1000-Word PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

Praise and Blame

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We praise people for morally good things: giving to charity, being generous, having compassion for the needy. We blame for morally bad things: cheating on one's spouse, being selfish, harboring ill will towards others.[1]

What are praise and blame, though? When are they appropriate?

This essay reviews influential answers to these questions.

1. What Are Praise and Blame?

Praise and blame are responses to individuals and groups based on their behavior, character, or attitudes.[2]

Praise and blame come in many forms: e.g., we can praise with a glowing speech, by expressing admiration, or a pat on the back; we can blame with a stinging rebuke, a cold shoulder, or private feelings of anger.[3]

What do these types of responses have in common such that each counts as praise or blame?

On the *Cognitive View,* to praise or blame someone is simply to *believe* that *their behavior, character, or attitude reflects well or poorly on them in a particular way.*[4] These beliefs can be thought privately or expressed openly.

One concern for this view is that it seems possible to believe (or express) this about someone's action (character, attitude) without *actually* praising or blaming them: someone might believe (or express) that someone's action reflects well or poorly upon them while being entirely indifferent to that fact.[5] If so, praise and blame require something more than this type of belief.

The *Emotion View* aims to add the missing element: praise and blame involve an emotional response (e.g., gratitude or admiration, anger or resentment).[6] When we blame someone for an inconsiderate joke, we don't merely *believe* something about their behavior (e.g., that it reflects poorly on them); we *react* to it with feelings (and perhaps expressions) of indignation.[7]

However, perhaps we can confront others for wrongdoing (thereby *blaming*) without feeling anger, or openly commend someone (thereby *praising*) without feeling gratitude. If so, we need a more encompassing view of praise and blame.

The *Functional View* casts a wider net, identifying praise and blame by what they are meant to *accomplish*. One observation is that praise and blame are communicative. Some view blame as moral protest communicating that the individual wronged deserves better treatment.[8] If this view is correct, then perhaps anything that communicates the relevant message (e.g., open expressions, non-verbal behavior, reactive emotions) counts as praise or blame.[9]

One difficulty for this view, however, is that some blame (e.g., private anger) isn't clearly communicative.[10]

2. When Are Praise and Blame Appropriate?

Praise and blame are characteristic ways of holding individuals responsible for who they are and what they do. Consequently, it's generally agreed that they aren't appropriate responses to mere accidents. We're not deserving of blame for shattering a glass as a result of a spasm, nor is someone deserving of praise if, while texting and distracted, they inadvertently bump someone out of the way of an oncoming car.

Furthermore, acting rightly or wrongly may not merit praise or blame if the behavior results from coercion, compulsion, or manipulation (e.g., I'm not blameworthy for violent behavior resulting from a rage-inducing pill slipped into my drink).

Instead, praise and blame are appropriate responses only to things for which we're morally responsible. But when are we morally responsible?

2.1. The Control-Based View

On one view, we are only praiseworthy or blameworthy for things that are under our *control*.

This helps explain why we excuse individuals for mere accidents or when someone's control is temporarily inhibited by coercion, compulsion, or manipulation. It also explains why we exempt certain individuals from praise and blame (e.g., young children, individuals who are severely mentally disabled), since they lack the basic abilities to control their behavior.[11]

Most control-based theorists agree that an individual must have the abilities to deliberate about moral reasons for and against actions and to behave in accordance with those reasons.[12] One long-standing debate concerns whether individuals also need the ability to do otherwise than what they actually do.[13], [14], [15]

2.2. The Attitude-Based View

On a competing view, we are praiseworthy or blameworthy for things that reveal something morally significant about our underlying attitudes, such as the commendable moral concern or objectionable lack of moral concern (or ill will) revealed by our behavior. Since mere accidents and compulsive behavior typically don't reflect well or poorly on us, this view can explain why we don't praise or blame individuals for these things.

The attitude-based view seems better suited than the control-based view to explain why we sometimes praise or blame individuals for things that aren't under their control. For example, we might blame a friend or spouse for forgetting something (e.g., a birthday or anniversary) when it reflects a failure of concern.[16]

2.3. Additional Requirements on Praiseworthiness

While individuals can be blameworthy for minor faults (e.g., arriving late to a meeting), people typically aren't praiseworthy for fulfilling ordinary obligations (e.g., arriving on time), especially when doing so is easy. We also don't think someone praiseworthy for acting rightly simply to build their reputation, as when a politician engages in moral grandstanding to appear virtuous.[17] Praiseworthiness for morally right behavior also requires one or more of the following:

1. one's behavior is *motivated* by moral concerns (e.g., because it's right, because it benefits others);[18]

2. one's behavior is *supererogatory*—it goes beyond one's moral obligations;[19]

3. one's behavior is *difficult* (i.e., it requires effort or sacrifice).[20]

These proposed requirements suggest that the standards for praiseworthiness are higher than those for blameworthiness.

2.4. Further Considerations

Even if someone is praiseworthy or blameworthy, there may be other reasons that these responses would be inappropriate. We might not have the *right* to blame if doing so would be hypocritical (perhaps we're unrepentant for similar wrongdoing) or if the wrongdoing is none of our business.[21]

3. Conclusion

Since praise and blame are essential elements of our interpersonal relationships, we should think carefully about when they are appropriate responses to others while also reflecting upon when we merit them ourselves.[22]

Notes

[1] We also engage in *non-moral* praise and blame. For example, one might praise an artist for a beautiful painting or blame an athlete for bungling a play. This article focuses on *moral* praise and blame.

[2] Praise and blame might also be directed toward groups of people or institutions on these bases.

[3] Although it's widely agreed that blame can be either private or overt, it's not clear that private praise makes as much sense as private blame (Coates and Tognazzini 2013: 4-5).

[4] Theorists offer different accounts of what the content of this belief is. Michael Zimmerman (1988) maintains that to blame someone is to judge that they have a "discredit" in their "moral ledger", and Pamela Hieronymi (2004) argues that blame involves the judgment that one has disregard for or ill will towards others. Parallel beliefs might be involved in praise (e.g., that one has a credit in one's moral ledger, that one has a high regard for the interests of others).

[5] There are further reasons to think that praise and blame require something in addition to belief. For example, an evil person might believe (or express) that someone's behavior reflects poorly upon them morally but relish this fact. That wouldn't seem to count as *blame*. On the other hand, one might call attention to the good deeds of someone with repulsion (e.g., "Look at that goody goody, always

ruining our fun!"). A response like this might acknowledge (at least implicitly) that the person's action reflects well upon them morally, but it certainly wouldn't count as *praise*. Lastly, one might recognize that someone's behavior reflects poorly upon them but refrain from blaming because it would be hypocritical (e.g., "She may deserving of blame for what she did, but *I* sure have no right to blame her; after all, I do that all too often myself").

[6] However, see Stout (2020) for a view according to which blame requires reactive emotions, but praise does not.

[7] P.F. Strawson (1969) is credited with establishing widespread acceptance of this view. See also Wallace (1994) and Wolf (2011) for further defenses of this view. On a less widely held view, blame involves a *desire* that the individual not have behaved as they did (Sher 2006).

[8] Typical examples of praise could be understood as communicating an invitation to appreciate or take joy in some commendable behavior, character, or attitude (Telech 2021).

[9] See Talbert (2012) and Smith (2013) on blame as moral protest. For an alternative functional account of blame, see Shoemaker & Vargas (2019).

[10] For a more in-depth treatment of what blame is, see Coates and Tognazzini (2021) (from which I take some of the names for the views discussed in this section).

[11] These two general reasons (excuses and exemptions) for not holding someone responsible were introduced by P. F. Strawson (1969).

[12] See Fischer and Ravizza (1998).

[13] See Van Inwagen (1983) for a defense of the view that being morally responsible (and therefore blameworthy) requires the ability to do otherwise, and Frankfurt (1969) for an argument against this requirement. Some authors have argued that this requirement holds for blameworthiness but not for praiseworthiness (Wolf 1980, Nelkin 2008). These authors maintain that if an agent could not avoid doing the morally *right* thing (because of their degree of commitment to morality or care for others) then their behavior is deserving of praise. Authors who defend this asymmetrical view of the requirements on praiseworthiness and blameworthiness argue that what explains the asymmetry is that the relevant requirement is the ability to do the *right thing* for the *right reason*.

[14] For more on control requirements, see Free Will and Free Choice by Jonah Nagashima as well as Free Will and Moral Responsibility by Chelsea Haramia.

[15] Some authors maintain that the control requirements on moral responsibility are impossible to fulfill, and therefore that no one is deserving of blame for anything. For further reading on how taking a control-based approach to moral responsibility and blameworthiness might lead to this view, see Galen Strawson (1994).

[16] See Angela Smith (2005) for this sort of argument against control-based views. It's worth noting that authors who defend control-based views have their own strategies to account for responsibility for these things. According to control-based views, we may be *derivatively* praiseworthy or blameworthy for things that are not under our voluntary control if they are the foreseeable consequences of earlier behavior for which we are responsible (Fischer and Tognazzini 2009). For example, forgetting my anniversary may result from earlier failures to set myself reminders (this sort of case is discussed by Smith 2005).

[17] Tosi and Warmke (2020).

[18] See Arpaly (2002) for a view like this.

[19] See Swinburne (1989) for a defense of this requirement.

[20] See Nelkin (2016) for a discussion of how difficulty figures into praiseworthiness both for control-based views and attitude-based (sometimes called "quality of will") views of moral responsibility.

[21] See Fritz and Miller (2018) for a defense of the "non-hypocrisy" condition on the standing to blame, and McKiernan (2016) for a defense of the "business condition" on the standing to blame. See Todd (2019) for an attempt to unify various conditions on the standing to blame. While the current literature on these further considerations has focused mostly on blame, some authors have extended similar considerations to praise. For example, Lippert-Rasmussen (2021) points out that it can be hypocritical to praise *myself* for some trivial virtue while ignoring the greater virtues of those around me.

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