that praise does not. The problem of unfairness with respect to blame arises from worries about avoidability. If blame involves subjecting one to harsh treatment or sanctions of some kind, then it would seem unfair to blame someone who could not have acted so as to avoid such treatment. However, so the argument goes, no charge of unfairness applies in the case of praise. To this end, Gary Watson writes,

[I]f the requirement of avoidability derives from the idea that we should not be made to suffer from sanctions which we have no reasonable opportunity to avoid, then the requirement will have no relevance to the conditions of appropriate praise. The special objection to responding adversely to those who could not do otherwise simply does not apply to the case of favorable treatment. (1996/2004, p. 284)

Dana Nelkin (2011) agrees with Watson on this point. She formalizes the fairness argument as follows:

1. X is responsible and praiseworthy for an action @ only if it would be fair to reward X for @.
2. It would be unfair to reward X for the performance of an action @ if X lacked the ability to do otherwise.

Therefore,

1. X is responsible and praiseworthy for the performance of an action @ only if X had the ability to do otherwise. (p. 32)

Like Watson, she thinks that (2) is false, claiming that it is strange to “speak of the unfairness of lacking an opportunity to avoid acting well and so missing out on a benefit.” (p. 33)

I think Nelkin is correct to say that, put in terms of avoidability, there is something counterintuitive about the idea that praise would be considered unfair unless the praiseworthy person had the opportunity to avoid doing the praiseworthy thing in question. However, I take it that the worry about avoidability in cases of both blame and praise is primarily a worry about desert. In the case of blame, the reason that we care whether a person could have done otherwise is because we think that *undeserved* blame is unfair. So, the crucial question is whether undeserved praise is also unfair. The reason that Watson and Nelkin think that undeserved praise doesn’t raise worries about fairness, it seems, is that praise, unlike blame, does not involve harm or any type of negative consequences for the person receiving it. This, however, strikes me as false.

Receiving praise that one does not deserve *can* often occasion ill feeling. Adam Smith (1759/2011) helpfully draws attention to the negative reactions that the unwarranted responses of others elicit in us, saying, “It gives us the spleen … to see another too happy or too much elevated, as we call it, with any little piece of good fortune.” (p. 8) The idea here is that we find it off-putting to see others responding inappropriately in these ways. Inappropriate or unwarranted sentimental responses in others generate negative sentiments in us. This is, of course, not to say that it harms us to see others so respond, and that is what must be the case if the charge of unfairness is to apply to the case of praise. However, Smith thinks that harm *can* result from undeserved praise. He writes,

The man who applauds us either for actions which we did not perform, or for motives which had no sort of influence upon our conduct, applauds not us, but another person. We can derive no sort of satisfaction from his praises. *To us they should be more mortifying than any censure*, and should perpetually call to our minds, the most humbling of all reflections, the reflection of what we ought to be, but what we are not. (1759/2011, p. 97, emphasis added)

If Smith is correct, and I think that he is, then we have a *prima facie* case for thinking that undue praise can be a form of harsh treatment, and if this is true, then there are grounds for a charge of unfairness just as in the case of blame.

Consider, for example, the classic Quentin Tarantino film, “Reservoir Dogs.” In the film, Tim Roth’s character, Mr. Orange – an undercover police officer – develops a compelling relationship with a criminal who goes by the name of Mr. White (played by Harvey Keitel) after Mr. Orange is shot during a diamond heist that has gone bad. The two men arrive at a safe house where Mr. White sits with Mr. Orange holding his head and caressing his hair as Orange lays dying. Despite the fact that Mr. White is one of the very men that Mr. Orange set out to capture, Orange develops a strong bond with White who spends most of the film trying to comfort and encourage the dying man. In the film’s climactic scene Joe, another member of the criminal group, suspects that Mr. Orange may be a police officer, and aims his pistol at Orange. At this point, Mr. White intercedes, saying, “Joe, trust me on this, you've made a mistake. He's a good kid. I understand you're hot … We're all real emotional. But you're barking up the wrong tree. I know this man, and he wouldn't do that.” The ensuing standoff ends with Joe dead and Mr. White and Mr. Orange mortally wounded. As the police burst in to arrest White (and save Orange) Mr. Orange comes clean, confessing to Mr. White that he was, in fact, a police officer. The film ends with a tearful White killing the officer and, in turn, being killed by the police.

Viewers aren’t privy to what is going on inside Mr. Orange’s head when he decides to reveal his real identity to Mr. White, but it seems rather clear that guilt is the primary motivating factor. Moreover, Orange’s guilt seems not to arise solely because Mr. White had treated him with kindness and compassion during their time together. Rather, it is White’s praise of him as a “good kid” and as the kind of man who would never do what he’s being accused of, coupled with White’s sacrifice on his behalf, that seems to precipitate his confession. He sees himself as undeserving of White’s praise, and the guilt is so painful that it leads him to admit to White who he really is even though he knows that the admission will result in his death.

Many other, less dramatic examples could be offered in favor of this point as well. For instance, we might imagine an academic who attains notoriety by publishing plagiarized work. Eventually, the praise that he receives will come to be experienced as painful for precisely the reason that Smith suggests. Each new instance of praise will serve only to remind him that he is being praised for someone else’s accomplishments. Each complement and expression of admiration he receives will serve as further evidence that he is but a caricature of success. As the epigraph of this paper suggests, undue praise is a form of ridicule, and, as Smith notes, this ridicule can be far more painful than the harms caused by deserved blame.

The preceding constitutes a strong case for attending more closely to the ethics of praise.[[10]](#endnote-10) Praise is subject to the same consequentialist considerations regarding its permissibility as is blame, it admits of problems relating to *who* can permissibly engage in it, and, most importantly, it involves serious problems of fairness for those who unduly receive it. Therefore, the fact that blame raises crucial normative problems does not set it apart from praise or suffice to give it a preferred place in philosophical work on agency and responsibility.

**§3. Praise’s Exempting Conditions**

In this final section, I turn to the claim that blame warrants more philosophical attention than praise due to the fact that blame is more closely tied, as Williams put it, to “matters of intense philosophical interest.” Many have thought that a theory of blame is important because by examining cases in which we think it appropriate to withhold blame we can identify important conditions for responsibility. My goal here will be to illuminate praise’s potential to help shed light on the boundaries of morally responsible agency in much the same way.

In “Freedom and Resentment,” Strawson suggests that we examine the conditions that might lead us to modify or mollify our responses to the actions of others, and he divides these into two classes. The first class consists of those conditions that may lead us to see the particular action as one for which the agent is not responsible while the second class consists of those conditions – which commentators have come to refer to as “exempting conditions” – that invite us to see the agent as one that is not responsible. Here Strawson writes,

The second … subgroup of cases allows that the circumstances were normal, but presents the agent as psychologically abnormal – or as morally undeveloped. The agent was himself; but he is warped or deranged, neurotic or just a child. When we see someone in such a light as this, all our reactive attitudes tend to be profoundly modified. (1962/2003, p. 79)

Interpreting Strawson has become a cottage industry within the philosophical literature on moral responsibility, and I don’t wish to engage in any deep interpretive work here. I’ll simply rely on the general and uncontroversial idea that Strawson is bringing attention to – namely, that the practices surrounding holding others responsible are dependent in a crucial way on the capacities of those whom we hold responsible. This Strawsonian insight has spawned quite a lot of work relating to “marginal agents,” or agents who generate ambivalence regarding their status as responsible. The goal of that work, generally speaking, has been to examine just what it is that causes us to withhold our typical blaming responses toward these agents in the hopes of uncovering some essential feature of responsible agency.[[11]](#endnote-11)

It is striking, I think, that none of this work on exempting conditions has been aimed at understanding the conditions that exempt one from praise. To fill this gap, I will make a first pass at identifying those conditions here. It seems clear to me that exempting conditions for praise are also tied to capacity in a significant way. To see why, consider the case of children. Strawson thinks that children are exempt from blame (at least on many occasions) because they have not yet developed into full moral agents. However, while their lack of moral development restricts the cases in which they may be blamed, it serves to *expand* the range of cases in which they are appropriately praised. When a young child decides, unprompted, to share her toys with another child we typically think the child deserving of praise. We laud her for her kindness or generosity. However, a simple act of sharing from an adult doesn’t occasion praise at all, and the reason is that we expect adults to recognize that they ought to behave in this way. So, in this case, the lack of moral capacity (whatever the relevant capacity may be) makes praise appropriate for the child, but the fully developed moral capacity exempts the adult from praise.

We can see this same phenomenon at work in other cases as well. Consider the case of autism. Persons with autism have well-documented difficulties in navigating social situations – understanding what others want or expect of them, for example – nevertheless, they are able, with some considerable effort, to overcome these difficulties and to make sound moral judgments and engage with others in morally significant ways.[[12]](#endnote-12) Given that engaging with others on moral terms requires prevailing over whatever deficit, difference, or incapacity they experience, it is likely that some of their actions will be praiseworthy where identical actions from neurotypical individuals will not. Once again, possession of the full capacity exempts the neurotypical individual from praise, but its absence, or impairment, is precisely what makes the person with autism an apt target of praise.[[13]](#endnote-13)

One possible explanation as to why diminished capacity leads us to praise others in cases where we ordinarily would not may be that praise is tied to what we may reasonably expect of them. Erin Kelly makes this point with respect to blame, saying,

The point of excuses is to address obstacles to moral motivation, both cognitive and emotive, and to do this based on a normative standard. The normative standard is a moral one, but the norms that regulate it are different from the norms that guide our appraisal of actions as right or wrong. In evaluating an agent’s blameworthiness, we assess how reasonable it is to expect an agent to act morally in the face of obstacles. (2013, p. 256)

Kelly offers this as an account of excuses and how they influence blame, but the above considerations suggest that there may be something more general to this point. The reason that we praise children for simple acts of kindness, say, is that we do not expect them to recognize the moral reasons for acting as they do or, if one prefers, to have sufficiently developed moral character to behave in such a way. Put in Kelly’s terms, the presence of some obstacle not only lessens our inclination to blame but also increases our inclination to praise.

Recognizing this has a definite theoretical payoff. If examining our responsibility practices toward marginal agents really can help us to see the contours of responsible agency, then we would do well to approach these contours from both directions. Moreover, the above suggests that a careful study of praise may pay dividends for those interested in the nature of free will as well. After all, the philosophical attention to marginal agents is not motivated solely by an interest in blame or in responsibility, as such, but also by an interest in the nature of freedom, and if I am correct that praise comes with its own set of excusing and exempting conditions, then it stands to shed light on that debate in much the same way as blame.

Some work has already been done on this front. Andrew Eshleman (2014), for example, has argued that our praising attitudes serve to enhance freedom insofar as they are responsive to a different class of reasons than are blaming attitudes. Additionally, Susan Wolf (1990) and Dana Nelkin (2011) have defended asymmetrical conceptions of freedom in which praiseworthy action plays a distinct theoretical role. Conditions under which agents are exempt from praise or, as the case may be, praiseworthy for a wider range of actions will be directly relevant to a theory of freedom.

Our intuitions about the appropriateness of moral praise can tell us something important about the nature of morally responsible agency more generally by showing us those features of agents that cause us to withhold our positive responsibility responses and by helping us to see what makes those on the margins worthy of praise where others are not. It is an impoverished theory of responsibility that ignores our practices of praise.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been largely exploratory and, as a result, it will likely be dissatisfying for many readers. I have tried throughout to stay neutral where possible between theoretical accounts of blame, praise, agency, and responsibility. Instead, my goal has been to motivate further work on the nature of praise in general and moral praise in particular and to force praise out from under blame’s theoretical shadow. Praise is not merely the positive analog to blame. Praise raises serious normative issues that ethicists must carefully explore. Most importantly, it has deep connections to moral responsibility and desert. All of these features of praise have been unrecognized or underappreciated in the responsibility literature, and that literature is, to my mind, worse off for it.

Nathan Stout

Tulane University

School of Medicine

**Notes**

**References**

Bell, Macalaster. 2013. “The Standing to Blame: A Critique.” In Blame: Its Nature and Norms, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 263-281

Coates, D. Justin and Neal A. Tognazzini, Eds. 2013. *Blame:* Its Nature and Norms. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Eshleman, Andrew. 2014. “Worthy of Praise: Responsibility and Better-than-Minimally-Decent Agency.” In Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Vol. 2, eds. David Shoemaker and Neal Tognazzini. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 216-242.

Kelly, Erin. 2013. “What Is an Excuse?” In Blame: Its Nature and Norms, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 244-262.

Macnamara, Coleen. 2013. “Taking Demands Out of Blame.” In Blame: Its Nature and Norms, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 141-161.

Nelkin, Dana. 2011. Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility*.* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Scanlon, T. M. 2008. Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, and Blame. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press).

Schroeder, Timothy. 2015. “Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Moral Agency. In Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Vol. 3,ed. David Shoemaker. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 85-103.

Sher, George. 2006. In Praise of Blame. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Shoemaker, David. 2015. Responsibility from the Margins. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Singer, Peter. 1972. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” Philosophy and Public Affairs. Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 229-243.

Smart, J.J.C. and Bernard Williams. 1973. Utilitarianism for and Against. (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Smith, Adam. 1759. The Theory of Moral Sentiments. (Repr., San Bernardino CA: Empire Books, 2011).

Smith, Angela. 2007. “On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible.” Journal of Ethics, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 465-484.

------ 2013. “Moral Blame and Moral Protest.” In Blame: Its Nature and Norms, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 27-48.

Stout, Nathan. 2016a. “Conversation, Responsibility, and Autism Spectrum Disorder.” Philosophical Psychology. Vol. 29, No. 7, pp. 1015-1028.

------ 2016b. “Reasons-Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility: the Case of Autism.” Journal of Ethics. Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 401-418.

------ 2017 “Autism, Meta-Cognition, and the Deep Self.” Journal of the American Philosophical Association*.* Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 446-464.

------ Forthcoming. “Emotional Awareness and Responsible Agency.” Review of Philosophy and Psychology*.*

Strawson, P. F. 1962. “Freedom and Resentment.” In Free Will, 2nd Ed., ed. Gary Watson. (Repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 72-93.

Wallace, R. Jay. 1994. Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)

------ 2011. “Dispassionate Opprobrium.” In Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 348-372.

Watson, Gary. 1987. “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil.” In Agency and Answerability. (Repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 219-259.

------ 1996. “Two Faces of Responsibility.” In Agency and Answerability. (Repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 260-288.

------ 2004. Agency and Answerability*.* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Williams, Garrath. 2018. “Praise and Blame.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 17. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/praise/>

Wolf, Susan. 1987. “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility.” In Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology, ed. Ferdinand David Schoeman. (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 46-62.

------ 1990. Freedom within Reason. (New York: Oxford University Press).

------ 2011. “Blame, Italian Style.” In Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 332-347.

1. I’m very grateful to the participants at the 2018 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper as well as to an anonymous referee for *American Philosophical Quarterly*. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Nicholas Sars and Jennifer Stout for their helpful conversations [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To their credit, they acknowledge and provide reasons for the exclusive focus on blame. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A third asymmetry that I won’t address here regards what we might refer to as the “publicity criterion.” The idea here is that praise and blame differ in the fact that it might be possible to blame another person privately while never expressing that blame to anyone while praise seems to be necessarily communicative. Coates and Tognazzini (2013, pp. 4-5) make this point, and so does George Sher (2006, pp. 71-72). For examples of theories of blame that admit of private instances of blaming, see Scanlon 2008, Smith 2013, and Wallace 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Eshleman (2014) makes a similar point, though he puts the distinction in terms of the types of reasons to which our praising attitudes respond. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Wallace 1994; Wallace 2011; and Wolf 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Scanlon 2008 and Smith 2013 as examples of theories which reject this notion. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One might, nevertheless, think that certain instances of blame in which the blamer is reluctant to blame the wrongdoer, or has resigned herself to blaming, might be similar the case of what I’ve called begrudging praise. However, I don’t think that these sorts of cases are completely analogous. In the case of begrudging praise, we have the experience of a negative attitude occurring simultaneously with praise. In some cases – as in the case of jealousy – the negative attitude itself may function as praise. After all, one may sometimes feel flattered or elevated by being the object of another’s jealousy. It would be very strange, however, to have a case of blame in which positive emotions occurred along with, or constituted, moral censure. I’m grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Bell 2013 for reasons to the contrary. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Scanlon 2008 talks at length about the significance of blame. I want to set his discussion of significance aside here. I’m not using the term in any technical sense. I mean only to refer to how important blame and praise are for us in a given case – how much (or the way in which) they matter to us. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Other instances of praise raise important normative problems as well. Many backhanded compliments, for example, often take the form of praise (e.g. “This casserole is surprisingly good.”). Moreover, some instances of praise serve to subtly express biases or discriminatory attitudes toward the one praised, as, for example, when a white person compliments an African American for being “articulate” or “well-spoken.” Cases such as these further demonstrate the need for a careful examination of the ethics of praise. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This methodology has generated an enormous literature on responsibility and psychopathy, but it has also resulted in work on responsibility and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Schroeder 2015), unfortunate childhood circumstances (Watson 1987/2004; Wolf 1987), depression (Shoemaker 2015), and autism (Stout 2016a, 2016b, 2017, forthcoming), to name a few. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I discuss the case of autism at length in my previous work. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I don’t wish to be read as equating persons with autism with children here. To do so would be condescending in an obvious way. My point is only that the difficulties faced by autistic persons serves, in some circumstances, to alter reasonable expectations as the following paragraph makes clear. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)