Reluctant Heroes

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic – our memories of it, and its long-term effects – will shape our sociocultural narratives for the foreseeable future. As we emerge, some gingerly and some eagerly, into the post-pandemic era, and as we each fuse an amalgam of whatever we can salvage of the "old normal" and whichever parts of the "new normal" we've decided we'd rather keep, the data we gather and the observations we offer will shape our collective understanding of what the heck just happened.

This paper is an attempt to learn from some of the stuff that happened during the pandemic. In particular, it is an attempt to learn from the ostentatious praise lavished on essential workers at the beginning of the pandemic and, especially, from the backlash against that praise.[1] A tiny philosophical literature on the ethics of praise is just now blossoming into existence, and I think that this nascent literature will benefit from the analysis of this compelling case study; it is a good idea for ethicists to pay close attention to the phenomena of everyday moral life when charting new territory, and public conversation about praise for essential workers is the closest that we have come to a popular discussion of the ethics of praise in recent years. Contributing to the literature on the ethics of praise is not my only aim in this paper, though. As someone with considerable sympathy for essential workers, who was initially enthusiastic about the idea of applauding them but who quickly began to feel a sense of unease about these grandiose displays of praise and eventually to find them grotesque, I also want to wrap my head around the phenomena in and of themselves.

I will explore three components of the ethics of praise, each of which is thrown into sharp relief by the case for praise of essential workers during pandemic. First, praise can misrepresent either praiser or praisee, by being insincere in the former case or unfitting in the latter. Second, praise can manipulate. Third, praise can distract. I will also argue that these last two features (or, more accurately, bugs) of praise can be simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing, making their overall impact especially insidious. The central take-home lesson is that in order to develop an adequate ethics of praise we must attend carefully to praise's psychological effects on praisers, praisees, and third parties.

2. The Ethics of Praise

There is now a healthy literature on what is known as *the ethics of blame*. Scanlon (2008, p.166) uses the phrase "the ethics of blame" to refer to conversations about "reasons why one can be open to moral criticism for blaming someone or for failing to blame them". The subsequent literature has focused on the

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[1] 'Essential worker' is the American term; others include 'key workers' ('travailleurs clés'), in the U.K. and France, and 'system-relevant workers' ('systemrelevanter beruf'), in Germany. (I find the German term particularly revealing.) My discussion focuses on the U.S. and U.K., although I suspect that the phenomena I will describe arise elsewhere also.

standing to blame – what it is, who lacks it, and why. But, as Scanlon's gloss suggests, the ethics of blame could in theory encompass a broader and richer discussion than this: it could concern itself with all manner and variety of *pro tanto* considerations for or against blaming besides those that pertain directly to the blamee's degree of blameworthiness, including considerations of standing but also including any and all considerations that can affect the appropriateness of a particular instance of blame without necessarily being strong enough to undermine standing or to require or prohibit blame overall. It is by analogy with this broader category that I would prefer the ethics of praise to be defined. The ethics of praise, then, concerns itself with all manner and variety of *pro tanto* considerations for or against praising besides those that pertain directly to the praisee's degree of praiseworthiness, including considerations of standing but also including any considerations that can affect the appropriateness of a particular instance of praise without necessarily being strong enough to undermine standing or to require or prohibit praise overall. This category encompasses everything that one should think about when one deliberates about whether to praise, or assesses the appropriateness of a particular instance of praise, *all-things-considered* – that is to say, it encompasses all of the things that one should consider.

Plenty of *pro tanto* considerations for or against praising have nothing to do with praise in particular, however. They are just considerations that could in theory be made to count in favor of or against doing anything whatsoever. These include the threats and offers of the world-destroying demons and benefit-conferring angels of philosophical imagination, as well as a range of more ordinary forward-looking considerations – that praise could make someone happy, for instance – and some backward-looking ones – that one has promised to praise, for instance. All such considerations are technically encompassed by the ethics of praise, just as they are technically encompassed by the ethics of blame. But they are the boring parts. The interesting parts will be those that have to do with praise in particular: with its nature, or perhaps its function(s). This is parallel to what we find in the extant literature on the ethics of blame. The underlying explanations of factors thought to undermine the standing to blame appeal to moral considerations that do not pertain *solely* to blame and can also apply to plenty of other things; plenty of things can be inegalitarian (Wallace 2010, Fritz and Miller 2018), can be insincere (Todd 2019, Achs forthcoming), and can constitute meddlesome invasions of privacy (Radzik 2012), for instance. But that literature does focus on considerations that apply particularly *acutely* to blame, in light of what it is and what it does; that is to say, in light of the "opprobrium" (Wallace *op. cit.*, p.318) and negative evaluations that it involves, and in light of its purposes in allowing us to express commitment to moral norms, to signal our readiness to respond to violations of these norms with reproach and sanction, and then actually to so respond, thereby not only keeping track of moral reality (i.e. what is wrong, who is blameworthy) but also using our understanding of this reality to shape our moral community. The interesting parts of the ethics of praise will likewise identify moral considerations that apply particularly acutely to praise in light of what it is and what it does.

So, what *is* praise? And what function(s) does it serve?

If we understand praise by analogy with blame and understand blame as it is theorized in the philosophical literature, then the term 'praise' primarily refers to a certain type of mental state. It refers to the positive reactive attitudes by means of which we give people credit for what they do and how they are: to gratitude, esteem, admiration, pride, and so forth. However, in popular parlance the term 'praise' is rarely used to refer to these commendatory attitudes themselves. It is much more often used to refer to the speech and behavior by means of which we *display* these attitudes to ourselves and others: to compliments, applause, finger-snapping, high fives, the giving of awards and prizes, and so forth. (And, of course, the term 'blame' exhibits this same ambiguity, since it too is widely used to refer not to the underlying attitudes that philosophers investigate but to the things we do to let others know that we hold

these attitudes.) This provides theorists of praise with an important choice-point. As we will see below, some *pro tanto* considerations against praise pertain only to expressions thereof and not to unexpressed mental states, while others seem intuitively to pertain primarily to the mental states themselves and only derivatively to their expressions. For present purposes I will therefore use the term 'praise' to refer both to the private mental states and to their canonical expressions, disambiguating as the topic dictates. But if one had other purposes then one could perfectly reasonably regiment the term either way.

So construed, it appears that praise serves exactly the same ultimate social functions that blame serves, but with a proximate focus on the opposite phenomena. Praise, like blame, is Janus-faced: it has a backward-looking and a forward-looking component. Looking backwards, it is our way of registering, attending to, and responding fittingly to the morally good things about other people's past or present actions and motivations – that is to say, to the things that reflect well on them and show them to be a good person. This is just what blame does for the darker side of things, but for the lighter side. Looking forwards, however, the ultimate *point* of keeping track of and reacting to both the darker and the lighter sides is the same. Doing so manifests our commitment to moral norms concerning how people ought to behave and how people deserve to be treated. Our expressions of these reactions thus express those commitments, thereby reinforcing the norms within our moral community and, in some cases, prudentially incentivizing those who might otherwise have considered violating the norms instead to comply with them. Privately keeping track also enables us to sensibly modify our interactions with those around us going forward, using their moral "track records" to make judicious choices about whom to trust and whom to avoid. And even unexpressed reactive attitudes enable us to privately affirm our values, functioning as a kind of silent protest in the case of blame and silent celebration in the case of praise.[2]

So, what we are looking for when we "do" the ethics of praise are *pro tanto* considerations either for or against being in a commendatory attitude, or for or against expressing such an attitude to its object(s) or to third parties. And, to keep things interesting, we are looking not for just any old morally significant things but for considerations that arise for praise specifically (though not exclusively), in light of the nature of the commendatory attitudes and the effects of their presence and expression on our relationships with the people around us. There is a burgeoning literature on the ethics of praise understood as such: Holroyd (2021), Lippert-Rasmussen (2022), Jeppsson and Brandenburg (2022), and Telech (2022) all observe that praise can be unequally distributed and as such hypocritical at best and oppressive at worst; Jeppsson and Brandenburg further observe that praise can be patronizing, which is a sentiment echoed by Mason (2018, pp.109-110). But this short list is, unfortunately, exhaustive – I am unaware of any other discussions of the ethics of praise in philosophical work. It is this mini-literature that I aim to strengthen with the presentation and analysis of my case study, to which I now turn.

   3.   The Case Study

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, those of us who were sheltering at home quickly recognized that our ability to do so safely, and to maintain some semblance of our previous lives while doing so, depended on large numbers of others *not* sheltering at home. We needed people stocking our groceries, carrying our favorite meals from our favorite restaurants to our houses, manufacturing and

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[2] For discussions of the social function of blame that mention the various ones I have just described, see Wallace (1996), Hieronymi (2001), Scanlon (2008), McKenna (2012), Talbert (2012), Smith (2013), Macnamara (2015). I argue that praise serves the same functions as blame in my (forthcoming). Henceforth in this paper I will simply take for granted that these are indeed praise's social functions.

delivering our new webcams and footrests, and so on. In this context the term 'essential worker' came to be used to refer to everyone who still had to work in-person despite the pandemic – not only hospital workers and first responders but also those working in manufacturing and retail, in construction, in the service industry, in travel and transportation, and in cleaning. And it became trendy to issue public pronouncements of praise for essential workers, considered as this single, heterogenous category. These pronouncements were usually brief and most often a matter of thanking essential workers or calling them 'heroes'.[3] But they occurred in massive numbers; not only individual celebrities, politicians, and influencers, but also corporations, social institutions, governmental entities and news agencies hopped on the bandwagon.[4] Several parts of the world also introduced rituals of clapping, cheering, or even singing 'for' essential workers at regular intervals. Expressions of praise for essential workers flooded our social environment.

Meanwhile, essential workers – considered as this single, heterogenous category – were having a rough time. This was especially so during the early months of the pandemic in which their praise was so ubiquitous; that was also precisely when very little was known about the virus, how it spread, and how dangerous it was, as a result of which infection and mortality rates were soaring in urban areas while fear and uncertainty soared in the population at large. Several studies have found that infection rates were particularly high among essential workers (e.g. BMJ 2020, Gaitens *et* al 2021, Song *et al*. 2021) and that individual workers who had to interact face-to-face with customers were considerably higher to test positive for COVID-19 than those in other roles (e.g. Lan *et al*. 2021). Rates of depression and anxiety were also especially high among essential workers who were unable to socially distance while at work or on their commute (*ibid.*). And some early data also supported what one might think is a natural explanation for these patterns: that employers did not support their employees with adequate safety measures (Schneider and Harknett 2020). Indeed, some stores initially *prohibited* employees from wearing masks, reasoning that customers might think that the employees were sick and be deterred from entering the store (Shepherd 2020). And some essential workers told journalists that they felt unsafe coming to work because colleagues who tested positive for COVID-19 often neglected to disclose their status, continuing to work in-person despite their infection, because they did not have access to paid sick leave and could not afford to take time off (Reyes 2021). On top of all this, some public-facing essential workers were harassed or assaulted by angry customers resisting the new safety requirements that it fell to essential workers to enforce. And some of these assaults led to serious injuries, including broken limbs (Williams 2020) and gunshots (Zaveri 2020) – even fatal shots (Snyder *et al* 2020).

It is entirely understandable, then, that the praise lavished on essential workers met with a mixed reception. Some remarked on how much they appreciated their newfound social esteem; for instance, one

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[3] One might question whether expressions of gratitude are really a subtype of expressions of praise (as I assume). Notice, though, that these were not normal expressions of gratitude. According to Strawson (1982), gratitude is an interpersonal attitude that responds to displays of goodwill toward the grateful agent; it is the direct analogue of resentment, of which indignation is the "vicarious" version. But the attitudes expressed in thanking essential workers were largely vicarious attitudes rather than directly interpersonal ones. We were grateful to essential workers, as a whole, for everything that they did to keep *everyone* going, as a whole. It would have been at best churlish and at worst monstrous for someone to say, "Thank you to the FedEx operatives and GrubHub drivers who have delivered *my* packages and meals, but of course I am not grateful to all the other operatives and drivers who've delivered things to other people but done nothing for me in particular, nor am I grateful to everyone making repeated marginal contributions to the smooth operation of our basic social institutions since their tangible impact on me in particular is effectively nil". When we thanked essential workers as a whole in light of what they did for society as a whole, the attitudes thereby expressed were closer to moral admiration or esteem than to typical gratitude.
[4] For a *highly* selective survey, see e.g. O'Malley 2020, Nash 2020, Betancourt 2020, Callahan 2020, Villareal 2020.

clinic director said, "I love the signs, the cards, the donations, people bringing in handmade masks. They bring me to tears… My staff needs it, they love it, it makes their day" (Brown and Parafiniuk-Talesnick 2020). (Though see Kim *et al* 2023 for the negative health impact of *selective* public gratitude on those in "stigmatized occupations" who perceive themselves as unappreciated in comparison with other fields.) But there was also a robust and prominent backlash. Many essential workers gave interviews or co-wrote opinion pieces with journalists, frequently on condition of anonymity, to complain that they were being offered praise *in lieu* of personal protective equipment, sick leave, hazard pay, or other safety measures and forms of material and financial support (e.g. Climent *et al* 2020, Taylor 2020, Kinder 2020). Some also began to organize around the absence of the latter; for instance, eighty health professionals in the U.K. wrote a list of "demands" of the government,[5] while fast food workers in fifteen U.S. cities went on a coordinated strike to demand an increased minimum wage (Sainato 2021). And an attempted at a second round of clapping in the UK during the Winter of 2020-21 was cancelled amid complaints from nurses and fierce criticism on social media (Mitchell 2021, Duell 2021).

Indeed, these criticisms and complaints were present from the very beginning of the pandemic, although they grew in prevalence as the months went on. For example, on March 31, 2020, one Reddit user posted and subsequently deleted:[6]

> I am an "essential" worker. Most of us are NOT heroes. We just have NO choice.

On which the most popular comment was:

> I'm sick to death of the hero narrative. Almost like they're trying to use it so they don't feel like they have to pay people what they're owed for working such dangerous conditions…..haha jk…..unless….?

And the second-most-popular comment was:

> It's like what they do to soldiers. Call them heroes and send them to the slaughter house[.]

It is this backlash against the "heroes" rhetoric, and against praise for essential workers in general, that I think offers a treasure trove of data for ethicists and moral psychologists. One simple view would be that essential workers who resist the 'hero' label are just being modest, in the way in which explicit appreciation of supererogation is often met with demurral.[7] But, while it is of course possible that some essential workers exhibited modesty, the three comments above suffice to show that this simple view cannot be more than a small part of the whole story. For these Redditors' remarks do not even remotely resemble the behavior of a modest person. Far from being a form of demurral, their snarky observations are a form of social critique – one that we would be wise to take seriously and to try to develop and substantiate.

In the remainder of this paper, then, my primary aim is to continue using essential workers' own words to shed light on the problematic aspects of the praise that they experienced. In so doing I hope to

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[5] See the list at https://novaramedia.com/2020/04/22/dont-applaud-us-protect-us-chantforppe/. Subsequently a wave of strikes has washed over the U.K.'s public sector, while interest in unionization across the U.S. has been piqued.
[6] The thread can be found at https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/fsbmdb/i_am_an_essential_worker_most_of_us_are_not/.
[7] For some of the philosophical literature on modesty see Driver (1999), Bommarito (2013), Wilson (2016), Um (2019).

illuminate phenomena that are by no means exclusive to this particular case study, which will suggest some broader lessons for the benefit of theorists interested in the ethics of praise more broadly.

4. The Myopic View

To begin, consider this remark from Jasmine Kapralova, a grocer at Trader Joe's in Seattle (Bhattarai 2020):

> I shouldn't go in, but I feel pressured to go because I need the money… I'm scared to death of dying but also of losing my job and not getting paid.

And compare this one from Jessica Hockaday, an Instacart shopper in Raleigh (Sainato 2020):

> It was either my health or make money. We just paid our bills yesterday. We have nothing left and my husband's next paycheck doesn't come in for another couple weeks. They truly don't care about us.

As these essential workers tell us, they – and many others like them – faced a kind of Sophie's choice: "my health or make money", "dying [or] losing my job and not getting paid". What is important about testimony like this (for present purposes) is what it tells us about essential workers' motivations in continuing to work in-person throughout the pandemic. Essential workers like Kapralova and Hockaday do *not* say that they were moved by the thought of being one among thousands playing a role in keeping our basic social institutions in operation during a period of unprecedented global turmoil. Though their work was, in the aggregate, undeniably immeasurably socially important, many individual essential workers do not appear to have been driven to keep going by thoughts about this social importance. In fact, some questioned whether their particular jobs had any significant degree of social importance; "we're risking our lives for chicken", said Kendaliyn Granville, an employee who participated in a walk-out from Perdue Farms' processing plant in Georgia (Hammond 2020), and similar quips casting doubt on the so-called "essential" nature of their work were widespread among essential workers. What drove these individuals to keep working, as Kapralova and Hockaday make plain, was not a stirring sense of the weighty consequences of their work but sheer material necessity. It was the fact that their only alternative was to be unable to pay the bills and to afford basic necessities – a vulnerable position at the best of times, but especially so during a global health crisis.

This is important for present purposes because it indicates that many essential workers' choices to keep working in-person throughout the pandemic were *not praiseworthy*. For people do not merit praise just whenever they do anything that happens to be good in some respect. Nor do we merit gratitude from everyone whom our actions happen to benefit. On the contrary, gratitude is fitting only if the benefactor was moved (at least in part) by concern for the beneficiary.[8] Likewise, as the literature on moral worth tells us, actions are praiseworthy only if they are well-motivated, where the latter is either a matter of the agent's being motivated by the fact of their action's moral importance or by the further features that ground and explain its moral importance.[9] And neither of these was the case for those essential workers who were driven to keep working by sheer material necessity; what grounds their actions' moral importance is that they make repeated marginal contributions to the smooth functioning of our basic social institutions, but many essential workers were motivated neither by this fact nor by the resultant

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[8] See Manela (2016). This may be because gratitude, as a positive reactive attitude, is a response to others' good will, and if Benefactor was not moved by concern for Beneficiary then there is no good will to which to react.

[9] See e.g. Arpaly (2002), Markovits (2010), Sliwa (2016), Isserow (2019), Johnson King (2020), Singh (2020).

fact of their actions' moral importance itself. Indeed, many would have preferred *not* to make their marginal contributions, given the risks involved. They just needed the money. This motivation does not make their actions blameworthy, of course, since it does not reflect at all poorly on them. But lots of the things that we do are neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. And this includes everything that we do solely in order to pay the bills.

So, one thing that was amiss with praise of essential workers – considered as a single, homogenous class – was that a large portion of this praise was simply *unfitting*. We were praising people for doing things for which they were not, in fact, praiseworthy. This is arguably the most obvious thing that can be amiss with praise.

One slightly less obvious thing is hinted at in Hockaday's final remark: "They truly don't care about us". This is a surprising thing to hear from someone who is ostensibly receiving society-wide applause on a daily basis. But the sentiment is echoed by a great deal of other essential workers. Here, for instance, is Crissy Becker, a trucker with Maine's Blevin Logistics (Capatides 2020):

> I'm a mom… Instead of going home, I stayed out driving my truck sometimes 24 hours at a time, lately six weeks. So y'all got what you need. And there are hundreds of thousands more like me but instead of going home are running until we can't see straight in our tracks. We are one of the only things keeping [the] economy as alive as it is… I'm not normally one to complain. I love my job. But we constantly were with disrespect when nothing's going on and now that we are driving sometimes three days at a time with few hours [of] sleep… So y'all can have what you need. My hat goes off to the rest of us.

Becker complains of the "disrespect" that she and her fellow truckers face, and Hockaday of a lack of "care". They could, of course, be mistaken. But I see no reason to think so. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that expressions of praise for essential workers during pandemic were often either partially or wholly *insincere*; that is to say, they were either wholly unaccompanied by the commendatory attitudes supposedly expressed, or these attitudes were present in only a fleeting and superficial way. Cursory acknowledgement of essential workers' toil and our indebtedness became a trend, as I mentioned earlier, and subsequently more of a ritual – something performed by institutions, corporations, and public figures mostly for the sake of keeping up appearances. For those of us clapping at our windows and on our balconies, what was once a message of solidarity turned rapidly into an obligatory routine or a nice opportunity to see our neighbors. (One of my neighbors in New York City started dancing on his balcony with rolls of toilet paper as maracas, in a kind of macabre celebration of his own hoarding behavior.) Indeed, when essential workers pointed out that they were receiving praise *in lieu* of significant material and financial support, it was often the praise's sincerity that they were calling into question. But expressions of attitudes that one does not really hold are in general *pro tanto* inappropriate; they are ways of lying or misleading. And when someone's hollow expressions of moral attitudes are driven by their interest in maintaining a bogus appearance of moral sensitivity, so as to retain their customers or their loyal fanbase, then these expressions are no more than a calculated charade.

It is tempting to stop here. That is, it is tempting to rest content with an analysis of praise for essential workers during pandemic that points out that such praise frequently *misrepresented* both praisers and praisees – depicting the latter as praiseworthy and the former as taking a commendatory attitude toward them, when in fact each of these was frequently not the case (since much praise for essential workers was

unfitting and much was insincere).[10] I think that such an account would be correct. But I also think that it would be importantly incomplete. There would be something *myopic* about such an account, insofar as it would imply that if a particular instance of praise is both fitting and sincere then there can be nothing wrong with it. On the myopic view, what is required for praise to be all-things-considered unassailable is just (i) for the praisee to be genuinely praiseworthy for the praised behavior and (ii) for the praiser to base their commendatory attitude on a genuine appreciation of this praiseworthiness. The myopic view is tempting, as I've said. But I do not think that it is true. On the contrary, I think it misses a lot. This is well-illustrated by the case of praise for essential workers during pandemic, of which the (sometime) unfittingness and insincerity was only part of the problem. We can see the rest of the problem only by zooming out a little bit – as I will begin to do in the next section.

5.   Moving Beyond Myopia

Some essential workers were much more upbeat about their work's positive impact than Kapralova, Hockaday, and Granville. For example, here is Cassie McNeill, a bus driver in Belfast (McGarvey 2020):

> My main role until recently was actually cleaning. I went from driving the buses to cleaning them, which was a big change, but it was necessary… It was great to be able to help people get about, even if you were contributing in a very small way… It was stressful at times, particularly now with driving the buses again and with the kids back at school, we're so aware and constantly trying to wipe down surfaces between runs. [But] picking up the NHS workers and getting them in to do the job that they need to do and looking after our friends and family on the front line is really rewarding.

And here is "Jester D" (@JustMeTurtle), a garbageman on Twitter:[11]

> I'm a garbageman, I can't work from home and my job is an essential city service that must get done. It's a tough job, from getting up pre-dawn to the physical toll it takes on my body to the monotonous nature of the job, at times it's hard to keep on going… Right now though, right now I am feeling an extra sense of pride and purpose as I do my work. I see the people, my people, of my city, peeking out their windows at me. They're scared, we're scared. Scared but resilient… Us garbagemen are gonna keep collecting the garbage, doctors and nurses are gonna keep doctoring and nurse-ering. It's gonna be ok, we're gonna make it be ok. I love my city. I love my country. I love my planet Earth. Be good to each other and we'll get through this.

These essential workers, and many others like them, were indeed motivated by the "necessity" – not material this time, but moral – of "contributing in a very small way".[12] When their work made them

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[10] Was any of it *both* unfitting *and* insincere? Technically, no. This is one point where the ambiguity of the term 'praise' becomes relevant. For it is *expressions* of praise that can be insincere, but it is the underlying commendatory *attitudes* that can be unfitting. And an expression of praise is insincere just in case it is not accompanied by an underlying commendatory attitude. In that case, though, the underlying attitude cannot be unfitting since it does not exist.

[11] See https://twitter.com/JustMeTurtle/status/1238682500085338112?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7C twterm%5E1238682500085338112%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cbsnews.com%2F news%2Fcoronavirus-heroes-covid-19-truck-drivers-sanitation-workers%2F

[12] They (and others like them) may also have experienced what Frankfurt calls "volitional necessity"; see his (1982).

"stressed" and "scared", the countervailing consideration that loomed large in their minds was not their own financial condition but rather the importance of operating as a small-but-cheerful cog in the machine during a global crisis. And some, like Jester D, saw themselves as figureheads of a sort, representing the comfort of routine and modeling grit and perseverance to the citizens who "peek[ed] out their windows" at them. These essential workers tell us that they found their work "really rewarding" and that it gave them a sense of "pride and purpose". They evidently took commendatory attitudes toward themselves, then. So, why shouldn't the rest of us join in?

To answer that question, allow me to introduce two final quotations from essential workers – the last that I will consider in this paper. Here is Dr. Laura Kolbe, in an opinion piece for the Journal of General Internal Medicine (2021):

> I love being a doctor. Moreover, I willingly undertook a career with significant occupational hazard—from unpredictable hours, to patients whose illness might cause volatility or aggression, to communicable diseases. This was the deal, in exchange for a career that brings such wonder and joy… I am willing to go beyond the specifics of my contract because I love and respect my role as a physician. Ongoing extreme risk without appropriate compensation or risk reduction should not be expected of healthcare workers, however, under the label of gifts or heroism… It's flattering, but as the months go on, it's also harder to call attention to the need for workplace improvements if one has internalized this view of one's higher-risk or unprecedented work as a gift to society.

And here is Diana Torres, a nurse at Mount Sinai West hospital in New York (Wallis 2020):

> I know people thought about quitting, but it became... you're going to quit now, when your coworkers are struggling and are suffering and you're just gonna let them be? They started applying pressure like, we need you. So for me, it became do I quit now and stay at home and cry about how I could have helped more and I didn't, or do I go in there and continue to expose myself to the point that I may potentially lose my life? If they had told us ahead of time what we were going to walk into, I'm sure most of us wouldn't have walked in through the doors. Right? But we didn't have an option. It was sort of like it just happened, and we were just victims of the broken system yet again, walking into a danger zone not even knowing what we were walking into. I don't want to be called a hero and die a hero because I lost my life to this because they failed us.

There is no reason to think that Kolbe's and Torres's primary motivations differ from those of McNeill and Jester D. They say nothing of money. They are medical workers, at least one of whom regards medicine as "a career that bring such wonder and joy". It seems fair, then, to assume that they were driven to keep working in-person throughout the pandemic at least in large part in recognition of the moral importance of medical work during an unexpected and unparalleled public health emergency. Nonetheless, their testimony also hints at something more insidious happening to their motivations. Torres tells us that she faced a very different kind of Sophie's choice from that faced by Kapralova and Hockaday; her options were to "go in there and expose myself to the point that I may potentially lose my life" or to "quit now and stay at home and cry about how I could have helped more and I didn't". It is somewhat misleading to use the words 'choice' and 'options' here, though, since Torres also tells us that she and her fellow nurses felt as though they "didn't have an option". The very fact that nurses were so heavily needed during the pandemic – especially in cities like New York, where Torres works – was used to "apply[] pressure" on her and her colleagues. They were thereby convinced to keep working, not by

being provided with accurate and up-to-date information about the "danger zone" that they were "walking into", but simply by being made to feel that the alternative would have been unconscionable. This case bears all the hallmarks of that paradigmatic form of manipulation known colloquially as a *guilt trip* (for a philosophical take on which see Barnhill 2014), in which Manipulator cajoles Manipulatee into acting as Manipulator wants by associating negative moral emotions with the idea of doing otherwise.

Kolbe's account echoes Torres's but adds some detail to the picture. In particular, Kolbe makes clear that *praise itself* can have the psychological effects that Torres articulates. She notes that it is the "labeling" of her work as "gifts or heroism" – i.e., precisely the form that praise of essential workers predominantly took, since it predominantly consisted in thanking essential workers and calling them heroes – that masks an expectation of "ongoing extreme risk without appropriate compensation or risk reduction". And she further emphasizes that the "internalization" of these labels inveigles essential workers into accepting their lot without question or complaint. This is an aspect of praise that is significant and concerning; it is the dark side of praise itself, as it were. Praise is often used to reward good behavior and to incentivize similar behavior going forward, either from one's praisees or from third parties within earshot. And it is sometimes used pre-emptively to indicate that a certain type of conduct is expected in a context, as e.g. in the case of signs that say, "Thank you for not smoking". But praise is Janus-faced, as we saw earlier; it aims not only to produce desired behavior in the future, but also to do so by recognizing and appreciating well-motivated instances of such behavior in the present or past. (This is the difference between genuine praise and mere Skinnerian behavioral conditioning.) It is thus important for praise's backward-looking component that it represents the praisee(s) as performing the praised behavior out of the goodness of their heart. When praise represents you as doing something out of the goodness of your heart, though, any subsequent admission of reluctance about doing it can feel like an admission that your heart is not as good as it has been made out to be. To praisees, the prospect of this admission can feel awkward at best and shameful at worst. Thus praise itself can be used to "apply pressure", as Torres puts it. We can compliment people into continuing to do whatever they're doing, and into acquiescing to whatever difficult circumstances come to surround this behavior.

There can be something curiously self-fulfilling about this sort of praise. To see what I mean, notice that praise for medical workers like Torres and Kolbe was full of placeholders; they were praised for *doing whatever it takes* to continue working during the pandemic and for *having whatever degree of moral concern* is sufficient to compel them to keep going in spite of the (ever-growing and largely unknown) risks or costs. As the pandemic raged on, with the risks and costs involved in their work steadily increasing, these variables were accordingly filled in progressively more demanding ways. But the praise remained constant, smoothing over the cracks. It was if those praising essential workers assumed that they, *qua* heroes, had arbitrarily high levels of moral concern – high enough that we could pre-emptively marvel at their willingness to keep going *no matter what*. What Torres's and Kolbe's remarks indicate is that the internalization of these expectations then brought about precisely that unfettered willingness in our praisees. I suspect that this dynamic can arise whenever someone is regularly praised for their willingness to fulfil a role that they adopted voluntarily, knowing that it would inevitably involve *some* personal costs and/or *some* exposure to risk (e.g. a career in medicine, as Kolbe describes). In such a case, receiving continual praise for one's commitment to fulfilling one's role despite "the risks" or "the costs" can secure this continued commitment even as the referents of the phrases 'the risks' and 'the costs' gradually shift from the mundane and routine to the extraordinary and extreme. Placeholder-filled praise encourages praisees to see whichever risks or costs come to be associated with their role as all of a piece – i.e., as simply part of what they signed up for when they took on the role. In doing so it discourages them from drawing the line somewhere, or from even thinking about where the line ought to be.

Kolbe also observes that internalizing the cultural narrative surrounding her work "makes it harder to call attention to the need for workplace improvements". This points toward another important part of the picture. To some extent, the observation can be explained by the phenomena just discussed: continual praise dampens one's resistance to a bait-and-switch between the risks and costs that one envisioned when one adopted a role and those one is actually being made to absorb, making it just as hard to admit that one would prefer for these downsides to be lessened as it is to admit to reluctance about performing one's role in general, given that one is now invested in a self-conception according to which one willingly bears the risks and costs associated with the role out of the goodness of one's heart. But this only explains why it was psychologically difficult for medical workers to bring themselves to (try to) *draw* attention to the need for workplace improvements. Something else remains to be explained: Why wasn't public attention placed on the need for workplace improvements *already?* Why is this something to which essential workers needed to call our attention? Why weren't we already attending to it?

I said earlier that when essential workers pointed out that they received praise in lieu of material and financial support, it was often the praise's sincerity that they were calling into question. This is true. But I do not think that questioning the sincerity of their praise was all that these essential workers were doing. They were also attempting to remedy a bad case of *misplaced attention* on the part of many of those lavishing them with praise. Roughly speaking, attention is misplaced when there is something else to which the attender should attend instead – where this more-worthy-of-attention thing might be more important, more urgent, or just more intimately related to the attender than that to which she in fact attends. For example, in the ethics of blame literature it has been suggested that norms of attention explain all of the most well-known restrictions on the standing to blame: hypocrites attend to others' moral faults and failings rather than to their own, complicit blamers attend to others' wrongdoing rather than to their own parts in the proceedings, and meddlesome blamers attend to the salacious peccadilloes of those to whom they bear no significant relation rather than to important things going on in their own lives (see King 2020). More precisely, though, norms of attention must be understood in comparative and diachronic terms. One does not plunge ineluctably into hypocrisy the instant one has a fleeting thought about another person's wrongdoing. What is important is that, *over time*, one attends *more* to one's own moral faults and failings than to those of others. Likewise, attending to the praiseworthy aspects of others' actions and motivations is all well and good as long as one does so *proportionately*. And what must be kept in proportion here is not only our attention to other aspects of people's conduct and character, but also to literally anything and everything else to which we might attend.[13]

In the case of essential workers during pandemic, several other things about their surrounding circumstances were frequently more attention-worthy than their praiseworthiness. Most notably, there was the hazardousness of their working conditions. Had we attended to this, we might then have attended to some challenging moral and political questions that would have become salient. More immediately, there were the questions of what the rest of us could (each) have done to improve essential workers' working conditions and of what we (each) might owe them in light of our dependence on their acceptance of these conditions and absorption of the associated risks. More broadly, there were the questions of how it came to be that this particular subsection of the population were the ones taking on significant personal risk for the sake of significant public benefit, whether it was just that this was so, and, to the extent that it was unjust, what could and should be done by way of remedy. In the case of essential workers who were driven to keep working in-person by sheer material necessity, these broader questions included ones about the (in)justice of the precarity of their financial status and the consequent severity of their material need. All of these challenging moral and political questions should have occupied a greater

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[13] Thanks to Zach Irving, Jessie Munton, and Susanna Siegel for discussing norms of attention with me.

share of the public attention at the beginning of the pandemic, given their urgency and importance. But they did not receive as much attention as they deserved. Instead, the public narrative surrounding essential workers focused on repeated brief celebrations of the praiseworthiness of their decisions to keep working. And where no such thing existed – in the case of essential workers driven by material necessity alone, whose decisions to keep working were not praiseworthy – we simply acted as if it did, ignoring the dire reality of their motivational states.

To be clear: it is not inevitable that praise should distract praisers from challenging moral and political questions concerning the praised behavior. Quite the contrary. In the case at hand, the hazardousness of essential workers' working conditions was part of what *made* their behavior as praiseworthy as it was and *also* part of what made these moral and political questions as urgent and important as they were. In attending to essential workers' praiseworthiness, then, praisers recognized – at least implicitly – one of the facts that made these moral and political questions so pressing. With that in mind, it was perfectly possible that, while experiencing commendatory attitudes and after expressing them, praisers could have gone on to consider these questions at length and discuss them in detail. Some of us did indeed consider and discuss them a bit. But many didn't. Having recognized (at least part of) the difficulty of essential workers' plight, we then turned our attention away from the upshots of this fact that required us to think hard and take action and toward the more comfortable upshots that were pleasant to reflect upon. This is the same shift of attention as that which occurs when someone compliments you on how well you deal with adversity rather than asking about how the adversity arose or how it might now be alleviated.

Praise's potential to manipulate and its potential to distract can give rise to reasons against praising that are independent of one another. But the import of these phenomena for the ethics of praise is particularly significant, I think, when they arise and work together. And we do indeed see this mutual reinforcement in the case at hand. Internalizing the message behind manipulative praise dissuades praisees from calling attention to the challenging moral and political questions surrounding their praised behavior, as Kolbe observes. Praise's manipulative aspects can thus shore up its distracting aspects by enabling them to occur unchallenged. At the same time, praise's distracting aspects can reinforce its manipulative aspects: by focusing the public narrative on the goodness of praisees' hearts and neglecting to raise the challenging moral and political questions, praise can create the impression that nobody could possibly owe these praisees anything besides the gratitude and esteem (and expressions thereof) that they are already receiving. Thus praise that simultaneously distracts and manipulates can serve an ideological function, since the overall impact is often to maintain the status quo: it is tough for praisees to request or demand improvements to their surrounding circumstances if their every "Look, this is really difficult…" is met with a cheery "Yes, good for you for doing it!" before they can get to "What we want is…" or "We need…". And it is even tougher if they have been led to feel guilty about even pointing out the problems. Moreover, even for those of us who are not ourselves praisees, it is difficult to reorient a conversation toward the challenging moral and political questions surrounding someone else's behavior if praise keeps dragging the focus back to the exemplariness of this behavior and the goodness of their heart.

6. Broader Lessons

It is time to go beyond the case study.

The four problematic aspects of praise that I have surveyed are by no means confined to praise of essential workers during pandemic. Any sort of praise whatsoever might possess the myopic flaws of insincerity or unfittingness. And even the more complex one-two punch of praise that simultaneously distracts and manipulates is a dynamic that arises frequently elsewhere. As the third Redditor above

shrewdly noted, a similar rhetoric has long surrounded members of the armed forces and especially low-level infantry. It is also common for people whose work serves an obvious public benefit – social workers, state-school teachers, public defenders and so on – to be paid relatively poorly in comparison with similar work in the private sector, apparently with the expectation that their work's clear moral value will be sufficient to motivate them regardless of salary. ("Virtue is its own reward", we say, as though we were thoughtfully avoiding associating more tangible rewards with virtue for fear that doing so would taint it somehow.) And feminist scholars have long criticized the ways in which housework and childcare can be expected of women, without any form of compensation whatsoever, in the context of a narrative that paints them as driven to perform this labor out of love and therefore needing no further reward or support of any kind. In short: essential workers are far from the first to experience this dynamic. But the sheer scale of the phenomena in their case has left them well-positioned to notice and describe it. And some have tried to do so. Those of us with interests in the ethics of praise would be wise to listen.

Since the ethics of blame literature is heavily focused on the standing to blame, one might wonder whether these aspects of the ethics of praise point to comparable restrictions on the standing to praise. I think that the concept of standing to praise is an interesting concept that is well worth investigating but that it is not very useful or illuminating in the case at hand. For the usual restrictions on the standing to blame find no purchase when it comes to praise for essential workers: the phenomena explored in this paper can arise even if praisers avoid hypocrisy by praising all essential workers equally, even if they avoid complicity by doing nothing to facilitate or provoke the praised behavior (indeed, the fact that praisers did nothing to facilitate the praised behavior was *part of the problem*), and despite the fact that essential workers' efforts to oil the social wheels and/or directly combat the COVID-19 virus were very much praisers' business. Moreover, while one certainly might try to sell the argument of this paper with the claim that I have discovered four conditions on the standing to praise, I see no need to put these points in terms of standing. I find it unilluminating to say that those praising essential workers lacked the right to do so or that essential workers were permitted to ignore their praise. That might be true. But it is immaterial. Insofar as our praise was insincere, unfitting, manipulative, or distracting, these were important *pro tanto* considerations against this praise even if they were not strong enough to deprive us of a right, generate an exclusionary permission, or even render our praise impermissible overall.

Indeed, cramming all of the ethics of praise into considerations of standing seems very much in the spirit of what I earlier called "the myopic view". It is an only slightly souped-up version of the myopic view that sees the ethics of praise as entirely a matter of the detection of three synchronic, binary properties – sincere/insincere, fitting/unfitting, with standing/standingless – whose presence is supposed to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a particular instance of praise to be all-things-considered appropriate. What this approach misses is a nuanced understanding of praise's *psychological impact* on praisers, praisees, and third parties, and of the ways in which this psychological impact can generate reasons to be cautious about praising. These are reasons that are specific to praise's nature and functions, and thus properly part of the ethics of praise, but that nonetheless can only be understood diachronically and that vary in both form and degree in light of not only the relationship(s) between praiser and praisee but also the wider social context in which an instance of praise occurs.

One might also wonder about the extent to which these aspects of the ethics of praise reflect an analogous phenomenon to that which Bell (2012) calls the "positionality" of blame. Bell is skeptical of the utility of the notion of standing to blame, but she does hold that "blame's moral propriety sometimes depends on

the relationship between the blamer and the target" (*ibid.*, p.263).[14] Here I am more optimistic, though cautiously so. For the *capacity* of praise for essential workers to manipulate or to distract does not seem to vary with praisers' relationship to their praisees. On the contrary, both the manipulation and the distraction were cumulative impacts of the praise of an entire society of people, each of whom bore a different set of relationships to those in their set of praisees. And each individual praiser contributed to these cumulative impacts, their particular relationships to their praisees notwithstanding. Nonetheless, both the specific *way* in which an instance of praise manipulates and distracts and the *moral egregiousness* of its doing so are indeed relationship-dependent. For example, the thing from which distracting praise distracts a given individual – be it thinking about whether to give their employees hazard pay, thinking about whether to propose legislation requiring all employers to give employees hazard pay, or just thinking about whether to campaign on essential workers' behalf and donate some money – varies depending on whether that individual is an employer, a politician, or a member of the public. Similarly, the degree and variety of pressure that someone's praise can put on an essential worker varies depending on whether they are a coworker engaged in the same projects, a manager or supervisor, or a member of the public who benefits from their work. And the distraction and manipulation of managers' and supervisors' praise was presumably more morally egregious than that of praise of members of the public, since the former were in a much better position to directly improve working conditions than the latter.

Lastly, it is worth acknowledging that some employers *did* directly improve their employees' working conditions – and, likewise, some politicians did propose legislation aimed at improving essential workers' lot, some members of the public campaigned on their behalf, some journalists amplified their stories, and so forth. That is all to the good, of course. And, to the extent that these individuals continued to praise essential workers, it alleviates the problematic aspects of their praise. Misplaced attention is rectified with well-placed attention, and patterns of attention can become well-placed once they have ceased to be self-servingly selective. Similarly, it makes it easier (rather than harder) for essential workers to call attention to the need for workplace improvements if they are *already* praised in a heavily qualified way that explicitly recognizes the difficulty of their work and the injustice of the fact that only certain segments of the population have to perform this work, with this heavily qualified praise accompanied by sincere discussion of the challenging moral and political questions about how the rest of us can support them and what we may owe them. That sort of heavily qualified praise would assuage the pressure on essential workers rather than exacerbating it. So, my conclusion is not that we should stop praising essential workers altogether. Far from it. In this and in all other cases of misrepresentative, distracting, and manipulative praise, it would be unproblematic to identify and appreciate the praiseworthiness of those actions that are in fact praiseworthy *alongside* raising the challenging questions rather than as a way of avoiding reckoning with them. That is precisely what I have tried to do in this paper.

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[14] The precise way in which Bell understands the positionality of blame does not seem to apply to my case, either: Bell argues that there exist "relationship-dependent norms" to which only related individuals are in a position to hold one another, such as the norms of artistic integrity to which two friends from art school might hold one another (p.277), but the norms at issue in the case of praise for essential workers do not seem to be relationship-dependent in this sense. Nonetheless, there *is* a different kind of relationship-dependence in play in this case, as discussed in the main text. Thanks to Juliana Bidadanure for prompting me to discuss the positionality of praise.

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