Praise and Positive Behavior Management

Zoë Johnson King
University of Southern California

1. Introduction

The literature on moral responsibility is surprisingly fixated on blameworthiness. Authors in this literature chiefly propose theories about what renders someone blameworthy, about which factors mitigate blame, and about the conditions under which they do so. Indeed, it is common to see the terms "responsibility" and "blameworthiness" (or "culpability") used interchangeably. But that is absurd. Culpability is no more than half of responsibility. For, as well as blameworthiness, there is also praiseworthiness. Praiseworthiness *simpliciter* has enjoyed nothing like the sustained philosophical attention given to blameworthiness; there has been substantial discussion of the concept of virtue, and we are seeing a recent upswing of interest in the concept of moral worth, but that's about it. There isn't even a word for the positive analogue of mitigation — that is, the phenomenon whereby some consideration reduces the praiseworthiness of an aspect of someone's action, thought, or character that would otherwise be fully praiseworthy. Nor is there a word for the analogue of excuse — that is, the phenomenon whereby some consideration wholly negates the praiseworthiness of what superficially appears to be something praiseworthy. We have given so little thought to praiseworthiness and its curtailments that we don't even have ways to name the relevant phenomena.

Here philosophers might take a leaf out of the pedagogical books. Schools understand that responsibility is not all about blame; that is why they have "merit" or reward systems in addition to punishment systems. Moreover, schools and educational theorists understand that, as far as the promotion of good educational outcomes is concerned, praising the praiseworthy is usually even more effective than blaming the blameworthy. Indeed, schools and educational theorists understand that praising the praiseworthy is often more effective than blaming the blameworthy even at reducing or eliminating "problem" behavior. This understanding is reflected in the gargantuan literature on "positive behavior management" (as it is known in the UK) and "positive behavioral interventions and supports" (in the US) – a literature that is heavily emphasized in virtually all teacher training programs but has been completely overlooked in philosophical and legal work on moral responsibility. In short: schools have been seeing what happens when one tries to praise the praiseworthy as much as (if not more than) one blames the blameworthy for several decades now, and there is a wealth of research describing the results. I think that philosophers and legal theorists can learn a lot from this.[1]

---

[1] N.B. I am concerned with *moral* praise and blameworthiness. I take it that schools' behavior management systems are primarily attempts to respond to that which is morally praiseworthy and that which is morally blameworthy in their students' conduct; for example, helping a peer with their work is praiseworthy (when well-motivated), and making a snide remark intended to damage a peer's self-esteem is blameworthy (when done without justification or excuse). This is complicated by the fact that schools' reward systems often include rewards for academic achievement as well as for good behavior. We might think that what is rewarded is in fact some mix of the *morally* praiseworthy and the *academically* praiseworthy. If that is so, then I should be understood as talking only about the moral parts of the picture. Notice, though, that schools do not typically punish poor academic performance itself – just the morally

In doing so, we upturn what one might think of as the typical relationship between academic theorists and teaching practitioners. Theorists of agency and responsibility who are also interested in education might assume that there is a unidirectional relationship here: the theorists take our theories, fill in their variables with propositions about what we see, imagine, or assume that school environments are like, and generate some implications about what teachers, students, administrators, or other relevant parties should do. But this unidirectional approach ignores the possibility that theorists might themselves have something to learn about agency and responsibility from schools, pedagogical research, or both.

I seek a more reciprocal relationship. I think that theorists of agency and responsibility have much to learn about praise from pedagogical research on positive behavior management, as well as from the conventional wisdom of classroom practitioners. They have found out what works and what doesn't; we would be wise to pay attention. But it is also true that, while there is a gargantuan literature documenting the *efficacy* of positive behavior management techniques at improving educational outcomes and reducing instances of egregious poor behavior, there are few extended discussions of the *theoretical rationale* for a "positive" approach. The implicit argument seems to be a consequentialist one: this works better, so let's do it. Here is where theorists of agency and responsibility can help. We can provide a more robust in-principle defense of what has for decades been a regular component of on-the-ground educational practice. The point of this paper is to begin that task.

In the next section, I will introduce the basic idea of positive behavior management and briefly summarize the extensive research on what works. This is for the benefit of philosophers and legal theorists who have little-to-no teacher training and are unfamiliar with the pedagogical literature. Then, in the following two sections, I will offer a theoretical rationale for placing praise at the center of our responsibility practices and praiseworthiness at the center of our theorizing, on equal footing with blame and blameworthiness rather than as a largely-neglected afterthought. My view is that our reasons to blame are all matched by corresponding reasons to praise: praise and blame can be equally fitting, and both types of reactive attitude serve important communicative and expressive functions. Given this symmetry, I will suggest, we should not pay way more attention to blame and blameworthiness than we do to praise and praiseworthiness.

2. What is Positive Behavior Management?

All schools have systems, of one sort or another, for *behavior management*. This phrase refers to everything that schools do to try to get students to comport themselves in a manner conducive to learning — roughly, to participate attentively in whatever classroom activities are designed for them (so as to facilitate their own learning) and to treat their peers with kindness and respect (so as to facilitate others' learning). Most schools make at least some of these systems explicit in written behavior management *policies*. And behavior management policies typically include three main components: stated expectations of student conduct, punishments for students who do not meet these expectations, and rewards for students who consistently meet expectations or who go above and beyond.

For several decades now, there has been a conspicuous trend both in pedagogical theory and in educational practice regarding the development of effective behavior management policies. This trend is known as "positive behavior management" (abbreviated to PBM) or "positive behavioral interventions

---

suspect behavior that might lead to it. I suspect, then, that rewards that are ostensibly for good academic performance are in fact best interpreted as rewards for the morally praiseworthy efforts that led to it.

and supports" (abbreviated to PBIS). As the latter term makes clear, there are two sides to PBM/PBIS: behavioral *interventions* and behavioral *supports*. Both are intended to contrast starkly with an approach that simply doles out punishments for failures to meet school expectations and attempts to ensure compliance through the harshness of the punishments. This is the "negative" approach with which positive behavior management is implicitly contrasted. The negative approach is now seen as somewhat Dickensian — outdated and inhumane. In contrast, PBM/PBIS systems emphasize the importance of *positive* interventions in response to failures to meet school expectations, construing "positive" interventions as those that emphasize finding out why the student acted as they did and what they or others can do to get them back on track. PBM/PBIS systems also include positive behavioral *supports;* this encompasses anything done to facilitate students' meeting of school expectations, prior to and independent of addressing any failures to meet them. (Supports are proactive, whereas interventions are reactive.) Positive behavioral supports include clear communication of expectations for student behavior. And, crucially for this paper, they also include explicit, planned systems of praise and reward for students who meet or exceed expectations — "supporting" good behavior by celebrating it when it occurs.

In my own teacher training,[2] the importance of praise was heavily and repeatedly emphasized. We were routinely told to "catch them being good". This phrase encourages practitioners to break cycles of defiance and admonishment by actively looking for things that students are doing well, for which one may then praise them. The underlying idea was that many of our students rarely receive any sort of encouragement whatsoever — since they come to school from unstable home environments in which not only their achievements but also some of their basic needs are frequently overlooked — and so they may struggle to develop healthy senses of self-esteem and self-efficacy if we are not actively seeking ways to point out and celebrate the small things that they are doing well.[3] Building up students' sense of themselves as someone capable of choosing to "be good", the thought goes, is crucial for preventing their development of a sense of identity built around failures to meet expectations (or hostile challenges to them, or both). And, the thought goes, since such an identity is antithetical to learning, it falls to us as teachers to prevent its development. An anecdote: I vividly recall one conversation with a senior teacher at my school who repeatedly stressed that there is no good behavior too small to be caught and praised – "It can be 'Well done for having your pen out!'", he said. "It can be anything."

An enormous wealth of research vindicates these anecdata. Decades of studies have found PBM/PBIS programs to be effective in reducing students' rates of office disciplinary referrals (Colvin and Fernandez 2000, Metzler et al 2001, Nelson et al 2002, Mass-Galloway et al 2008, Muscott et al 2008, Bradshaw et al

---

[2] I have a PGCE, the UK's main teaching degree, and used to work at an academy in South-East London.

[3] The concept of self-efficacy is now widely used in pedagogical theory, but has its roots in the work of psychologist Albert Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997, 2000). Roughly, someone's sense of self-efficacy is her sense of her own ability to revise her behavior and/or alter her surrounding circumstances so as to be successful in accomplishing a goal — something that is crucial to maintaining students' motivation to focus on learning and helping their peers in class, especially if they have in the past behaved poorly and/or been academically unsuccessful. Bandura argues that "social persuasion" can be an effective tool in developing individuals' senses of self-efficacy; "people who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given activities are likely to mobilise greater effort and sustain it than if they harbour self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise" (2000, p.302). In addition, Bandura suggests that "vicarious experiences" provided by observations of peers can increase self-efficacy; "[s]eeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed" (*ibid.*). Thus public verbal praise of either students or their peers — whoever is "caught" being good — can serve to increase students' sense of self-efficacy.

2012, Simonsen et al 2012, Vincent et al 2012, Flannery et al 2014, Kelm et al 2014, Bradshaw et al 2015), in decreasing bullying (Olweus 1997, Waasdorp et al 2012, Kelm et al 2014), in improving rates of on-task behavior (Becker et al 1967, Mayer at al 1983, Mayer at al 1993, Wills et al 2019), and in increasing prosocial behavior and emotion regulation (Broden et al 1970, Christophersen et al 1972, Hall and Harris 1973, Bradshaw et al 2012). Some studies have also found statistically significant improvements in students' academic attainment following the implementation of PBM/PBIS systems (Clark et al 1968, O'Leary et al 1969, Hall and Harris 1973, Nelson et al 2002, McIntosh et al 2006, Muscott et al 2008, Horner et al 2009, Simonsen et al 2012, Kelm et al 2014). These studies demonstrate the efficacy of techniques such as "good news referrals", in which teachers contact parents or carers to share good things that their children have done (i.e. the opposite of disciplinary referrals), and token reinforcement systems that use "points" or "tickets" to track students' behaviors that meet or exceed school expectations and then offer either certificates or tangible material rewards for students who accumulate a sufficient number of tokens.[4] In addition to these more elaborate techniques, though, there are also simple systems of verbal praise. One of the most widely-used PBM/PBIS techniques is the aptly-named "praise and ignore", in which teachers respond to low-level disruption by ignoring it entirely and instead vocally praising other students who are getting on with their work or otherwise acting well.

As mentioned, the pedagogical literature documents these strategies' *efficacy* at securing certain results. But there is little discussion of potential non-consequentialist rationales for positive behavior management. Here's where I come in. The remainder of this paper develops just such a rationale.

3. Fitting praise and virtues of attention

When something is blameworthy, it is worthy of blame. Likewise, when something is praiseworthy, it is worthy of praise. So far, so tautologous. But there is an important moral upshot to these platitudes: praise and blame are either activities or attitudes,[5] and are rendered *fitting* by that which makes individuals praiseworthy or blameworthy. Praising the praiseworthy is akin to blaming the blameworthy — and to fearing the fearsome, deploring the deplorable, and so on — in that they are appropriate responses to the normatively significant features of things. Now, here's another tautology: it is normatively appropriate to have the normatively appropriate responses to things. When someone deliberately acts well and/or has good motivations, then, praising her is normatively appropriate.[6][7]

---

[4] It should be noted that there may be important differences between immaterial and material rewards when it comes to securing student motivation long-term; Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's "self-determination theory" (1985) emphasizes the importance of autonomous motivation, suggesting that attaching *extrinsic* rewards to behaviors can undermine the extent to which individuals are then *intrinsically* motivated to engage in the behaviors when rewards are no longer offered. Deci and Ryan's account suggests that schools would do better to focus on good news referrals, verbal praise, and certificates than on material reinforcement.

[5] We can use the term "praise" to refer either to the private mental state of giving positive moral credit, or to outward expressions of that mental state (e.g. saying "well done!"). The former is an attitude, the latter an activity. Likewise, blame is either an attitude (cf. Scanlon 2008, Wolf 2011, Wallace 2011 for accounts of this attitude) or an activity.

[6] This assumes the substantive account of what we are praiseworthy for that I have defended elsewhere (Johnson King *fc*). Subsequently I will speak generally of praiseworthy "features" when I want to talk simultaneously about praiseworthy features of one's actions and praiseworthy motivations.

[7] One fascinating set of questions concerns the extent to which young children can really *deserve* praise and blame, given their limited moral understanding and the limited control that they have over their actions. One might suspect that much of our blame of very young children is "proleptic" in Williams' (1995) sense – and the same may be true of praise. But I don't think that this remains plausible as children get older. Perhaps elementary-school-age children are universally excused when they act poorly, and perhaps their moral motivations are insufficiently robust for them to

Even this basic point gets us some way toward a case for giving praise a far more central role than it has so far enjoyed in our theorizing about moral responsibility. For, since the normatively appropriate reaction to people's moral achievements and good qualities is to praise them, ignoring such things is normatively *in*appropriate. When we focus single-mindedly on blame at the expense of praise, then, we do something that is normatively inappropriate: we fail to praise the praiseworthy.

That said, we cannot have *all* of the normatively appropriate reactions to *all* of the things. This is because there are just too many features of things that render certain reactions normatively appropriate. We lack the cognitive and affective capacities to have the fitting attitudes to everything all at the same time. The combinations of attitudes that would be involved in such a state are combinations that humans cannot sustain simultaneously: we cannot simultaneously experience overwhelming grief and overwhelming joy, for instance. Moreover, the total quantity of attitudes that would be involved in a completely fitting mental state is too great for human minds: we cannot be indignant enough to respond fittingly to all of the injustices ever perpetrated, for instance. This problem is even more acute for the normatively appropriate reactions that involve action rather than mere attitude, since we have nowhere near enough time to perform all of the relevant actions. So, failing to praise the praiseworthy is not our only problem. These failures are among a litany of failures to react normatively appropriately of which each of us is guilty at all times.

Given our cognitive and affective limitations, some philosophers think that there exist *norms of attention*: norms directing us to focus on certain normatively significant features of things, and to respond to them in the ways that they deserve, at the expense of others. Norms of attention tell us which of the normatively appropriate reactions to have, since we cannot have all of them.

Indeed, norms of attention have already found their way into the literature on moral responsibility; they have been offered as putative explanations of the virtue of modesty and of what is wrong with hypocritical and meddlesome blame. Here is Nic Bommarito on modesty (2013, pp.115-6):

> As the thoughtless person does not attend to the needs of others, the immodest person does not attend to the goodness found in others. As the self-centered dwell on the satisfaction of their own desires and projects, the immodest dwell on their own goodness and importance. What is morally bad about immodesty is the same as what is bad about other egocentric vices—they all manifest a will that is indifferent to others in particular ways… In the case of immodesty, dwelling on one's own goodness or importance manifests an egocentric will, one that cares too little about the goodness of others and the role that others play in one's own success.

According to Bommarito, the problem with immodesty is that an immodest person does not attend sufficiently to others' moral achievements and good qualities. Now, this concerns an improper balance between the extent to which one attends to *one's own goodness* and the extent to which one attends to others' goodness, rather than an improper balance between the extent to which one attends to *others' badness* and the extent to which one attends to others' goodness. But Bommarito's view does at least open the door to the idea that we ought to devote some portion of our attention to others' goodness.

---

deserve praise even when they act well, but that is dubious for most middle schoolers and surely false of high schoolers. Children's moral agency is burgeoning, but they often have more than enough of a grasp of the morally relevant aspects of what they are doing for them to be fitting targets of at least some degree of praise and blame.

Similarly, here is Matt King on meddling and hypocritical blame (*ibid.* p.1438):

> [Meddling and hypocrisy] are wrongs in which we attend to that we should ignore. For meddlesome blame, the reasons arise out of the norms that structure our personal relationships. Other things equal, we should regulate our involvement in the lives of others, restricting our concern to those with whom we share the mutual vulnerabilities of intimate relationships… For hypocritical blame, the reasons concern our moral priorities. There is a general principle favoring attending to conducting ourselves rightly in the world over attending to the faults of others. Where hypocritical blame is objectionable, we find that the blamers have strong reason to correct their own conduct and seek self improvement. As such correction ought to be their moral priority, highlighting their own bad behavior serves to reorient their attention to the more important thing.

For King, the problem with hypocrisy is that a hypocrite does not attend sufficiently to the ways in which they are themselves capable of moral improvement. Like Bommarito's account of immodesty, this is a self-other comparison: it concerns an improper balance between one's attention to *one's own badness* and one's attention to others' badness, rather than an improper balance between one's attention to *others' goodness* and one's attention to others' badness. But King's view of hypocrisy does create room for the idea that we can pay too much attention to others' moral failings. And King's account of meddlesome blame echoes this theme, with the twist that what makes our attention inappropriate can be that our relationship to our blamee is insufficiently close for their moral failings to deserve our attention at all.

Putting these ideas together, I want to suggest that there can be improper balances between the extent to which we attend to *others' badness* and the extent to which we attend to *others' goodness*. Someone can violate norms of attention by paying too much attention to others' moral failures and bad character traits and not enough attention to others' moral achievements and good qualities. Thus, I suggest, the degrees to which one attends to others' goodnesses and to others' badnesses merit direct comparison; these degrees of attention should be compared to one another and not only to the degree to which one attends to oneself. This is a substantive, first-order proposal about the content of our norms of attention.

Developing this proposal, I want to suggest the following:

> SYMMETRY THESIS: There are no reasons to attend to others' blameworthy features that are not matched by corresponding reasons to attend to others' praiseworthy features.

We can make a case for the Symmetry Thesis by surveying all the reasons one might have to attend to others' blameworthy features and observing that each of them is matched by corresponding reasons to attend to praiseworthy features. Praising the praiseworthy and blaming the blameworthy are equally fitting, as we have seen. And both can be effective in bringing about behavioral change — indeed, praise can be *more* effective than blame in this regard, as discussed in the literature on PBM/PBIS. Praise and blame can also both express or communicate our commitment to a system of moral values (on which I will say much more in the next section); we affirm these commitments just as well by recognizing those who abide by our values as by admonishing those who fall short. Similarly, just as blaming wrongdoers can be a way of standing up for ourselves or for other victims of wrongdoing, so too can praising "rightdoers" — those who treat us or others well — be a way of reaffirming the moral regard in which we and others deserve to be held (again, much more on this in the next section). I do not wish to take a stand as to which of these reasons to praise and blame are the most basic or the most explanatorily

fundamental. That is because I think we can defend the Symmetry Thesis even while remaining ecumenical on this matter. On all of the most promising accounts of our reasons to praise and blame, I claim, the Symmetry Thesis holds true.

To clarify: when I speak of reasons to blame being *matched* by corresponding reasons to praise, I mean that for each sort of reason to blame that can exist, a corresponding reason to praise — one with the same underlying rationale — can also exist. Both praise and blame can be fitting, can bring about moral reform, can express or affirm our commitment to our values, can be ways of asserting ourselves, and so on. But I do not want to commit to any claim about the relative *strength* of our actual reasons to praise and to blame. This is because the strength of our actual reasons to praise and blame depends in part on how many moral failures, how many moral achievements, and how many good and bad qualities actually exist in total, as well as just how bad the badnesses are and just how good the goodnesses are. In a nightmarish world in which everyone is completely evil except for a single act of kindness one afternoon, I do not think that we would have as much total reason to praise this single act of kindness as to blame everything that is blameworthy. Surely we would have more total reason to blame the blameworthy, since there is so much more of it and it is so much more egregious. So, I cannot commit to any precise thesis about the relative strength of our actual reasons to blame and to praise, since I do not know precisely how many moral goodnesses and badnesses actually exist, nor precisely how good and bad they are. Nonetheless, the Symmetry Thesis suggests that, for whichever praiseworthy and blameworthy things do actually exist, we have all of the same *types* of reasons to praise the former as to blame the latter. The same sorts of considerations that count in favor of blaming the blameworthy also count in favor of praising the praiseworthy.

To clarify further: one might think that the Symmetry Thesis is clearly false because there are certain categories of action to which only one of praise or blame is ever relevant. For example, it is often thought that supererogatory actions are praiseworthy when performed but not blameworthy when omitted. In my (ms) I explore the possibility that some actions are "morally basic" and that these actions are blameworthy when omitted but not praiseworthy when performed. And in my (forthcoming) I note that there do not seem to be any opposites of negligence and recklessness when it comes to praiseworthiness; people are not praiseworthy for doing something good without realizing that what they're doing is good, when they should have realized (as in cases of negligence), nor are people praiseworthy for being aware of the "risk" of goodness of what they're doing and doing it anyway (as in cases of recklessness). Categories of action like these could be thought to falsify the Symmetry Thesis, since the fact that someone has acted recklessly or negligently or has omitted a morally basic action might seem to be a reason to blame that corresponds to no reasons to praise, and likewise the fact that someone has acted supererogatorily might seem to be a reason to praise that corresponds to no reasons to blame. However, I don't think that this approach gets at our reasons to praise and blame at the right level of explanatory depth. When we blame a reckless act, for instance, there are deeper explanations of why we do so than the simple fact that the act was reckless, since there are further explanations of why blame is an appropriate response to reckless acts. In blaming we might be engaging in moral conversation or moral protest, for instance (on which I will say more in the next section). These deeper explanations identify the ultimate reasons why we blame *at all*, rather than the proximate reasons why we blame specific types of actions. I am interested in these deeper explanations – explanations of why we praise and blame *at all*. My contention is that they are symmetric.

The Symmetry Thesis, if true, suggests that those who focus on blame at the expense of praise display improper patterns of attention. For we do not, in fact, live in a nightmarish world in which the praiseworthy is far outweighed by the blameworthy. There are a lot of good people and they do a lot of

good things. Granted, the total quantity of blameworthy stuff might be somewhat greater than the total quantity of praiseworthy stuff. And perhaps some of the blameworthy stuff is a lot more evil than any of the praiseworthy stuff is good. I don't know the numbers. Nonetheless, these differences would have to be positively gargantuan for them to render fitting the monomaniacal focus on blame and blameworthiness that is currently found in the literature on moral responsibility. And I am confident that the differences are not *that* big. So, here is one non-consequentialist rationale for giving praiseworthiness a much greater role in our theorizing about moral responsibility, and praise a much greater role in our behavior management practices, than they have so far enjoyed: doing so would rectify an improper skewing of our collective patterns of attention.

4. Expressive and communicative praise

In this section I will spend a lot more time discussing a variety of reasons to blame that one might think challenge the Symmetry Thesis. The views I will discuss all suggest, in one way or another, that blame serves a *communicative* or *expressive* function. One might think that blame is uniquely suited to serve such a function, with the result that there are reasons to blame that are not matched by corresponding reasons to praise. But I will argue that this is not the case.

Lots of philosophers think that blame serves a communicative function. Here, for example, is Jay Wallace (1996, p.69):

> [the reactive emotions expressed by moral sanctions] are focused emotional responses to the violation of moral obligations that we accept. In expressing these emotions... we are demonstrating our commitment to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life. Once this point is grasped, blame and moral sanction can be seen to have a positive, perhaps irreplaceable contribution to make to the constitution and maintenance of moral communities: by giving voice to the reactive emotions, these responses help to articulate, and thereby to affirm and deepen, our commitment to a set of common moral obligations.

He's not the only one. Watson (1987, repr. 2010, p.230) says that "the reactive attitudes are incipiently forms of communication"; Darwall (2010, p.265) that "reactive attitudes… implicitly address their objects"; McGeer (2013, p.184) that "blame… aims to generate a normatively valuable dialectic"; MacNamara (2015a, 2015b) that the reactive attitudes are "messages". And McKenna (2012) spends an entire book developing an account of blaming attitudes as "contribution[s] within a conversational exchange" (p.88), in which a wrongdoer manifests ill will toward others, we interject to hold her accountable, and she is then expected to offer an excuse, justification, or apology for her behavior.

Suppose that the function of blame is indeed communicative. Start with Wallace's suggestion that its function is "to articulate, and thereby to affirm and deepen, our commitment to a set of common moral obligations". Would it really follow that the role played by blame is "irreplaceable", as Wallace suggests? Couldn't praise play the same role?

The answer is that it can. By praising those who meet or exceed our moral standards, we articulate and affirm our commitment to these standards just as well as we do by blaming those who violate them. Praise and blame express the same commitments to the same standards. Granted, these commitments are typically left implicit in instances of vocal praise; we say "That was kind of you to help her" rather than "I am committed to moral standards such that helping actions of the sort that you have performed are kind,

which is a mark in their favor", for instance. But so, too, are these commitments left implicit in instances of vocal blame; we say "You can't treat people like that!" rather than "I am committed to moral standards such that actions of the sort that you have performed are cruel, which is a mark against them — one that ordinarily renders actions impermissible, as it did yours". The first-order normative theory to which we are committed is taken for granted in expressions of both praise and blame. The sense in which it is "expressed" is closer to that involved in presupposition than assertion. Nonetheless, this commitment is expressed equally well, and in the same way, by both praise and blame. And, if there is indeed a causal mechanism by means of which expressions of our moral commitments further "deepen" those commitments, as Wallace suggests, then there is no reason to expect this to occur to a greater extent for expressions of blame than for expressions of praise.

Some of the philosophers who see blame as essentially communicative think that what is communicated is not just a general commitment to a set of moral standards but rather a special sort of moral reason — a *distinctively second-personal* reason (see Darwall 2006 and McKenna 2012, and cf. Raz's 1979 account of authority). On this view, blame does not simply remind wrongdoers of already-existing reasons to act or avoid acting provided by the standards of their moral community. Rather, blame issues wrongdoers with new reasons. When I hold you accountable for your wrongdoing, I create reasons for you to display remorse, make amends, and avoid violating moral standards in future: now you can do all of those things *because I told you to*. However, this view about blame's communicative function does not challenge the Symmetry Thesis any more than Wallace's view does, since it, too, readily extends to praise. Second-personal reasons can be issued via praise just as easily as via blame. For what is distinctive about second-personal reasons is that they enable you to take certain actions *because I told you to*. And I do not have to wait until you have failed to do something in order to tell you to do it. If you are already doing it, then I can just tell you that that's great and you should carry on. Exactly as blame can be a second-personal "Stop that!", then, so too can praise be a second-personal "Keep it up!".

Other philosophers hold a view according to which blame is expressive, but not necessarily communicative. They see blame as a form of *moral protest* — an outcry in response to someone's poor behavior (see Hieronymi 2001, Talbert 2012, Smith 2013, and cf. Boxill 1976 on the relationship between protest and self-respect). On this view, it is not crucial that blame be addressed to someone receptive to its communicative message. After all, if a blamee holds sufficient ill will toward a blamer to treat her wrongly, then her complaint at his treatment may well fall on deaf ears. Rather than entering into a productive conversation about shared moral standards through one's expression of the reactive sentiments, then, one may just be shouting into the void. Nonetheless, these theorists hold, there is something morally valuable about these expressions of moral protest: they can be ways of defiantly affirming one's moral status, even if one's doing so does not change anybody's mind.

This view does not challenge the Symmetry Thesis either. That is because one can affirm one's moral status without doing so defiantly. If the point of blame is to stick up for oneself in response to a challenge to one's moral status, so too can the point of praise be to reiterate and affirm that one is being treated as one deserves. Granted, someone who is already treating a praiser as she deserves may not need a reminder of her moral status. But the blame-as-protest account is already one according to which blame serves its function independently of whether it changes anybody's mind. On this approach, then, praise can also serve its function even if no mind-changing takes place – not because the reactive sentiments fall on deaf ears but because praiser and praisee already agree about how the praiser deserves to be treated. Both praise and blame can be affirmatory regardless of who is or is not convinced by them.

One aspect of one version of the expressive view might seem particularly challenging to the Symmetry Thesis. Here is Hieronymi (2001, p.546):

> I suggest that a past wrong against you, standing in your history without apology, atonement, retribution, punishment, restitution, condemnation, or anything else that might recognize it as a wrong, makes a claim. It says, in effect, that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable. That — that claim — is what you resent. It poses a threat. In resenting it, you challenge it. If there is nothing else that would mark out that event as wrong, there is at least your resentment.

According to Hieronymi, people's deliberate actions make claims about how those affected by the actions may be treated. If a claim is negative and goes unchallenged, then it poses a persistent threat. One might think that this makes the negative claim particularly *challenge-worthy*; a claim that we may be treated well is not similarly threatening, so there is nothing to challenge. So, blame's ability to repudiate a persistent threat might provide a reason to blame that is not matched by reasons to praise. In the sea of demands on our limited attention, a persistent threat adds some urgency to our reasons to blame.

This might be right. But it takes us only so far. For, when Hieronymi addresses the objection that we should not get worked up about the threats posed by others' actions, she articulates a more fundamental underlying rationale for her view that does extend to praise (*ibid*., p549):

> [W]e ought to care about what other people think. To not care about what you think is to not care about you. To disregard your evaluation is to disregard you. Respect for you as a fellow human being commits me to caring about your evaluation.

We should pay attention to threatening claims about how we may be treated, according to Hieronymi, because we ought in general to care about others' evaluations of us. And we ought in general to care about others' evaluations of us as a matter of respect for those others. But if we ought in general to care about others' evaluations of us, then we ought to care about those evaluations regardless of whether they are negative (and thus threatening) or positive. And, in that case, if we have reasons to protest false claims about how we or others deserve to be treated then we also have matching reasons to celebrate true claims. Indeed, one might think that the goal of respecting you and your evaluations makes it especially important to acknowledge and credit those of your evaluations that are *correct*, rather than skipping over them until we find one that is incorrect and then blaming you for it. This might make our reasons to praise even stronger than our reasons to blame. But, at any rate, even if there is some urgency to our reasons to pay attention to others' threatening evaluations, it remains the case that we also have reasons to pay attention to others' correct, non-threatening evaluations. And these reasons to praise have the same underlying rationale as our reasons to blame — viz., the general importance of what other people think. That is exactly what the Symmetry Thesis predicts.

5. Conclusion

Praise is often more effective than blame at ensuring compliance with the standards of our moral community, as the literature on PBM/PBIS shows. Moreover, I have argued that there are no reasons to blame that are not matched by corresponding reasons to praise: when someone is genuinely praiseworthy, praising her is fitting, is a way of communicating our commitment to the moral standards that she upholds, and — if her praiseworthiness involves treating us or others well — is a way of affirming and reiterating the moral status that her actions afford to people. Since there is much out there

that deserves to be praised, it is normatively inappropriate to focus monomaniacally on that which deserves to be blamed, directing a disproportionate amount of our attention toward blameworthiness at the expense of praiseworthiness. As well as blaming the blameworthy, we should praise the praiseworthy.[8]

Word count (excluding references): 6,707 words.

[8] I am grateful to the editors of this volume for helpful comments that improved the paper's argument in several places, as well as to Chris Howard and Jamie Fritz for helpful conversations about the fittingness parts. But my highest debt of gratitude is to my wonderful research assistant, Meghana Maddali, who helped me to collect and organize all of the empirical material that appears in this paper.

REFERENCES

Bandura, Albert (1977). "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change." *Psychological Review* 84(2), 191-215.

Bandura, Albert (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, Albert (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.

Bandura, Albert (2000). "Health Promotion from the Perspective of Social Cognitive Theory". In *Understanding and Changing Health Behavior: from Health Beliefs to Self-Regulation,* eds. Charles Abraham, Paul Norman, and Mark Conner. London: Routledge.

Becker, Wesley C., Charles H. Madsen, Carole Revelle Arnold, and Don R. Thomas (1967). "The Contingent Use of Teacher Attention and Praise in Reducing Classroom Behavior Problems". *The Journal of Special Education* 1(3), 287-307.

Bommarito, Nicolas (2013). "Modesty as a Virtue of Attention". *Philosophical Review* 122(1): 93-117.

Boxill, Bernard R. (1979). "Self-Respect and Protest". *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6(1), 58-69.

Bradshaw, Catherine P., Tracy E Waasdorp, and Philip J. Leaf (2012). "Effects of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Child Behavior Problems". *Pediatrics* 130(5), p.e1136-e1145.

Bradshaw, Catherine P., Tracy E. Waasdorp, Tracy, Philip J. Leaf, and Steve Graham (2015). "Examining Variation in the Impact of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Effectiveness Trial". *Journal of Educational Psychology* 107(2), 546-557.

Broden, M., C. Bruce, C, M. A. Mitchell, V. Carter, and R. V. Hall (1970). "Effects Of Teacher Attention on Attending Behavior Of Two Boys At Adjacent Desks". Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis 3(3), 199-203.

Christophersen, Edward R., Caroline M. Arnold, Diane W. Hill, and Robert H. Quilitch (1972). "The Home Point System: Token Reinforcement Procedures For Application By Parents Of Children With Behavior Problems" *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 5(4) 485-497.

Clark, Marilyn, Joe Lachowicz and Montrose Wolf (1968). "A Pilot Basic Education Program for School Dropouts Incorporating a Token Reinforcement System". *Behavioral Research and Therapy* 6(2), 183-188.

Colvin, Geoff and Elizabeth Fernandez (2000). "Sustaining Effective Behavior Support Systems in an Elementary School". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 2(4), 251-253.

Darwall, Stephen (1996). *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Flannery, K.B., P. Fenning, M. McGrath Kato, K. McIntosh, and Shane Jimerson (2014). "Effects of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Fidelity of Implementation on Problem Behavior in High Schools". *School Psychology Quarterly* 29(2), 111-124.

Johnson King, Zoë (forthcoming). "What Are We Praiseworthy For"? Forthcoming in *New Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics*, ed. Ruth Chang & Amia Srinivasan. OUP.

Johnson King, Zoë (ms). "The Slow Clap Phenomenon". Unpublished manuscript.

Hieronymi, Pamela (2001). "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63(3): 529-555.

Horner, Robert H., George Sugai, Keith Smolkowski, Lucille Eber, Jean Nakasato, Anne W. Todd, and Jody Esperanza (2009). "A Randomized, Wait-List Controlled Effectiveness Trial Assessing School-Wide Positive Behavior Support in Elementary Schools". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 11(3), 133-144.

Howard S. Muscott, Eric L. Mann, and Marcel R. LeBrun (2008). "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in New Hampshire: Effects of Large-Scale Implementation of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support on Student Discipline and Academic Achievement". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 10(3), 190-205.

Kelm, Joanna L., Kent McIntosh, Kent, and Sharon Cooley (2014). "Effects of Implementing School-Wide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports on Problem Behaviour and Academic Achievement in a Canadian Elementary School". *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* 29(3), 195-212.

King, Matt (2020). "Attending to Blame". *Philosophical Studies* 177(5): 1423-1439.

Macnamara, Colleen (2015a). "Reactive Attitudes as Communicative Entities". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90(3): 546-569.

— (2015b). "Blame, Communication, and Morally Responsible Agency". In Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela Smith, eds., *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp.211-236.

Mass-Galloway, Robin L., Marion V. Panyan, Carl R. Smith, and Suana Wessendorf (2008). "Systems Change with School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports: Iowa's Work in Progress". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 10(2), 129-135.

Mayer, G. Roy, Tom Butterworth, Mary Nafpaktitis, and Beth Sulzer-Azaroff (1983). "Preventing School Vandalism and Improving Discipline: A Three-Year Study". *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 16(4), 355-369.

Mayer, G. Roy, Lynda K. Mitchell, Tamara Clementi, Erica Clement-Robertson, Rosalind Myatt, and Daniel Thomas Bullara (1993). "A Dropout Prevention Program for At-Risk High School Students: Emphasizing Consulting to Promote Positive Classroom Climates" *Education & Treatment of Children* 16(2), 135-146.

McIntosh, Kent, David J. Chard, Joseph B. Boland, and Robert H. Horner (2006). “Demonstration of Combined Efforts in School-Wide Academic and Behavioral Systems and Incidence of Reading and Behavior Challenges in Early Elementary Grades”. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 8(3), 146-154.

McKenna, Michael (2012). *Conversation and Responsibility*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Metzler, Carol W., Anthony Biglan, Julie C. Rusby, and Jeffrey R. Sprague (2001). “Evaluation of a Comprehensive Behavior Management Program to Improve School-Wide Positive Behavior Support”. *Education & Treatment of Children* 24(4), 448-479.

Nelson, J., Ronald M. Martella, and Nancy Marchand-Martella (2002). “Maximizing Student Learning: The Effects of a Comprehensive School-Based Program for Preventing Problem Behaviors”. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* 10(3), 136-148.

O'Leary, K. D., W. C. Becker, M. B. Evans, and R. A. Saudargas (1969). “A Token Reinforcement Program in A Public School: A Replication And Systematic Analysis”. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 2(1), 3-13.

Raz, Joseph (1979). “Legitimate Authority”. In his *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-27.

Scanlon, Thomas (2008). *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Belknap Press.

Shoemaker, David (2007). “Moral Address, Moral Responsibility, and the Boundaries of the Moral Commuity”. *Ethics* 118: 70-108.

Simonsen, Brandi, Lucille Eber, Anne C. Black, George Sugai, Holly Lewandowski, Barbra Sims, and Diane Myers (2012). “Illinois Statewide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Evolution and Impact on Student Outcomes Across Years”. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 14(1), 5-16.

Smith, Angela (2013). “Moral Blame and Moral Protest”. In D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Talbert, Matthew (2012). “Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest”. *The Journal of Ethics* 16(1): 89-109.

Vincent, Claudia G., Tary Jeanne Tobin, Leanne S. Hawken, and Jennifer L. Frank (2012). “Discipline Referrals and Access to Secondary Level Support in Elementary and Middle Schools: Patterns Across African-American, Hispanic-American, and White Students” *Education & treatment of children* 35(3), 431-458.

Waasdorp, Tracy E., Catherine P. Bradshaw, and Philip J. Leaf (2012). “The Impact of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Bullying and Peer Rejection: A Randomized Controlled Effectiveness Trial”. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 166(2), 149-156.

Wallace, R. Jay (1996). *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. Harvard University Press.

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

Watson, Gary (2010). "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme". In his *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays,* pp.219-258. Oxford University Press.

Wills, Howard P, Paul Caldarella, Benjamin A. Mason, Benjamin, Amanda Lappin, and Darlene H Anderson (2019). "Improving Student Behavior in Middle Schools: Results of a Classroom Management Intervention". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 21(4), 213-227.

Williams, Bernard (1995). "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame." In *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.39-45.

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