2021

Oppressive Praise

Jules Holroyd
University of Sheffield
j.d.holroyd@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

Philosophers have had a lot to say about blame, much less about praise. In this paper, I follow some recent authors in arguing that this is a mistake. However, unlike these recent authors, the reasons I identify for scrutinising praise are to do with the ways in which praise is, systematically, unjustly apportioned. Specifically, drawing on testimony and findings from social psychology, I argue that praise is often apportioned in ways that reflect and entrench existing structures of oppression. Articulating what is going wrong here helps us to see what to do about it.

Keywords: praise, blame, moral responsibility, esteem, stereotypes, distribution, shifting standards, amelioration

Philosophers have had a lot to say about blame, much less about praise. In this paper, I follow some recent authors in arguing that this is a mistake. However, unlike these recent authors, the reasons I identify for scrutinising praise are to do with the ways in which praise is, systematically, unjustly apportioned. Specifically, drawing on testimony and findings from social psychology, I argue that praise is often apportioned in ways that reflect and entrench existing structures of oppression. Articulating what is going wrong here helps us to see what to do about it.

In section 1, I identify a gap in the contemporary philosophical literature. In section 2, I identify a different kind of gap, to do with how praise is apportioned in the real world. In section 3, I try, using the resources provided by accounts of moral responsibility, to diagnose the problem with these gaps in our practice. I advance a diagnosis that focuses on unjustly distributed praise, informed by stereotyped expectations. In section 4, I consider various ways of responding to the problem, so diagnosed. In concluding, I point to further ramifications not only for our practice, but also for our theorising about moral responsibility.

1. The Praise Gap (in Philosophy)

It has typically been assumed that blame warrants greater attention than praise. For example, in Wallace's influential *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments,* the focus is primarily on responsibility, blameworthiness, and blame. This focus is justified, Wallace (1994, 61) writes, because "praise does not seem to have the central, defining role that blame and moral sanction occupy in our practice of assigning moral responsibility." Moreover, because blame has punitive elements, and is condemnatory, it requires special justification. As Wallace puts it, "Given the punitive and potentially harmful aspect of these responses [i.e., blame and moral sanction] the suspicion arises that there is something intrinsically cruel about the practice of holding people responsible that makes it morally suspect" (1994, 61). Blame seems to warrant greater philosophical scrutiny.

Perhaps adding to the fact that praise isn't deemed worthy of much attention is that early characterisations of the "positive reactive attitudes" include "approval" (Strawson 1974, 4), "gratitude . . . love" (5), and it is indeed difficult to see what might be problematic about these attitudes towards others. And whilst we might ask about the aptness conditions for some of these attitudes—gratitude certainly can be misplaced—emotions or attitudes such as love or admiration don't seem to be responses to specific doings but rather to persons and their admirable traits or lovable qualities. So praise, in response to specific things done, seems to get little attention. Indeed, in drawing attention to an asymmetry between the conditions for praise and blame, Nelkin (2011) has suggested that it seems strange to worry about whether an individual might be harmed by a benefit, such as the communication of praise. If people can't be harmed by praise, our practices of communicating it warrant less scrutiny.[1]

That much of the work on moral responsibility has focused on blame is attested to by the fact that there is an extensive Stanford Encyclopedia entry for "Blame" (Tognazzini and Coates 2018) but no corresponding entry for "Praise." What we end up with, as Eshleman (2013, 216) observes, is a literature "largely ignoring responsibility for actions that warrant praise and emulation." Yet, philosophers have started to suggest that something is awry. Eshleman (2013) and Stout (2020) have suggested that there might be much to learn about the contours of moral responsibility from scrutinising praise and praiseworthiness. Both challenge the assumption that praise and blame are symmetrical, such that an analysis of praiseworthiness can simply be read off an analysis of blameworthiness. There might even be questions, Stout suggests, about whether praise might sometimes harm.

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[1] This has been recently challenged by Stout (2020) (see section 3.a below).

I want to further motivate attention to praise and judgements of praiseworthiness. I do so by bringing to the table a problem with our practices of praising (and assigning praiseworthiness). Whilst this problem pertains to the assignment of individual praiseworthiness, my concern is essentially with our social practices. As Vargas points out, our judgements of praiseworthiness are guided by standards of correctness. Moreover, "when praised, we become subject to a distinct web of practices and attitudes that reflect an altogether different way of being regarded by others" (Vargas 2013, 5).[2] It is this web of practices and attitudes, and the standards that structure how our moral responsibility system plays out, with which I am concerned here.[3]

2. The Praise Gap (in the World)

Before exploring another kind of praise gap, I want to draw attention to a few features of our social practices of praising and appraisal. The first thing to notice about our practices of attributing praise is that attitudinal judgements of praiseworthiness, as well as communicative acts expressing praise, are directed towards both practices which are moralised and those which are less explicitly moral. For example, we praise people for acting morally well—showing great generosity in helping others, say, or great courage in the face of adversity. But we also frequently praise people for doing well in other dimensions—for example, displaying perseverance in applying oneself to a difficult maths problem. However, even in instances in which there are no obviously moral norms in play, the kinds of traits being praised are typically ones that we take to exemplify some kind of virtue, quality of character, or excellence. This makes it appropriate to think of appraisals in these domains as continuous with moral praise. Second, whilst for the purposes of this paper we don't need an account of a particular conception of praise, I take it to include judgements of moral merit, as well as expressions that communicate this.[4] In particular, we might helpfully think of it along the lines of Darwall's notion of

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[2] Though Vargas, like others, gives very little attention to praise throughout his book, focusing primarily on blame and blameworthiness.

[3] Of course the idea of "our" responsibility system is an oversimplification. Even focusing on the social practices operative in particular locations (generally, Western Anglophone society, and specifically, the US and the UK in the twenty-first century), there will be significant variations in the social practices found. Nonetheless, there will be patterns found within the dominant practice, and it is with these I am concerned.

[4] I include judgements, as well as expressions, because I do not want to preclude the possibility of private praise. However it is mainly in relation to the expressions of praise that my concerns arise.

"appraisal respect," which he characterises as "an attitude of positive appraisal of that person either as a person or as engaged in some particular pursuit" (Darwall 1977, 38). Such an attitude "is like esteem or a high regard for someone" (39)—admiration for their courage or esteem for their perseverance, say. This aspect of our praise practices aims to track praiseworthiness. But there is another important aspect of our practice, which is to cultivate praiseworthiness—our communications of praise with children most explicitly have this end, but it is not exclusive to children—we support and encourage each other's moral agency and development much of the time (at least, when we praise successfully). Thirdly, praise is not exclusively—and perhaps not even primarily—a second-personal practice. Whilst it has significance in second-personal communications, third-personal appraisals are, as we shall see, also important in social life. These third-personal communications can be important both for communicating and finding out about moral exemplars in a domain, but they also can have more formal roles in, for example, generating ordinal rankings that determine the distribution of valuable goods. With these preliminary remarks in mind, I now want to highlight a further key feature of our practices: namely, that there appears to be a very different kind of "praise gap" in our practices of apportioning praise.

2.a. Khader and Lindauer, "The Daddy Dividend"

First, some anecdata. Khader and Lindauer draw attention to the annoying discrepancies in the way that accolade is distributed between them for their respective roles in parenting:

> We coined the term "daddy dividend" on one of the many days a stranger on the subway told Matt (a white man) that he was the "best daddy ever." The thing he had done to receive this accolade was to wear his baby in a carrier, and perhaps not seem utterly miserable doing so. By contrast, Serene (a brown woman) has never been told by a stranger that she's the best mom ever, or even a decent one. (Khader and Lindauer 2020, 6)

Man does parenting: praise ensues! Woman does parenting: no big deal. Joseph Stramondo describes similar experiences, this time tainted also with ableism, whilst out with his toddler, who is riding with him in his wheelchair:

> I can immediately tell they want to say something to us. "Hey man, look at you! Is that your little girl? You're a great dad! You're father of the year!" One of them tries to give me a high five as we roll past, but my hands are occupied; one is on my chair's joystick and the other

clutches Hazel loosely to help her balance. . . . I am celebrated as a disabled father and Leah is disparaged as a disabled mother. (Stramondo 2020, 8–9)

2.b. "Helpful" Men[5]

These bits of anecdata will be eye-rollingly familiar to some of us. And the gender dynamics they illustrate extend to other contexts, as confirmed by studies in social psychology. Consider the series of studies from Heilman and Chen (2005) indicating that men and women are asymmetrically apportioned praise for altruistic behaviour in workplace settings. Heilman and Chen (2005, 432) were working with two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Engaging in altruistic citizenship behavior will enhance men's performance evaluations and reward recommendations but will not affect those of women.

Hypothesis 2. Withholding altruistic citizenship behavior will be detrimental to women's performance evaluations and reward recommendations but will not affect those of men.

That is, when women are helpful, that's no big deal; but when they're not, they are harshly judged for that perceived failure. Conversely, when men don't show altruistic behaviour, that's no problem. When they do, they are praised highly. And these hypotheses were confirmed across a series of studies, which I'll now describe. In these studies, all participants are asked to evaluate a worker—that is, Cathy or Kevin—and rate them. They were told this is part of a "360 evaluation process," so their appraisal would involve seeing, and would be based upon, feedback that other colleagues have also provided. The participants see details of Cathy's or Kevin's role and job title, and how long they have been in the job (purchasing, level three administrator). They then see feedback from a colleague about that person. The colleague has rated them on five-point scales for various parameters, and, crucially, in an open text box, has had the opportunity to provide any observations about the employee. In that box a colleague has ostensibly written information about the employee's typical work behaviour. In the experimental conditions, the colleague had described a scenario in which help was needed, and information on how the employee had responded. In study 1 (roughly):

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[5] Heilman and Chen 2005.

> Oh no! The photocopier had broken, the colleague needed to finish compiling reports for the next day, but almost everyone had gone to the office party! Disaster! Urgent help is needed with sorting and stapling!

Or in study 2 (roughly):

> Oh no! Lost computer files! The colleague has a presentation tomorrow and needs help inputting financial data from this week and checking it over before the presentation tomorrow morning, but almost everyone has gone to the office party!

In both studies, the colleague describes how they asked for help from either Kevin (in one condition) or Cathy (in another), who were described as either helping or not helping. The experimenters are looking for how participants respond to one of four conditions: where Kevin helps, where Kevin does not help, where Cathy helps, where Cathy does not help. Participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire rating the (helpful or unhelpful) employee (Cathy or Kevin) to evaluate their job performance and make recommendations for organisational rewards. (In a control group, no information about helping behaviour was provided, so participants could only evaluate on the basis of the other aspects of evaluation). What did Heilman and Chen find about their participants' evaluative tendencies?

> As predicted by our hypotheses, the tests revealed a difference in how women and men were evaluated when they did and did not perform the helping behavior that was requested. Specifically, when they did not help, the man's job performance was rated no differently, but the woman's performance was rated significantly lower than when no information about helping was provided. In contrast, when they did perform the helping behavior, the man's performance ratings were significantly higher, and the woman's performance ratings were no different than when no information about helping was provided. . . . Thus, women neither were given as much credit for their altruism nor treated as tolerantly for their lack of it as were men who behaved identically (2005, 434–35).

Men who helped were also more strongly recommended for organisational rewards (salary raises, bonuses, promotions), whereas helpful women were not recommended any more highly than in the condition in which no information about their helping behaviours was provided. The key dynamic I want to draw attention

here is the following: Women help, showing altruism: no big deal. Men are helpful, showing altruism: praise be![6]

2.c. Superficial Socialist Feminists and White Allies

In *Mediocre*, Ijeoma Oluo describes the role of writer-activists Floyd Dell and Max Eastman in the socialist feminist movements in the USA of the 1910s. Introduced to the movement by women socialist feminists (Crystal Eastman and Ida Rauh), Dell and Eastman were, apparently, keen to recruit other men to the cause and "demonstrate to other men why they should be socialist feminists as well" (Oluo 2020, 54). However, their commitment to the cause, Oluo writes, was questionable. Whilst they did speak up for women's suffrage, birth control, and civil rights for people of colour, they also seemed to really like the idea of women's sexual liberation and the opportunities for sexual liaisons this might afford them. Their participation in the movement, it seems, coincided with their treating their wives badly (including lying, cheating, and ultimately in Eastman's case, abandoning his wife and child). And, it seems their commitment didn't run deep: later, Dell renounced feminist values, and Eastman became a McCarthyite anticommunist.

Oluo draws attention to this to highlight the double standards in play: whilst women in such movements must be beyond reproach, "mediocre, highly forgettable white men regularly enter feminist spaces and expect to be centred and rewarded, and they have been. They get to be highly flawed, they get to regularly betray the values of their movement yet they will be praised for their intentions or even simply for their presence" (2020, 62). In clear illustration of this, Oluo writes that in addition to being shitty partners, they were also shitty feminist leaders: "Max Eastman was a founder of the New York Men's League for Women Suffrage, which sounds pretty cool, right? However, one of the first things Eastman did was make a promise to the men who signed up that 'no member would be called upon to do anything. The main function of the league would be to exist.' In the battle for women's suffrage, in which women literally fought and died, men become heroes by simply existing" (Oluo 2020, 56; quoting from Neuman 2017; quoting from Eastman 1912, 17).

Pertinent to our point here is the pattern of praise to which Oluo draws attention: men involved in the socialist feminist movement merely had to show up to be accoladed and praised for their activism. The women involved did much more, for much less (if any) praise.

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[6] Also telling is that women were judged more harshly than men for not helping. But my focus here is on the asymmetrical positive appraisals for the altruistic helping behaviour. The organisational reward recommendations are also salient; I return to this in section 3.c.

Fast-forward a century, and Ernest Owens draws attention to similar dynamics of misplaced praise within the antiracist movements of 2020. Writing in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, Owens (2020, n.p.) suggests that "the sudden resurgence of 'white ally' culture needs to be examined," and he asks rhetorically, "Why should there be a badge of honor or distinction of merit bestowed on white people who are choosing to address a human error within themselves that's been terrorizing others?" Owens worries about "a culture of pointlessly glorifying white people who appear to give a damn." Instead, he writes, one should focus on dismantling systems of oppression "without praise, visibility, or being asked to." Owens' rhetorical question points to the problematic patterns that are our focus here: white "'allies" do little more than show up (or simply declare allyship) and are praised for doing so, whilst people of colour sustainedly engaged in antiracism movements, at greater risk to themselves, receive little recognition or praise for so doing.

3. What's the Problem?

I have introduced the above examples by way of illustrating the general point I want to make: our practices of praise are not insulated from social and political dynamics. Men are praised when women—especially women of colour—are not; white people are praised when people of colour are not. These dynamics will be familiar to those who have experienced the oppressive dimensions of them. But a failure within philosophy to ethically scrutinise praise, and our practices of communicating it, means that these dynamics have not received attention nor shaped how we might think about the ethics of praise. But what, exactly, is going wrong in the cases I have described? In this section, I start to diagnose the problem, before going on to evaluate proposals for addressing it.

3.a. Undeserved Praise?

We might suppose that we can easily diagnose the problem here, as one in which certain instances of praise are *undeserved*. Lindauer and Stramondo didn't *deserve* the praise ("father of the year") for doing their share of parenting. The (fictional) Kevin employees didn't *deserve* the praise they received for helping their (fictional) colleagues.[7] Eastman and Dell didn't *deserve* praise for their role in socialist feminism. White "allies" don't *deserve* praise for showing up (four hundred years too late, as Owens puts it). That might be part of what is going on here. But what is wrong with getting praise that is not deserved?

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[7] Of course, no such individual in fact exists—the fictional Kevins, then, are those undeserving of praise. Note that as such, they can't really be harmed by it.

Some authors have suggested that it is strange to think that there is any worry about people receiving undeserved praise. In discussing avoidability conditions for moral responsibility, for example, Nelkin (2011) has suggested that it is odd to think that one should be able to avoid praise, which is essentially a benefit (whereas avoiding blameworthy action, and so blame, seems more important).

Stout (2020) takes up this point but disagrees, since he suggests that undeserved praise might in fact be harmful (and therefore important to have been able to avoid). Stout argues that undeserved praise might be harmful because it may seem to us mortifying or be experienced as a form of ridicule. But that isn't what is going on across the cases presented here; the unpleasant feelings Stout identifies are dependent on the recipient of the praise being aware of its undeservedness. Whilst this may be true in some of the cases (Lindauer and Stramondo), it is presumably not the case for all of the examples I described. Indeed, in at least some of the cases (superficial allies), the concern seems to be that praise is expected. As such, the inaptly praised parties are not, on the face of it, harmed in these particular ways by the undeserved praise they receive.

It might be true that sometimes getting too much (more than is deserved) of something that is usually a good can be problematic. But I think we need more apparatus—than simply the claim that it is undeserved—to explain what those problems are.[8] The primary source of the worry here isn't with the wrongful recipients of too much praise.

Moreover, in isolation from other explanatory facts, it is hard to get particularly vexed about some individuals getting benefits to which they are not, strictly speaking, entitled. It is implausible to suppose that we are under a strict duty to praise only in accordance with moral worth. Finally, one might think that, to a degree, some praise is deserved here—there is *something* praiseworthy about men

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[8] An instructive analogue is to consider the claim, from Fricker (2007,18), that attributions of excess credibility—another instance of some getting more of a good than is warranted—are unlikely to be disadvantageous, so not unjust. Davis (2016) has argued—convincingly, I think—that this claim is problematic. Rather, excess credibility judgements can be harmful—e.g., by disrespecting and producing epistemic damage—when they trade in stereotypes. But note that Davis's claim is that *some* kinds of excess credibility judgements are harmful (in particular, when attributed to members of marginalised groups based on stereotypes). Some instances of attributing excess credibility may not be similarly problematic. The analogous point is that whilst excess, undeserved, praise need not itself be problematic, it sometimes may be—when the undeserved praise also has other features, as outlined in section 3.e, below. These other features, rather than that it is undeserved, do important explanatory work in articulating the problem.

who go against societal incentives and norms to participate in parenting and something praiseworthy about men or white people who speak up against systems of gender or racial oppression (systems which uphold them in privileged positions). So, that praise is undeserved is, in isolation, an inadequate diagnosis of what is going wrong here.

3.b. Useless Praise?

Crude consequentialists would have a different take on when and whether praise is problematic. On this view, we should deliver praise when it is useful—in promoting more good behaviour, say (see Sidgwick 1981, 428). In this instance, then, the issue would be that praise is being doled out when it is not useful to do so. I think there is some mileage in this idea: How helpful is it to be praising someone for doing what is basically expected of them as a parent? How helpful is it to be praising men for being minimally decent, helpful colleagues? How useful is it to praise supposed allies for their superficial engagement with socialist feminism or with movements for racial justice? In each instance, I think it is right to have doubts about praise being likely to produce stable dispositions to act in admirable ways. But there is something dissatisfactory about this diagnosis of what is problematic here.

For a start, this line of argument is hostage to empirical fortune. It is vulnerable to the response that praise really is, in fact, helpful in these cases. Against a backdrop of norms and social structures that do not support men participating in parenting, say, lavishing them with praise for doing so may encourage them and perhaps even work counter to those norms. This may be a context where praise has a key role in supporting and encouraging those whose moral agency is in development. If it turns out that way, then there'd be no worry here.[9]

Second, if one shares the thought that praise isn't helpful in these contexts, one might think that there is more to be said about why it isn't. What is the underpinning explanation for why praise isn't going to promote stable dispositions to act well here? And does that have something to do with what is ultimately problematic about these dynamics?

Finally, there is something important in the comparative aspects of the scenarios I described: one parent getting praise when the other does not; (fictional) Kevin being praised when (fictional) Cathy is not. Nothing in the crude consequentialist picture of when praise is justified addresses this.

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[9] There's some empirical evidence that praise, construed or communicated in a certain way at least, is unlikely to promote stable motives to act well. See, e.g., Deci and Ryan (2000) and Conway and Peetz (2012). See also the concerns I raise about using praise to shape behaviour in 4.b below.

3.c. Ill-Distributed Praise

A more adequate diagnosis of what seems problematic here looks beyond the individual who is the target of praise and takes up the comparative dimension to the examples here. What is problematic is that *this* (undeserving) person was praised when *that* (deserving) person was not. It is the *distribution* of praise, then, (perhaps given facts about desert as they stand across people) that explains what is problematic about the cases I have described.

The idea that praise can be ill-distributed is a compelling one—by analogy, it is easy to agree that someone who consistently praises one of their children but not the other for like behaviours would be guilty of a problematic favouritism, and we would think the unpraised child has been unjustly done by. If this disparity tracks social identity, as in our examples, it goes beyond favouritism and becomes discriminatory. The idea that there is something problematic about this is bolstered if we consider the kind of goods that may be being ill-distributed. Recall Darwall's (1977, 38) characterization of "appraisal respect": "an attitude of positive appraisal of that person either as a person or as engaged in some particular pursuit." Since such an attitude "is like esteem or a high regard for someone" (39), we can see why it might be important to apportion such goods—esteem, high regard—appropriately and proportionately, without favouritism or bias. This is especially so if the discrepancies in praise track whether one is a member of a privileged or disadvantaged group, since much has been written on the forms of psychological oppression—including low self-esteem—that oppressed people may suffer (Bartky 1990; Benson 1994; Shelby 2002, 2005). Problematic patterns of praise may well compound these harms to self-esteem, then. They may also reflect, and shore up social hierarchies of esteem and standing, in the ways Elizabeth Anderson has argued are antithetical to egalitarian social relations. Hierarchies of esteem, Anderson (2017, 3–4) writes, involve the extraction of "tokens of deferential honour . . . in recognition of the other's superiority"; hierarchies of standing are those in which "the interests of those of higher rank *count* in the eyes of others, whereas the interests of inferiors do not: others are free to neglect them." Patterns of praise that track social position entrench both kinds of hierarchy.

The worry about the distribution of praise gains support from recent work analysing the problematic distribution of blame. Ciurria (2019, 2020) has recently argued that our current practices of attributing responsibility, and blame in particular, serve to absolve perpetrators of certain wrongs—in particular, wrongs that perpetuate oppression. For example, men who rape or abuse women are "disappeared" from public discourse about sexual violence against women, making it difficult to identify and blame them for their role in oppression. Instead, blame falls on women for perpetuating their own oppression—for example, by engaging in

"risky" behaviour, like having a drink or being outside.[10] Men fail to get the blame they deserve, and women are instead blamed too much. Is the picture with praise symmetrical, such that (e.g.) men get too much praise, and women too little?

Certainly in the examples I have provided, this is the distribution that is at issue. But further empirical research on praise suggests a more complex picture. One might think that a problem with the diagnosis that praise is being ill-distributed is that a bunch of studies suggest that, in some contexts, women receive *more* praise than men, and people of colour receive *more* glowing appraisals than white people (Biernat and Manis 1994; Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1997; Biernat and Vescio 2002; Biernat et al. 2009; Kobrynowicz and Biernat 1997). For example, in one study, looking at evaluations of men versus women in sports, participants afforded women *more* praise than men for commensurate performances (Biernat and Vescio 2002). In another study, the same performance was more positively appraised (as "better") when achieved by a black student than the same score achieved by a white student (Biernat et al. 2009). These findings are hard to square with the idea that an additional dimension of oppression that people suffer is that praise is asymmetrically distributed, such that women and people of colour end up with a praise deficit. So what is going on here?

A closer look suggests a possible response to this worry and fills out our analysis of what is going wrong in our examples. There are two steps to understanding what seems to be going on here. First, one way in which these findings are explained is in terms of the "shifting standards" model, whereby social group membership (whichever group membership is salient in a context) affects the expectations, or standards, to which one is held. The second step, crucially, is that practices of praise are keyed to these social expectations. So, for example, in a sporting context, with gender as the relevant social grouping, women are held to lower expectations than men (who are expected, according to the stereotype, to be more powerful, faster, etc.) (Biernat and Vescio 2002; see also Vial and Cimpian 2020, 121–22). Where expectations are low, they can be greatly exceeded, and so considerable praise is given to women who surpass those low expectations. Commensurate praise is not afforded, for the same level of performance, to those (men) held to higher expectations. But, in fact, as the studies indicate, we know that

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[10] Ciurria makes reference to certain public health materials (also discussed by Solnit [2016]) in which such narratives are found. The materials in question, specifically, set out the risks of drinking to women, which include injuries/violence, STDs, and unintended pregnancy. These risk factors are presented alongside health risks such as "heart disease, cancer", with no mention of the behaviour of other parties (male abusers or sexual partners) that might be implicated in the instantiation of these risks.

the praise doesn't reflect the fact that participants thought the women were *really* better or (actually, unqualifiedly) meritorious: when it came to making selections for the team and determining things for which performance actually mattered (batting order), the women were not picked or prioritised. So the "excess" praise here, one might respond, can't really be thought of as "levelling up" with the praise inequities in the examples I set out. Whilst superficially, more praise is communicated, it isn't accompanied by any of the attendant goods. It does not express genuine evaluation of unqualified merit and high regard, or it doesn't convey actual esteem.

Or consider the finding that black students were appraised as "better" than the white students who received the same standardised test score (Biernat et al. 2009). This appraisal is indexed to the stereotype-informed low expectations of black students, compared to white students, leading to the "wow" factor when those expectations are exceeded. Again, the study showed that participants didn't *really* think the black students were better. When asked to predict future test scores, they estimated higher scores for the white rather than black students. So again, we might think this doesn't really address any racialised praise inequities of the sort identified earlier, since this isn't conveying actual esteem or serving as a genuine evaluation of merit. So the worry about whether the goods attendant on praise are ill-distributed still stands.

Does this response give us reason to doubt that the praise identified in our earlier examples (section 2) is "really" praise? If shaped by, for example, low expectations of men who parent, or help, or superficially commit to justice movements, then is the praise being talked of there also failing to convey an evaluation of real merit or of actual esteem? One reason not to be swayed by this thought is that, in at least some of those cases, real reward also follows the praise. In the studies by Heilman and Chen, men's helpful behaviour was recognised and resulted in organisational reward recommendations (salary increase, promotion, bonus pay). Other studies show that when men parent, they are not only praised for it, as in our examples above, but reap institutional rewards that women do not. In a well-known study, Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) evaluated the impact of being identified as a parent on application materials. They found that equally good application materials were evaluated as demonstrating less competence and commitment, warranting a lower starting salary, and judged as less promotable and less suitable for senior management, when the applications contained information that revealed that the applicant was a mother. Conversely, fathers were not similarly penalised but rather judged to be more committed, deserving of a higher starting salary, more promotable, and more suitable for senior management.[11] Both

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[11] For a more recent study confirming these findings, see González, Cortina, and Rodríguez (2019).

entitlement to material benefits and various cultural markers of esteem, then, seem to line up with the unequal praise in a way that suggests that these instances of praise, for those in socially privileged positions, really do track judgements of merit and esteem (rather than simply surprise at lower expectations being exceeded). Moreover, that these judgements of esteem translate to—that is, justify and prop up the unequal distribution of—material rewards is a further reason for serious concern about these patterns of appraisal.

So there does seem to be a problematic distribution of praise—and in particular the judgements of merit and expressions of esteem—across people, tracking people's status in oppressive hierarchies. Worse, studies suggest that these distributions of appraisal support material inequities. Still, one might think that the framework these studies provide helps us in pointing to a deeper understanding of what the problem is.

3.d. Shifting Standards and Expectations

The "shifting standards" model mentioned above draws our attention to the fact that, in practice, appraisals appear to track expectations, which in turn are informed by stereotypes (Vial and Cimpian, 2020). Part of that seems to involve excessive praise when unreasonably low expectations are surpassed. But the other part of that concerns unreasonably high expectations. In the context of appraising parents, women are stereotypically expected to do more caring and nurturing work than men (who are expected to be less present, less involved in the physical and emotional care of their families) (Kobrynowicz and Biernat 1997). Where men and women were commensurately appraised as "good parents," however, this reflected vastly different expectations—women who were appraised as good parents were expected to do way more care work than men to earn that accolade. The overall picture, then, is that stereotypes shape expectations, and praise is accorded in line with those expectations. In summarising the relationship between stereotype informed expectations and appraisals, Vial and Cimpian (2020, 123) note that stereotypes can shape not only the intensity (how much praise) but also the type of feedback (praise or criticism). Thus, a man might be praised for something more (with greater intensity) than a woman or might receive praise for something a woman would be criticised for (see Khader and Lindauer 2020; Stramondo 2020).

This suggests a deeper diagnosis of the problem as one whereby praise is shaped by stereotypes, which inform expectations.[12] The problem, then, is not that

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[12] Vial and Cimpian distinguish between descriptive stereotypes (generalisations about how group members are) and prescriptive stereotypes (which also contain normative requirements about how individuals should be). They note that when prescriptive stereotypes apply, failure to conform to stereotype also affects the

there is some undeserved or useless praise. On this analysis the problem is that there are stereotyped (low or high) expectations, which inform whether or not someone is praised for exceeding those expectations. Practices of praise, then, are also tracking and shoring up problematic social role expectations. This is an important aspect of the analysis, as it reveals the mechanisms by which praise can be implicated in entrenching oppressive norms.

3.e. The Hybrid View: Shifting Standards *and* Asymmetric Judgements of Merit and Esteem

Whilst I find this framework of shifting standards helpful and illuminating, my overall analysis (drawing on the argument of section 3.c) departs from Vial and Cimpian's: I have argued that in some of these instances (namely, those in which members of oppressed groups are held to low expectations), there is reason to suppose that what is expressed does not communicate any unqualified judgement of merit or expression of high regard or esteem. My view is that there are shifting standards and stereotyped expectations, but that this analysis needs to be supplemented by the analysis of the goods that praise communicates as asymmetrically distributed.

Thus on the hybrid view, there are various different problems with the patterns of praise I have identified. First, as we have just seen, there are cases in which supposed praise isn't tracking merit or esteem but rather something like surprise at having (stereotype-informed, low) expectations surpassed (the sportswomen, the black students). These instances of purported praise are problematic in masking the fact that these appraisals are not genuine, unqualified judgements of merit or expressions of esteem. Second, there are cases in which stereotypes inform (high) expectations, such that meeting them becomes unnoteworthy for members of the stereotyped social group (women who are parents, women's helping behaviour in workplaces, people of colour's labour for racial justice). Thus, actually praiseworthy behaviour is not visible. In institutional settings, moreover, it goes (asymmetrically) unrewarded, entrenching social hierarchies. Further, unequal expectations are entrenched, which serves to perpetuate oppressive norms. Third, those in positions of privilege—already commanding respect and esteem—are sometimes held (perhaps not unreasonably) to low expectations also (in particular with respect to their roles in dismantling oppressive structures). Moreover, they are—and expect to be—excessively praised for meeting or exceeding these low expectations (white allies, the daddy dividend,

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global evaluation of the person (e.g., how likable they are). They also note that praise or criticism for conforming (or not) to a stereotype is more marked in the case of prescriptive stereotypes (see Vial and Cimpian 2020, 123).

Eastman and Dell).[13] Yet in this case, the praise does seem to correlate with patterns of reward and judgements of esteem, in ways which indicate that those in socially privileged positions enjoy a monopoly of genuine (if unwarranted) esteem.

The problem, then, is not that there is some praise which is undeserved or not useful, nor simply that there are stereotype informed expectations. Nor is it simply that there is some problematic distribution of praise. It is the conjunction of the role of stereotyped expectations, and the asymmetric attributions of appraisal respect and esteem, favouring those in positions of privilege, that is problematic in the cases described.

4. What's the Solution?

If this is the problem, then what should we do about it? That will depend on one's conception of what our practices of praise (and blame) are for. My focus in this section is on the issue of how to address "the praise gap" in the world, and on the theoretical tools available to us in thinking about this. There remain further, here unaddressed, questions about the broader theoretical implications for accounts of moral responsibility practices.

4.a. Tracking Moral Worth

We have already encountered the (commonsense) idea that our practices of apportioning praise and blame are supposed to track moral worth. On this view, we should rectify our practices so that praise—genuine esteem and judgement of moral merit—is accorded where it is deserved. That would mean sometimes—in the sorts of cases I described—praising women more and people of colour more, such that the expressions of esteem and high regard people receive is more commensurate with the merits demonstrated. It would also mean ensuring that the praise is underpinned by judgements of merit unmoderated by stereotyped expectation, and that it communicates genuine esteem. But how much more praise is due? The problem with such a remedial strategy is that it is pretty difficult to get a grip on exactly how much praise is deserved. Second, this strategy is especially challenging

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[13] Note the complex intersection of the gendered dimensions of the "daddy dividend" with ableism that Stramondo highlights, though. As a disabled parent, he writes, he was aware that expectations were so low, his competence to parent would be challenged: "There is this presumption that the disabled parent is inherently an inadequate parent. . . . The stakes are incredibly high. How long would it take for me to lose father of the year status, for example, if one of my kids were to be even minorly injured while under my care in public? . . . We believed that it was not a question of if child services would be called on us, but when" (Stramondo 2020, 9).

insofar as our practices—including our judgements of moral worth—are shaped by socially oppressive hierarchies, insofar as we expect, and communicate that we expect, different virtues from men and women, white people and people of colour, able bodied and disabled people. If differential standards of moral worth are applied to different social groups, then attempts to track moral worth are likely to end up tracking distorted conceptions of moral worth.[14]

Moreover, as we saw, there are some occasions—in particular those concerned with moral development—when it may be important to praise whether or not it is deserved—to encourage or support, say. So aiming for only deserved praise seems both insufficient and undesirable.

4.b. Shaping Behaviour

On the crude consequentialist view, we saw that praise was justified if it produced good outcomes—increased moral behaviour, say. I raised doubts about whether the problematic patterns of praising are well suited to that goal. So, on this view, we should revise our practices so that praise really is useful in producing more or better moral behaviours. This seems a pretty fraught endeavour to me. One might think, as noted, that praise is helpful in getting people to do more of something (that's at least the assumption at work in praising children). But on the other hand, there's some evidence that praise can—under some conditions— undermine later motivation to act well: this seems to be especially likely when praise is supposed to function like a reward, to condition motives for good behaviour; or if it fosters compensatory beliefs, such that people feel they've shown themselves to be morally "good enough" (Deci and Ryan 2000; Conway and Peetz 2012). This view also faces well-known worries about manipulation, and treating moral agents like beings to be conditioned rather than subjects of moral address (see Vargas 2013). Moreover, using praise—or overpraising—to encourage certain dispositions risks being experienced as patronising or condescending, especially if the praisee is attuned to the low expectations underpinning the high praise. Consider the troubled responses to the high praise in the testimonies of Lindauer and Khader and of Stramondo, above. Understanding that one is being told, for example, "You're doing great—for a father" or "That was an amazing performance—

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[14] There is some literature on the way oppression can shape moral agency and in particular the virtues, but as far as I know this has not connected up to the shaping of moral agency with practices of appraisal specifically. Tessman's *Burdened Virtues* (2005) for example, examines the way that oppressive social contexts can hinder the development of virtues or can require those in oppressed positions to develop distinctive virtues to combat oppression which come at a cost to the self. See also Dillon (2012).

for a woman" makes explicit the stereotypes involved and thereby how disrespectful those underpinning stereotypes are. Further, part of what seems disrespectful about using praise for this purpose is that it also suggests that the recipients of praise lack the maturity to engage with constructive criticism. Feedback needn't be praise to be helpful. What is more likely to be helpful, and less morally fraught, than trying to manipulate with praise, one might think, is a frank discussion of, for example, expectations about parenting roles and why they are so warped; or expectations for white people about engaging in antiracism and the dynamics of their doing so.[15]

4.c. Eliminating Praise

One might think that we would do better to just get rid of these aspects of the responsibility system. Eliminativists have tended to focus on the potentially problematic aspects of blame, such as the "strike back" emotions that it may involve (see Waller 2011, 2014). If praise has problematic aspects, as I have argued, then might our practices of praise too be targeted by the eliminativist: we should simply give up on our practices of praise. One worry is that this is something of a "baby out with the bath water" strategy. We give up on *all* praise because *some* aspects of it are problematic. Moreover, social life without praise seems a pretty bleak prospect. Would it require withholding all of those utterances of "well done," "good job," "nice effort"? Would it require withholding from judgements that, say, that person is admirable, this person courageous, this person kind? Not only would that be extremely psychologically challenging (see Ciurria 2019; Vargas 2013), it also looks rather undesirable. One would hope that these kinds of judgements and communications can be preserved, but in a way that better reflects genuine moral qualities, rather than tainted by oppressive stereotypes.

4.d. Ameliorating Praise

Some have suggested that we can avoid eliminativism and address concerns about our responsibility system by revising or ameliorating it. As Vargas (2013, 75) argues, "When there is some reason to revise, rather than eliminate, elimination looks like a hasty and unmotivated option." The sorts of revisions that have recently been proposed lead us to functionalist accounts of our practices of holding responsible, whereby they can be justified if they serve a particular function.[16] For Vargas, that function is improving the moral sensibilities of those engaged in the practice (see also McGeer, 2019). For our practices of praising to be justified, on this view, we would have to find a way of praising that really did improve the moral

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[15] One might think that forward-looking considerations do have some role in our practices of responsibility. I consider this in 4.d below.

[16] I am overall sympathetic to these approaches; see Holroyd (2018).

agency of those praised—a practice that stabilised dispositions to share parenting equally, for altruism irrespective of gender, for genuine commitment to and solidarity with emancipatory social movements, say. But this will of course require not only changes to our practices of praise but also to social and institutional structures so that they, for example, facilitate participation in parenting of both parents, enable cross-racial understanding and solidarity, and more equitably reward altruism (creating, in Vargas's [2017] later terms, the "moral ecology" to support better agency).

An alternative functionalist account has recently been proposed, which focuses on the relationship of the responsibility system to emancipatory social goals. Our practices of blaming can be justified, Ciurria (2019, 15; 2020) argues, if they serve the emancipatory aims of an intersectional feminism. On Ciurria's view, apt blame tracks people's contributions to oppressive systems (it is not agency tracking, importantly). This functionalist view might seem particularly promising in application to praise, given the considerations I have raised here: apt praise tracks (inter alia) contributions to ending oppression.[17] But, in addition to applying Ciurria's functionalist view to praise specifically, there is reason to elaborate on it, by noting the reflexivity of that norm for praiseworthiness: it applies to itself, and our practices of praise should themselves avoid entrenching oppression and instead serve emancipatory goals. What I am proposing is that our practices of praise should be structured by plural reasons, including backward-looking desert-based reasons, and forward-looking reasons concerned with improving moral agency. But crucially, a further set of reasons should be considered in determining whether praise should be apportioned: reasons to do with challenging and dismantling oppression. This

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[17] I think there are some concerns with Ciurria's (2019, 18) proposal of moving away from some of the "agency tracking" aspects of our practices of moral responsibility, especially with respect to blame. But these concerns are less applicable to praise, since our practices of praise are often geared towards cultivating, rather than tracking, moral agency. On the other hand, however, it is important that, in levelling up praise, appraisals are not done purely for pragmatic reasons but in actual recognition of merit (these might be merits instantiated in cultivating moral agency, or in showing excellences of it). A related anecdotal insight: after delivering this paper, audience members have reported finding subsequent instances of praising weird, finding that they have to take pains to emphasise that it is genuine and not just for the sake of "levelling up" esteem. This relates to the concerns with using praise to shape behaviour articulated in 4.b.

means that we should (a) praise contributions to ending oppression[18] and (b) reform our practices of praise so that they themselves serve emancipatory goals. What would this proposal look like, specifically?

Looking back at our examples, in the case of the "daddy dividend," the problem was diagnosed as there being unjustifiable inequities in praise and esteem, and that these are grounded in asymmetrical expectations about men's and women's roles in parenting. An ameliorated system of praising, focused on ending oppression, would readjust these expectations, such that men are not judged and praised in relation to the stereotype-informed low standard (much less rewarded for their performance in relation to it). Instead, expectations would be modified to be consistent with emancipatory goals: holding men to higher, and perhaps women to lower, expectations. And, as suggested above, social institutions and structures beyond practices of responsibility would also need reshaping to support this. Moreover, the genuine merits of women who parent would be recognised and esteemed rather than ignored, devalued or, worse, penalised.

In our current, nonideal world, what might the first steps towards ameliorating praise be? To avoid entrenching problematic stereotypes and perpetuating inequities of esteem, we could either level up, level down, or redistribute praise. One might think that praise is not a finite resource—in principle, we could just generate more praise to go around. Perhaps that is sometimes possible, and when it is, that may be desirable. In that instance, levelling up might seem like a good option, since (as noted in sections 3.a and 3.b) there are some desert-based and forward-looking considerations that may speak in favour of praising men who, in current circumstances, work against gender norms to participate more fully in parenting. The problem is that women who parent are not in receipt of commensurate praise (either with their performance or with the praise men receive), and this should be rectified by elevating our appraisals of women's contributions to parenting and merits thereby demonstrated. However, in practice, given constraints on time, energy, and attention, praise may turn out to be a finite resource. If so, levelling up is not a realistic option. If practices of praise are responsive to reasons of moral worth, encouraging moral sensitivity, and challenging oppression, then careful consideration is needed about what would best serve the balance of these reasons.[19] Given the devaluation of women's care, and other available means for encouraging men to participate in parenting, my view is

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[18] This is *one* of the goals of our responsibility system; I am sympathetic to the idea that our practices of moral appraisal may have plural goals, of which emancipation is just one.

[19] See considerations raised in sections 3.a and 3.b.

that redistributing praise seems to me the best option here: women, rather than men, should be praised.[20]

In the dynamics revealed in Heilman and Chen's studies, the problem was diagnosed as there being unjustifiable inequities in praise and esteem grounded in the stereotype-informed asymmetrical expectations of men and women with respect to service—how women are routinely expected to be more helpful to others than men. An ameliorated system of praising would work with modified expectations about helpfulness, and judgements of merit and esteem would track whether those egalitarian—rather than stereotype-informed—expectations are met. Thus, when women display altruism, this would be recognised and rewarded appropriately.

In our current nonideal world, working towards ameliorated praise here seems to require redistributing praise. In the sorts of contexts Heilman and Chen's studies speak to—workplace evaluations—the role of praise is to inform ordinal rankings and the distribution of organisational reward. Levelling up is clearly not possible here (not everyone can be employee of the month, or get the bonus or promotion). This seems like the sort of case, then, in which corrective measures are needed—acknowledgement of the discriminatory patterns of appraisal, and explicit determinations to rectify these to avoid entrenching problematic norms, unjust distributions of positions of esteem, and attendant material goods. And, in some instances, ensuring that women get proper esteem and standing will mean that men get less.

In the case of superficial allies (the strategic socialist feminists and the recently arrived white allies), the problem was diagnosed as there being unjustifiable inequities in praise and esteem grounded in the asymmetrical expectations of men and women, and of white people and people of colour, regarding their involvement in—and how much they are expected to sacrifice for—movements for social justice. An ameliorated system of praise would modify expectations of would-be allies, holding them to higher standards. Moreover, the contributions and work of those who sacrifice much in these movements—for example, Crystal Eastman and Ida Rauh, in the case of the socialist feminists; Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, cofounders of the BLM US movement; Joshua Virasami of BLM UK;[21] and Tyrek Morris, cofounder of the youth-led All Black

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[20] This would need to be done carefully though, to avoid valorisations of women's care that reinforce stereotypes of women as "nurturers" or "natural mothers."

[21] As reported, though, many of the cofounders and leaders of BLM UK remain anonymous for fear of far right and police harassment. See Cole (2020) and McIntosh (2020).

Lives UK—would be rendered more visible, recognised, and appropriate esteem and admiration afforded to them.

In our nonideal current context, working towards ameliorated praise seems to require both explicit acknowledgement and resolve to address discriminatory patterns of appraisal, as well as—perhaps for strategic reasons, in some contexts—withholding praise from feminist men or white people allied to the movements.[22] Given the role that discriminatory appraisals can play in entrenching problematic distributions of recognition and esteem, allies would surely recognise that their praiseworthiness—to the degree that they are—does not take priority over remedying the problems of ill-distributed esteem or high regard and the material rewards that often track these.

Ameliorated practices of praise would work to make visible the problematic stereotypes underpinning existing practices of praising; to readjust expectations towards more equitable goals, and to distribute praise—judgements of merit and expressions of esteem—accordingly. I have suggested that working towards an ameliorated practice of praise, in our current nonideal context, requires case-by-case consideration of how best to address unequal expectations and inequitable distributions of praise.

5. Conclusion

I hope to have shed light on an aspect of the literature on moral responsibility that has received little attention—the ethics of praise. Whilst there has been much attention to blame, including more recently to its oppressive aspects, my aim was to show that an ethics of praise is much needed, and in particular, that any approach to evaluating our practices of praising needs to recognise the ways that oppressive dynamics shape this part of our responsibility system.

This work points to broader, challenging theoretical questions about philosophical approaches to moral responsibility. If our practices are systematically unjust and shaped by oppressive social hierarchies, then there is work to be done in considering carefully the implications of this for approaches to moral responsibility that take our social practices as a key part of their methodological and justificatory framework (e.g., Strawson 1974; Wallace 1994; McGeer 2019).

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[22] The sorts of contexts I have in mind as exceptions may be ones where, e.g., feminist men or antiracist white people support each other's participation in the movement and consolidate motivations to participate, but where any praise communicated is carefully pitched to ensure it does not entrench problematic dynamics (of "saviourism", e.g.).

However, my focus here has been principally on the reasons that might structure our practices of praise, and how those practices might be ameliorated to address "the praise gap". As long as our expectations are shaped by gender oppression, racism, ableism, and other vectors of oppression, our practices of praise are vulnerable to distortion. They may entrench problematic norms, misinform structures of recognition and reward, and shape moral agency in oppressive ways. In response, we might instead tailor our practices of praise to serve emancipatory goals, praising strivings towards those goals, and using praise itself in a manner consistent with them.

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JULES HOLROYD is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield, UK. Jules has worked on topics in moral psychology, social philosophy, and feminist philosophy, and has published on moral emotions, relational autonomy, implicit bias, and epistemic injustices, in venues such as Cognition and Consciousness, Philosophical Topics, and The Journal of the American Philosophical Association. Jules is co-director of the Centre for Engaged Philosophy (https://engagedphilosophy.org/).