

Meaning, Praise, and Anger: Essays in Moral Psychology

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# Meaning, Praise, and Anger: Essays in Moral Psychology

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This dissertation explores philosophical issues related to meaning, praise and anger. The first chapter highlights cases in which one is causally responsible for something that alters the meaning of their life, but seemingly not morally responsible for doing so. In this type of case, the agent nonetheless takes themselves to be responsible. I sketch an account—grounded in meaning in life as a distinctive value— to make more sense of these experiences from the perspective of the agent. The second chapter concerns private praise, private blame and the symmetry thesis about praise and blame. The chapter addresses the question of whether praise can be done privately and what that privacy would have to look like. I argue that the possibility of private praise should be used in the evaluation of newly emerging theories of praise. The third chapter highlights the way praise and blame function together to manage informal social groups. These groups determine how social goods are distributed, what ideas are taken seriously, the meaning of one's utterances, and a person's identity. The fourth chapter explores issues of praise in Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* and highlights some puzzles that emerge from Shantideva's seemingly conflicting advice about how we should praise others freely yet avoid being praised ourselves. Using the tools developed in the previous chapters, we can make sense of some of these Shantidevan suggestions about praise if we understand praise as changing one's group and if we take seriously the possibility that the best thing to do is to praise something, but to do so privately. Finally, the fifth chapter is about anger. In it, I highlight how expressions

of anger get their power from anger's deviant nature. As such, insofar as theorists are successful in establishing or changing norms about anger, critics of anger give it power and defenders of anger defang it.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Timothy Michael Kwiatek was born in Boston, Massachusetts where he grew up in the punk scene. His earliest exposure to philosophical ideas was through song lyrics. After years of hitchhiking and riding freight trains across the country, he settled in North Carolina, where he began studying Buddhist philosophical texts while residing in moldy sheds. He later made a home for himself at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he majored in philosophy with a minor in classical humanities. He began graduate school at Cornell University in 2015. He will begin a lectureship at Cornell in August 2023.

“The time I waited seemed endless, and I felt doubts and fears crowding upon me. What sort of place had I come to, and among what kind of people? What sort of grim adventure was it on which I had embarked?”

Dedicated to Buckaroo Jr. (forthcoming).

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Introduction

1. Meaning, Tragedy and Responsibility
  1. Heracles Cases
  2. Senses of Responsibility
    - 2.1 Metaphysical
    - 2.2 Social
    - 2.3 Blaming Ourselves and Accepting Responsibility
  3. Ruining Your Life and Meaning Responsibility
  4. Objections
    - 4.1 Agent Regret
    - 4.2 Too Much Blame
    - 4.3 Is Meaning Appropriate?
  5. Conclusion
  
2. Private Praise
  1. Private Praise the Three Troubling Theses
    - 1.1 Avoid the Problem by Avoid Praise
    - 1.2 Publicity Condition and Privacy
    - 1.3 Symmetry
  2. The Judgment View
  3. The Action View
    - 3.1 Motivating Examples
    - 3.2 Mechanics of Private Praise
  4. Praise as a Success Term
    - 4.1 Praising Persons and Praising Good Qualities
  5. Phenomenology of Private Praise
  6. Conclusion
  
3. “We Accept You, One of Us”: Praise and Blame as a Theory of Group Management
  1. Groups
  2. Managing a Group
  3. Praise, Blame and The Stickiness of Groups
  4. Help and Harm in Terms of Groups
  5. Nonmoral Blame and Nonmoral Praise
  6. The Characteristic Sting of Absence
  7. Grouping the Dead and Grouping in Private
  8. Other Features of GMT
  9. The Ethics of Praise & Blame as the Ethics of Group Management
  10. Conclusion

4. Praise in Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*
  1. The Text
  2. The Puzzle
  3. Tools for Interpretation
    - 3.1 Praise and Groups
    - 3.2 Wisdom and Praise
    - 3.3 Near and Far Enemies of Praise
  4. Conclusion
  
5. Anger, Deviance and Affliction
  1. Optimists and Pessimists
    - 1.1 The Fire Analogy
  2. Shock and Diminishing Returns
  3. A Middle Way
  4. Compassion
  5. Conclusion

Appendix: A Comparison of English Translations of Shantideva on Praise

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCA *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*

TAV The Action View (of Praise)

TJV The Judgment View (of Praise)

GMT Group Management Thesis (about Praise)

## **Introduction**

This is a philosophy dissertation on moral psychology. It concerns three related topics—meaning, praise and anger—and their roles and moral importance within a person’s psychology.

The first chapter explores the ways meaning in life as a distinct value can ground a sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility, which I call “meaning responsibility” is tracked by the phenomenological experience of agents who are causally responsible but not morally responsible for outcomes in their lives. This is most salient in tragic examples where the agent destroys something that contributes to the meaning of their life. However, I also consider some examples of how one’s life can unexpectedly and unintentionally become meaningful through a similar mechanism of responsibility.

The next three chapters concern praise. Praise is largely ignored as a distant cousin of blame. This dissertation aims to shed light on praise and some of the fascinating things that it does and ways that we use it, misuse it, and could use it better. The second chapter aims to end a conversation about private praise. The subsequent two chapters aim to start new conversations.

The second chapter concerns private praise—praising someone without the target of the praise knowing—or, in a stronger sense, praising someone without anyone other than the praiser knowing about it. I argue that it is a theoretical virtue of any account of praise that it be able to explain how this happens. The assumptions that lead to the denial of private praise are faulty. But in clarifying them, we can learn more about praise in general, and perhaps a little about praiseworthiness. I develop what I take to be the strongest objection to the possibility of private praise, namely the idea that “praise” is a success term. If this is true, kind words expressed to someone who does not recognize them as praise, may not count as an instance of praise. However, the considerations against this are sufficient to dismiss the idea of praise as a success term.

Chapter three develops my own theory about a function of praise and blame. According to my account, one of the functions of praise and blame together is to manage our place within

## Introduction

social groups. This is especially true of the sort of social groups that are loosely associated (like a group of Iron Maiden fans, the group of Kantians or even just a group of friends), as opposed to those which are more formal in their structure (like members of the US Senate, members of The Ramones, or members of the Cornell Philosophy department). Blame can be used to marginalize people within a group or to kick someone out of a group. Similarly, praise can have the effect of drawing the praised into the social group of the praiser. When the new group is inconsistent with membership in the old group, then praise from the wrong person at the wrong time can compromise one's social identity. Since so much of the management of these informal social groups is done within the perceivers mental space, this theory can readily accommodate private praise as well as private blame.

Chapter four examines the place of praise in Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*. Insofar as contemporary western philosophy engages with the thought of Shantideva, it tends to be about his views on anger. This is natural enough, since there is a rich debate about anger in contemporary western philosophy, often connected with blame, which Shantideva's remarks can fit into. One might be surprised to learn that Shantideva said at least as much about praise as he did about anger. It is also natural enough that this would not connect with western philosophical discussions of praise since these are also in their infancy. The aim of this chapter is to start making that connection. I appeal to the group management function of praise and blame that I developed in the previous chapter to offer a possible interpretation of Shantideva's remarks about praise, particularly the tension between the suggestion that we should praise others more freely, while not seeking praise for ourselves, and of tactfully avoiding praise when we encounter it.

The final chapter is about anger. The aim of this chapter is to diagnose a problem that arises if one defends anger as a legitimate part of moral discourse and practice. Anger is a deviant emotion. It gets its power from its subversive nature. When moral theorists defend anger and take it under the umbrella of moral discourse, make it a fair move in the moral game, they deprive anger of some of its power. And, somewhat paradoxically, moral critics of anger give anger some of its power. I consider a third position, neither optimistic nor pessimistic about anger, which

## Introduction

avoids this problem.



## Chapter 1

### Responsibility, Meaning and Tragedy

“There are things I’ve done I can’t erase.  
I wanna look in the mirror and see another face.”

Reporting on his experiences in World War II, E.B. Sledge describes a particular night in the foxholes. His fellow marines were anticipating attacks by Japanese soldiers and developed a system of passwords to help distinguish friend from foe in the total darkness. Sledge’s friend Jay approached his foxhole to ask for water but forgot the password. Sledge took aim and began to squeeze the trigger of his gun when the man called Sledge by his nickname, which ended up functioning as well as the password. Sledge reflects that: “My life would have been ruined if I had killed him, even under those circumstances” (Sledge 1990, p. 111).

The recent philosophical literature on responsibility is partly a project to expand, precisify and make coherent our intuitions about responsibility in a variety of cases. This has helped us develop a more fine-grained notion of responsibility from the more course-grained sense in which we use it colloquially. But for all that we have refined our understanding, something is still missing in the way we discuss responsibility. We can alter the meaning of our lives while failing to meet all the necessary conditions for moral responsibility. That is to say, we can undermine or destroy the meaning of our lives even if we do not act freely, do not disclose our true self or do not know what we are doing and are not the appropriate target of reactive attitudes. We can do it in ways that use our particular capacities and social positions against our own ends. Responsibility theory does not have the tools to account for this kind of tragedy. It seems too

harsh to say the agent is morally responsible. Yet if we say that the agent is not responsible, this can alienate an agent from highly relevant aspects of her own life.

In this paper I will introduce representative cases of the pattern I am interested in. I will show that many current accounts of responsibility will omit such cases. These accounts, and modifications of them either continue to exclude the cases, or have other problematic results. Finally, I will sketch the additional sense of responsibility which I propose will explain our mixed intuitions in these cases and allow us to understand more of the texture of such cases. I argue the agents in question are responsible for their action, not in virtue of their freedom, knowledge, or quality of will. Instead, the agents are responsible in virtue of the change the action creates in the meaning of their lives.

### **1. Heracles Cases**

The pattern I want to identify occurs in real life instances, such as the one Sledge narrowly avoided above. However, it is made most salient in a fictional example which grants us access to the agent's inner world. Examples of this form involve an agent who fails to meet at least one condition of responsibility, but who nonetheless is involved in some action that affects the meaning of their lives. Call cases like these Heracles cases. The most central of which is...

**Madness:** Heracles comes home from his trials in the underworld. As he returns to his family, the god Madness intervenes. Madness interferes with Heracles' perception such that he comes to believe that the lives of his family are threatened by attackers. Heracles fights and kills these attackers to protect his wife and children. The effects of Madness wear off and

## Responsibility, Meaning and Tragedy

Heracles looks around in horror as he realizes that there were no attackers, and that he just killed his wife and children.

Bernard Williams also considers this case, among others from Greek tragedy, saying of these tragic characters "...they may recognise that what they unintentionally did, if it did not destroy their lives, changed them radically, and changed them because they did the thing not just because of what happened to them" (Williams 1996, p. 74). Such a character "...needs to recognise and express his responsibility for actions when no one else would have the right to make a claim for damages or be in a position to" (Williams 1996, p. 74).

Williams' project in *Shame and Necessity* is to argue that the ancient Greeks had a robust notion of agency and responsibility. However, his discussion of these tragic cases focuses on the agent accepting responsibility, by contrast with the agent being responsible. I want to highlight three points on which we agree, which I take to be among the central features of the sense of responsibility I want to distinguish. First is that the agent in such a case plays an active role in destroying their life. Second, not featured in the quotes above but mentioned repeatedly in the text, is that this destruction is located in the significance or meaning of their lives. Finally, the agent recognizes their own responsibility, even if no one else would. They blame themselves, even if no one else is in a position to blame them. The measure of Heracles' responsibility here is not the freedom of his actions, and/or the fulfillment of a knowledge condition, but the severity of impact he had on the significance, the meaning of his life. Somehow the way it connects to the meaning of his live circumvents any other conditions.

One advantage of the Heracles case is that we are given the details. We see it from Heracles' distorted perspective. We get the account of what interferes with his perception, and we see the results before he does. Unfortunately, Madness comes very close to real life instances, for which we have only the testimony and remorse of the agent. But there are real life cases like...

**PTSD:** John returns home from his military service in Iraq and tries to resume a civilian life. One day, he wakes up bleeding in a jail cell. The police inform him that he attacked his fiancée. He sees cuts on his chest and is informed that he did this to himself as well. He has no recollection of these things, but accepts that they are true. He was aware that this was possible and always tried to be cautious in limiting the time he spent with loved ones, lest this occurs. But his cautions were not enough.

**Parasomnia:** Parks falls asleep in front of the television and regains consciousness to find himself with a knife in his hand standing above his repeatedly stabbed mother-in-law. He goes to the police station and reports that he thinks he has killed someone. Parks has a history of strange sleep behavior but no history of violence, and previously had a good relationship with his in-laws. It becomes clear that after falling asleep in front of the television, he got up, dressed, drove to his mother-in-law's house, and attacked both his in-laws. He had no recollection of any of this and was confused and horrified upon hearing what he had done.

Are Heracles, John and Parks responsible for these actions that brought ruin upon their lives? I have conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, I do not feel inclined to blame them. It seems hard to know what to say if we were to reprimand them. What might we tell them they ought to have done differently? Should Heracles refrain from protecting his loved ones, in anticipation of being tricked by the gods? Should John never spend time around people at all? Should Parks never fall asleep? All of these seem like too much to ask. Or in evaluating their character, should we fault Heracles for his impulse to protect his loved ones? This also seems inappropriate. At the same time, it seems fitting for them to blame themselves. I take it they are tracking an important connection between themselves and their actions. I will argue that there is a sense in which Heracles, John and Parks are responsible, (though not necessarily deserving of blame from others) but it is not one to be found in the responsibility literature.

One cue we can take from that literature is to look at cases toward which we have these ambivalent reactions as a guide. Such cases can suggest that there are multiple senses of responsibility to be disentangled. Resolving this ambiguity in how we use the term “responsibility” can help resolve conflicting intuitions.

Grim as all these stories are, they help us get a grip on a different way of being responsible. For the sake of developing a theoretical framework, I will sometimes focus on the Madness case. But it is important to remember that this is not simply a fictional matter. Further, I chose extreme cases because they make the matter particularly salient, but it is not essential for instances of such responsibility. We can impact the meaning and significance of our lives in less dire ways.

## **2. Different Senses of Responsibility**

## 2.1 Metaphysical

“Responsibility” is used in a variety of ways in the literature. None of them quite capture the sense in which it applies to Heracles cases. There is some dispute about whether there is one true sense of responsibility or if there is a plurality. For the sake of this project, I assume that there are multiple senses contained within the colloquial conception of responsibility. It is among these we must search for one which give the agents in Heracles cases the ability to express the responsibility they feel.

Clearly there is some relation between Heracles and the killing of his family. After all, he killed them with his own two hands. This is a major part of what is so horrifying to him and to the audience. But what else could the relation be? Next we should survey some already existing notions of responsibility. Consider perhaps the most minimal sense of causal responsibility. Carolina Sartorio explains that

“When philosophers say that responsibility is grounded in causation, what they typically mean to say is that (moral) responsibility presupposes, and is grounded in, causal responsibility. They typically take this to entail two things. First, agents can only be morally responsible for certain outcomes in the world if they are causally responsible for those outcomes, in the sense that there is some act (or omission) of theirs that causally contributed to those outcomes. And, second, when agents are morally responsible for outcomes, their being causally responsible for those outcomes is part of what accounts for their moral responsibility, or is part of what makes them morally responsible for those outcomes (although, again, other things contribute to making them morally responsible, in particular, the satisfaction of certain epistemic conditions for responsibility).” (Sartorio 2016, p. 23/24)

We can call this the causal condition. Heracles meets this condition. This is not to say that he meets some special criteria of being the cause. Rather, it is obvious that he is one cause among many, which makes him a candidate for some other form of responsibility. As Sartorio explains

this does not necessarily entail a further sense of responsibility. If Heracles was merely causally responsible in virtue of being a cause, we should again feel the same about Heracles (and expect him to feel the same) in the first case as we do about the following case:

**Unknowning:** Heracles has completed his trials in the underworld. On his way home he takes the path along the stream, rather than across the field. This causes an agitated observer to fly into a rage. The observer then proceeds to kill Heracles' family before Heracles gets home.

In this case, the death of his family does not seem to be attached to him as personally. In this scenario there was less that was particular to him.

There is a further distinction to be made between being a cause and being the cause. In the initial case, Heracles is a cause of the death of his family, but so is Madness, without whom things would have gone quite differently. For that matter, his wife is a cause of the death of her children, in virtue of having given birth to them in the first place. So an agent can be more or less of a cause. There is a spectrum of causal responsibility along which an agent can fall. Consider another case:

**Giants:** Heracles is picked up by a giant and hurled into his family. The collision kills his wife and children. Heracles is injured, but he survives.

## Responsibility, Meaning and Tragedy

In *Giants*, Heracles is a more central cause than in *Unknowing*. He will feel more guilt and find this experience more traumatic, but this is still not the same connection as in the initial case with *Madness*. It is clear enough that Heracles was a more important cause of the death of his children in *Heracles* than their mother was. And while he comes closer in *Giants*, he is still not the same. He is less easily replaced in *Madness* than in *Giants*. The giant could throw almost any sufficiently grown adult at Heracles' family to harm them, not to mention any other kind of massive object. The possible causes are interchangeable. In the previous cases, Heracles is readily replaceable. Maybe the agitated observer flies into a rage whenever anyone walks across his field. But it is Heracles' specific fighting skillset that is employed when he kills his family in the first case. If *Madness* similarly deluded Heracles' two-year-old child, his mother could simply pick him up and prevent him from doing such major harm. So it seems important that Heracles played this central role, used his special skillset.

Notions of responsibility range from those which are more metaphysical to those which are more grounded in social practice. One interesting example of an account of responsibility that retains this sense of metaphysical robustness is found in Robert Adams' paper "Involuntary Sins." In this, he explores the ways agents can be responsible for beliefs, emotions and other states of mind, even if they did not knowingly or volitionally bring them about. He claims that we are responsible, in the sense that we deserve blame, for our bad emotions, states and dispositions as much as our actions. However, his account is also sensitive to forward-looking considerations. So on his view, it is a further question to whom we ought to express our censure and blaming attitudes in light of forward-looking considerations about whether it will help them (or society) improve. But, in contrast, he says that the things we are responsible for, whether or not anyone



blames us for them, belong to us in virtue of the fact that they influence the moral significance of our lives. This notion of influencing the moral significance of our lives is insightful. Adams does not spell out moral significance, but in an intuitive sense, it seems that killing all of your loved ones fits that description.

So Heracles is probably responsible in Adams' sense, and furthermore, so is everyone, for everything they do. For Adams, the question to distinguish cases is not whether the agent is responsible, but whether the agent should be blamed. He says that this blame should be distributed in a forward looking way, with an eye towards improving the agent or the society. So the account, it seems, would say that Heracles is responsible in such a way that we bystanders are entitled to blame him, at least if any good will come of it. I have the opposite intuition. In Heracles cases, it seems to me that it is less appropriate for bystanders to blame the agent, provided they know the whole story. However, it still seems right that the agent should be able to blame herself. As such, Adams' account seems like overkill to try and capture what is going on with Heracles.

### **2.2 Social**

Other views are less concerned with the metaphysical and are more socially grounded. Instead, they take the kind of reactions the agent meets with as the guide to whether or not she is responsible. P.F. Strawson famously grounds moral responsibility in our social practices that involve having and expressing certain reactive attitudes towards one another on the basis of an action. Loosely speaking, the kind of thing I would resent you for is the kind of thing for which you are responsible. I do not react to your freedom or lack thereof, but to the quality of your will.

This is not the relation Heracles bears to his actions either. The story stipulates his good quality of will. He was trying to save his family, not to harm them. This is not the kind of intention we would be likely to resent Heracles for. Pity might be a more appropriate response, in light of the outcome.

Gary Watson introduced the idea that there is not a single unified conception of responsibility. Instead, responsibility has multiple faces. Watson makes a distinction between responsibility as attributability and responsibility as accountability. Watson explains: "The significance of attributable behavior is not its causal relation to the 'deep self' but that it expresses what the agent stands for in this activity." (Watson 2004, p. 260). So do Heracles' actions express what he stands for? This will depend on how we understand the actions. On the one hand, they express that he stands for the protection of his family. This is what motivates his action in the first place. This does not seem like a blameworthy thing to stand for. So it is hard to see him as responsible in this sense for bringing about the complete opposite of his intended aim, which expresses one of his deepest commitments. On the other hand, his actions express something else that he stands for and has built his life around. They disclose that he stands for combat and violence. A Heracles committed to pacifism would not encounter the same problem. He is renowned for his strength and his skill in combat. So while he does not stand for violence directed at his family per se, he very much stands for violence. In this sense, he may be more responsible for the action. I take it that both of these sense are true to some extent. The tension between the two contributes to the tragedy of his situation. But the way he stands for protecting his family exceeds the way in which he stands for violence. His love of violence and combat is not

indiscriminate. If it were, we would have to see a Heracles somewhat disappointed at having killed his family, but still thrilled from the fight.

More recently, Shoemaker (2015) develops a Strawsonian account of three faces of responsibility. He, too, motivates this multiplicity of responsibilities by appeal to its explanatory power. When asked whether or not an agent is responsible, we have ambivalent reactions in certain cases. If we assume there is only one form of responsibility, we cannot explain this ambivalence. With a variety of kinds, any of which can apply to a certain case or not, we can explain the apparent ambivalence. If this is the case, when we have these ambivalent attitudes, we simply have not sufficiently sharpened and distinguished our notions of responsibility. The ambivalence comes from the fact that an agent is, for example, answerable but not accountable, or attributable but not answerable.

For Shoemaker, answerability roughly tracks an agent's quality of judgment. Attributability tracks an agent's quality of character. Accountability tracks an agent's quality of regard. Each face of responsibility will prompt different reactive attitudes. Shoemaker associates each of these faces of responsibility with clusters of these attitudes into rather a large "emotional family." The answerable agent will meet with disappointment, disapproval, irritation, frustration or shame for her failures and approval, approbation or appreciation for her successes. The attributable agent will meet with disdain, contempt, disesteem, abhorrence, hatred, revulsion, or shame for her failures and esteem, veneration, awe, elevation, pride or veneration for her successes. Finally, the accountable agent will meet with resentment, indignation, guilt, hurt feelings or shame for her failures, while meeting gratification or warm feelings for her successes.

However, even with Shoemaker's tripartite account at our disposal, Heracles cases can still generate this kind of ambivalence. He did not exhibit a failure of character. He did not hesitate to rush into battle with the aim of protecting his family. I find it difficult to see him as the appropriate target of contempt or the related emotions Shoemaker characterizes. While his perception was altered, his judgement remained as good as we can reasonably expect of him. It was not a poor choice to protect his loved ones from the face of harm. And similarly, it is hard to see him as a fitting target of disappointment or irritation. There seems to be little more that we could ask of him in this situation. So much for him being answerable. Finally, the quality of his regard is also in good order. He cared about the well-being of his family. Here there may be concern that he did not show sufficient regard for the well-being of their attackers. But again, he does not seem to be the appropriate target of resentment or indignation, except perhaps by an observer who did not understand the details of the story. And these accounts are not meant to ground responsibility in the reactive attitudes of mistaken observers.

None of the reactions Shoemaker's account predicts were salient in any of the original stories from the cases considered. Euripides' Heracles ends with a friend consoling Heracles and taking him back to Athens to start a new life, rather than blaming him. Parks was found not guilty at his trial. And John is remarkably still friends with the partner he attacked.

It seems the agents in Heracles cases are not responsible in any of these social senses. They may be responsible in the more metaphysical senses. But mere causal responsibility does not explain the badness of Heracles' situation. Adams' account captures Heracles' own attitude of seeing himself as responsible. But only at the cost of capturing all cases. Then an action that an agent is responsible for is simply any action an agent performs. I do not think this is necessarily

the case. Heracles' action is of a special subset of cases in which the agent fails to meet a standard conditions. In contrast, if Heracles' actions had been controlled directly by the gods, this would not be a challenging or marginal case at all. We might think we are somehow being compassionate towards the people in these cases in our theorizing by not treating them as responsible. But doing so runs the risk of leaving them excluded from the moral community entirely as not worthy of moral evaluation. There is this important sense in which it is to our advantage to be on the hook for our wrongdoings, especially when the alternative is exclusion from a fundamental aspect of human interaction or alienation from our own actions.

### **2.3 Blaming Ourselves and Accepting Responsibility**

There are two other kinds of cases that ought to be distinguished from Heracles cases. I group these together because they seem to have no necessary conditions external to the agent. First is when people speak of "accepting" responsibility for their actions. This can be a strictly social matter and has few, if any, requirements beyond affirmation by the agent. I can accept responsibility for actions in circumstances where it was impossible for me to do otherwise, know the relevant information, etc..

I can do this in a tactical way in order to protect someone else from blame or absorb some of the blame or punishment that would otherwise be concentrated upon them. I can do this even if I have no relevant feelings of regret or self-admonition and even if I in fact, did nothing wrong. But this is a distinct sense from the kinds of responsibility discussed in this literature. This is not what happens in Heracles cases. The agents do not take the fall to protect someone else, or otherwise take on a burden which is not theirs to endure.

The second category of case involves both the feelings of regret and the affirmation of responsibility and fault, but where the agent is still not in fact responsible. These feelings do not attach to a feature of the agent's life or character. A child may mistakenly blame herself for her parent's divorce when there is no sense in which this is true. Nonetheless, the child may grow up holding on to this mistaken belief, which could easily take a psychological toll upon her. But in conversation with friends or a therapist, she could come to realize that this is a mistaken belief, and the negative feelings that come from it could fade in time. After all, she actually has done nothing to feel guilty about. It was not her action (or character, or existence) that caused it. This is also not what is happening with Heracles. We could imagine a friend telling him to forgive himself, but an attempt to convince him that it was somehow not his doing would be inadequate, if not completely misguided. And this latter, unsatisfying consolation is all our current accounts of responsibility can offer.

Heracles cases are different. They do not meet the conditions for any other sense of moral responsibility. They are not merely accepting responsibility because someone has to. Nor are they mistakenly blaming themselves. Knowing all the details of the story, it seems that blame from someone else would not be fitting. The agents are blaming themselves enough for everyone. Yet they seem somehow correct in blaming themselves, in a way the child in the divorce case considered above was not. Agents who mistakenly blame themselves can, in principle, be talked out of their blame. The agents in Heracles cases would receive no such benefit. Whatever Heracles did to move on with his life would have to start from understanding what he did, even though it is the complete opposite of what he was trying to do. They would need a way to express their responsibility and understand having ruined their lives.

### 3. Ruining Your Life and Meaning Responsibility

What does it mean to ruin your life? It does not mean your life is over. Indeed, part of the difficulty is that one must keep on living. But it does mean that something that gave meaning to your life, some project, some sense of identity or stability, has been ripped from it so irrevocably as to leave a permanent scar. Killing someone you care about, even under circumstances like those described above, is a paradigm example. Given the irreversible nature of killing, this is often a component in such cases. But it is not necessary. In retrospect, one could say that their life was ruined by many things like getting kicked out of school or even moving up in socio-economic status and thus losing connections to friends and family.<sup>1</sup> There can be something admirable about seeing one's self as responsible for events of such magnitude.

Claud Lanzmann made the film *Shoah* about the holocaust in WWII. Among those he interviewed were both the willing perpetrators and those coerced into participation. The filmmaker, no less than the viewer, found many of these unrepentant characters abhorrent. One interview was with a Polish man who drove trains to Treblinka. His name was Gawkowski. He did this job under threat to his life when he was twenty years old. Even so, he was only able to make himself do it with the aid of heavy drinking. Thirty-five years later as Lanzmann interviewed other people, some laughed about their participation, others lamented it, but most had somehow moved on. Gawkowski was unusual among them as someone the filmmaker saw as different from many of the others. He had sympathy for Gawkowski precisely because he could not get over it. It is this sort of unhealed wound that is under discussion here. These wounds themselves can be

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<sup>1</sup> See Morton (2019).

more than just cause for pity. Perhaps they can be appropriate. And the particular disposition through which they do not heal, can be a valuable quality.

An agent is inconsolable if they persist in blaming themselves for past wrongdoing. We can see that someone is inconsolable when they are no longer the target of active blame from others, and they are not expected to blame themselves but they cannot help but do it anyway. They carry on living, but life is never the same. They see something clearly which those around them may not. They feel the severity of what they have participated in to a degree that transcends objective evaluation of it. The inconsolable agent may not have met any standard conditions for responsibility, but they know themselves to be responsible. After enough time, they may no longer be the target of anyone else's blame, but their self-blame does not relent. It is conspicuous, as in Gawkowski's case that sometimes other people like that quality. It is not that we want them to suffer more than is necessary. It's not that we want some special revenge or retribution. We just respect the way they are rightly inconsolable in the face of such tragedy.

One reason to respect this quality is that being properly inconsolable is built up of several other good qualities. These include a proper sensitivity to moral reality, an Emersonian self-reliance. The agent who cannot be consoled over minor regrets of their childhood or an action that was not even a moral failing does not exhibit the valuable sort of inconsolability of interest here. They lack sensitivity to the right features of morality. Similarly, a person consistently browbeaten by the judgment of their peers into continual blaming of themselves does not exhibit this quality, they have merely caved to peer pressure. It is essential that this comes from the agent themselves. Importantly, the inconsolable agent has not yet given up on themselves.



In order to function, most of us have to put our failures and wrongdoings out of our minds. For most failures this is permissible, as long as we've learned from them and set out not to repeat them. We can then live in the moment again. The ordinary demand for self-blame, insofar as one exists, has a limited duration. This is a sort of blameworthiness that is forever because the agent makes it forever. It is not responsive to the healing touch of time. And when the evil is severe enough, this is how it should be. The inconsolable agent still carries on with their life and does their duty. But they never forget and they never forgive themselves. Indeed, at a certain level, it is among their duties not to forget or forgive. What they do is carry on in a way that sidesteps that process. The rest of their life is heavier for it. It is their ability to carry that weight that we recognize and could rightly respect. It would be too much to say we admire it, because it is not a quality anyone would hope for a chance to emulate.

The inconsolability of Gawkowski, the train driver, is not merely performative. But it does show us something contrary to the initial assumption one might have had. One may have thought he must fall beneath a certain threshold of moral sensitivity to be able to do this at all. But his inconsolability shows us that he may have been an exceptionally sensitive moral agent who found himself in a terrible situation. I contend that agents who display this level of sensitivity as to be inconsolable are plausible guides when it comes to responsibility, rather than people to be dismissed.

I will now sketch a notion of responsibility which can capture our reactions to Heracles cases. Heracles cases tend to involve a certain life-ruining, meaning destroying quality. These are reminiscent of what M.M. Adams describes as:

“...‘evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason prima facie to doubt whether one’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole’. Such reasonable doubt arises because it is so difficult humanly to conceive how such evils could be overcome.” (Adams 1989, page 299)

But these deeds do not seem to attach to agents by any of the traditional means. While the evils Adams discusses are no doubt metaphysical in nature, I leave it open whether or not meaning responsibility is assessing something wholly social or wholly metaphysical. (Like meaning in life, I suspect it contains elements of both)<sup>2</sup>. It is not dependent on the agent’s freedom or reasons responsiveness, nor on her quality of will, quality of character, quality of regard, quality of judgment and it need not even express of what she stands for. Closest so far, is Robert Adams’ account on which responsibility attaches by way of the moral significance of the agent’s life. However, there is something troubling about saying that an agent is responsible for an action, for which she may or may not be morally blameworthy, in virtue of how it effects the moral significance of her life. We need something at least slightly more removed from moral evaluation to facilitate this sense of responsibility. Rather than looking to moral significance, I suggest we look instead to meaning.

I intend for this conception of meaning to be fairly broad. It is the sense of overall life evaluation that Wittgenstein displayed when he famously said, on his deathbed: “tell them I’ve had a wonderful life” (qtd in Monk 1990, p. 579). He is not simply saying that he has had a morally

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of an account of meaning in life with seemingly both social and metaphysical components, see Susan Wolf’s “The Meanings of Lives”, 2007.

## Responsibility, Meaning and Tragedy

good life (though this was plausibly included in his considerations). What Heracles does is actively, permanently end his participation in the meaning-giving project of raising children and protecting his family. The reason this is situated between stricter notions of moral responsibility is because it touches on matters of moral value only indirectly through meaning. On most views, Heracles is not morally responsible.

To use Shoemaker's model "To be a responsible agent is to be worthy of X for Y in virtue of Z." (Shoemaker 2015, page 17). So to be meaning responsible is to be worthy of self-reproach, shame or grief and a need to express one's connection to an action (X), for actions for which one is causally responsible, but that would otherwise not qualify as responsible (Y), in virtue of having altered the meaning of her life (Z). In other words, the impact the action has on the meaning of the agent's life is what grounds her responsibility, in a way that sidesteps other conditions, such as the knowledge or control condition.

Heracles is responsible for killing his family. His responsibility is not in virtue of the connection of his action to his free agency, or his quality of will, but owing to its connection to the meaning of his life. He played an active role in undermining a project which gave meaning to his life. He did this undermining with a set of skills that are central to his character. In virtue of this responsibility, he is justified in blaming himself.

Another way of thinking about this is in terms of reasons. There are reasons that pertain to morality, like the reasons we have not to harm others for our entertainment. Given certain conditions, we can be morally responsible for our failure to respond to them. Similarly, there are reasons that pertain to meaning in our lives. Morality can give us reasons not to kill, or perhaps to develop our talents. Meaning can give us reasons to explore the country, start a family, or

## Responsibility, Meaning and Tragedy

learn to read Kant in German. A difference between moral reasons and meaning reasons is that there seem to be a set of exempting conditions that can get us off the hook for failure to respond appropriately to moral reasons that do not apply to meaning reasons. For example, suppose that there is a very high probability that it will add moral value (whatever that amounts to) to my life and the world to perform a certain action. Now suppose that I fail to do it, but I had no idea of how good it would have been for me to do it.

I may get an exemption from blame because I fail to meet the knowledge condition for moral responsibility. If we are dealing in reactive attitudes, you might know how things would have turned out and at first blame me, but after learning this relevant detail about the case, you would probably change the attitude you have towards me.

Consider an analogous case concerning not just morality but meaning. Suppose that if I drop out of school and hitchhike across the country then there is a similarly high probability that I will have fun adventures, fall in love and develop fantastic taste in music. These adventures, this loving relationship and this great taste in music will contribute to the meaning of my life, even if they do not necessarily contribute to the moral value of it. But again, I do not know that this will happen if I choose this course. I keep my unfulfilling job and have an unhappy, but still morally acceptable life. Think of the reaction I will get and how it might (not) change in light of my failure to meet the knowledge condition. I am hardly morally blameworthy for having a mediocre life when I could have had a phenomenal one. If I ever find out what I missed, I will blame myself, at least somewhat. But at the same time, it is difficult to imagine someone else condemning me for

my decision<sup>3</sup>. Considered in this way, the meaning responsible agent is the agent who responds or fails to respond to meaning reasons. And unlike with moral reasons, there are no exemptions.

They can be weighed against other sorts of reasons. So it could turn out that I am meaning responsible for the mediocrity of my life, but praiseworthy for its moral goodness. This could be true in such a way that, to do things differently would open me up to moral condemnation.

Cases of meaning responsibility are most salient when this relation alone obtains. In cases where an agent is also morally responsible, the moral responsibility overshadows the meaning responsibility, in a way. So if we imagined another case in which Heracles knowingly and willfully killed his family, he may also be meaning responsible for doing so, but the relevant question would be about his moral responsibility, as we would be interested in blaming him, punishing him, reforming his character, or just protecting the rest of society from him. Similarly, in many cases of causal responsibility, we do not bother to mention that an agent was causally responsible, because she was, say morally responsible.

We might say there are certain elements which are conduits for responsibility. That is to say, it is in virtue of these features that an agent is responsible. This is not to posit some new feature, but to give a name to a common feature. When the debate focused solely on freedom, freedom of the agent was the conduit. But theorists developed different notions of freedom in the face of worries about determinism. We have freedom as the ability to do otherwise, freedom as reasons responsiveness and mesh views of freedom. From another starting point, we have the reactive

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<sup>3</sup> I could see such condemnation coming from a particularly close friend. We seem to condemn people for failing to live up to their potential. But this kind of reaction will only come from a very close relationship. It would not be wide reaching enough to ground a sense of responsibility, the way Shoemaker or Strawson aim to ground it in their accounts.

attitudes literature starting with Strawson and the quality of will. Shoemaker takes a more fine-grained approach to this and considers quality of character, quality of regard and quality of judgment. These are examples of other conduits. Just here that is seven prospective conduits of responsibility. The trend is for them to proliferate, and with good cause. Our folk conception of responsibility is very coarse-grained. The project of responsibility theorist is to sort out the many notions contained within that folk conception. One way to think of my proposal here, is to offer meaning in one's life as a new prospective responsibility conduit.

#### **4. Objections**

##### **4.1 Agent Regret**

One might worry that this looks a lot like cases of agent regret. There are important differences between the cases under consideration here and the paradigmatic cases of agent regret, like Williams' truck driver.

The central case of agent regret involves a driver, who has been as diligent as can be reasonably expected in maintaining her truck, getting the brakes checked, and driving attentively. However, despite all this, there is an unpredictable malfunction in the brakes at a time when someone runs into the road. The truck hits and kills the pedestrian, leaving the driver distraught. She blames herself and is apologetic to the family of the killed pedestrian. Is this just the same thing that is happening with Heracles and the others? There are three important senses in which they are different.

First, while the truck driver may understandably feel guilt for being behind the wheel when the truck goes out of control and kills someone, there is an important sense in which the truck,

and not the driver, did the killing. It was the truck that malfunctioned. Heracles, John and Parks, in their respective cases, were the ones who malfunctioned.

Second, the truck driver feels compelled to make apologies to the family of the pedestrian she killed. Heracles, in contrast, has no one to make an apology to, no way to make amends, no one to ask for forgiveness. His family is gone. The significance of his life (at least in this dimension) is destroyed, and it was all done by his own hands. There is no external party with whom to try and make amends. He is the last one remaining to make peace with.

Third, the significance, the meaning of Heracles' life specifically is what he has destroyed. Projects that were quite specific to him were ruined, with the use of capacities that are also specific to him, maybe even constitutive of his character. It was his epic strength and fighting prowess. The tension in what he stands for in his action, as outline above in the consideration of Watson's attributability, is not present in the truck driver. There is no sense in which she partly stands for protecting pedestrians, but also partly stands for running them over. This use of our own characteristic capacities against our own ends can distinguish meaning responsibility from instances of mere agent regret. The tension in Heracles' case contributes to the tragedy of it in a way that exceeds the regret of the truck driver.

You might feel agent regret and be meaning responsible or not. The two come apart.

## **4.2 Too Much Blame**

Another concern with this account might be that it is even more universally condemning than Adams' account in "Involuntary Sins." Lest the reader think I am defending this notion of meaning responsibility in order to be able to condemn and punish more people for their misdeeds, I agree

with Adams that “we ought in general to be treated better than we deserve, and we have a corresponding duty to be merciful” (Adams 1985 p. 24). Euripides’ play ends with Heracles ashamed to be in his home community and being taken in by a friend from Athens. The story exhibits two important points. First is the sense of meaning responsibility that connects Heracles to his actions, regardless of what society asserts or philosophers consider. It further shows us a kind of tenderness and compassion that can come from understanding the ways that Heracles is responsible for these deeds and the way he feels as a result. His Athenian friend does not try to convince Heracles that things are okay, or that he is not responsible (as friends do in cases of mere agent regret). Rather he tries to help him find a way to rebuild his ruined life.

So on the contrary, I do not think this is an account of responsibility to be wielded against as many people as possible, but rather one that we can use to understand the situations and the sufferings of people who fall through the cracks of other accounts.

### **5.3 Is Meaning an Appropriate Conduit for Responsibility?**

Is meaning in life sufficiently similar to other elements to which we attach notions of responsibility? The elements I have considered above from Adams, Watson and Shoemaker include: an agent’s quality of judgment, quality of regard, quality of character, what it is an agent stands for in her action, and the moral significance of her life. This is a wide variety of elements. They are mostly attributes of an individual, in some sense or another. So for someone worried about the legitimacy of meaning, I shall compare it to other notions from this list, which hopefully they find more plausible. Most similar to meaning in life is moral significance from Adams’ account. If this is a plausible contender for what we might be responsible in virtue of, then



meaning should be as well, especially if it ends up having a moral component. And unlike the Strawsonian qualities, both are features of the agent's life as a whole.

For readers who are not sympathetic to Adams' view, meaning also shares relevant similarities to Watson's notion of what we stand for in an activity. This says something, again not necessarily about our character, but about what we express about ourselves in an action. It shows our commitments, whether individual or whole networks of them. What we stand for is connected to what the meaning of our lives ends up being about.

## **5. Conclusion**

I have discussed a series of cases which, as far as I have found, are not properly recognized by any current account of responsibility. In spite of this, one might have the intuition that Heracles and the others are, in some important sense responsible, even if they are not externally blameworthy. As such, I have tried to sketch the parameters of a notion of meaning responsibility. While at first glance it has some similarities to agent regret, I hope to have shown sufficient difference between the Heracles cases and the standard cases of agent regret. Theoretically, meaning responsibility has the advantage of explaining the ambivalence one might have towards Heracles and related cases. Practically speaking, without allowing for a sense in which the actors in Heracles cases are responsible for their actions, we risk taking Strawson's "objective stance" towards them. Even if we do this only for the event in question, it is a troubling result. In doing so, we would be depriving an agent of a kind of identification with her actions that shape the meaning of her life. Having this sense of responsibility grounded in meaning gives the agent an opportunity to do so.

## Chapter 2

### Private Praise

Imagine Geoff writes Matthew a letter filled with expressions of genuine gratitude, admiration, and kind words. Geoff does this with the intention of praising Matthew. Geoff sincerely judges Matthew to be praiseworthy in all the ways he elucidates. This judgment motivates the action of writing and sending the letter. Geoff explains that Matthew has so inspired him that he has transformed his whole life for the better. Where once Geoff was a coward, he is now courageous. Where once Geoff was insensitive to the wellbeing of others, now he is full of compassion and kindness. Now suppose the letter gets lost in the mail. Did Geoff praise Matthew?

There is an extensive and relatively stable set of observations about blame. A proposed account of blame needs to explain as many of these observations as possible. Shoemaker & Vargas (2019) explicitly collect some of these, which include things like blaming the dead, self-blame, dispassionate blame and so on. It seems that praise can similarly be directed at the dead, or at yourself or perhaps even done dispassionately. But the analogous list concerning praise is much shorter and the discussions have been more limited. As the philosophical literature on praise begins to grow, we need to establish a similar set of observations for which a non-revisionist theory of praise should account. In this chapter, I will argue that one such stable observation should be that we can privately praise, as Geoff did above. As such, a good philosophical account of praise should be able to explain how this happens.

Telech (2022) surveyed several accounts of praise while cataloging their verdicts on different issues, including private praise. Most of the accounts develop an analysis according to which we *can* privately praise. However, private praise creates problems for two of them: the

action view and the judgment view. I will consider the problems of private praise from those views in greater depth. While I do not endorse either view, I will argue that these challenges are surmountable without doing violence to the views or to our pre-theoretical notions of praise.

Section 1 discusses three interrelated theses about private blame, private praise and the symmetry between praise and blame. The relationship between these claims limits what we can coherently say about private praise, regardless of the particular view of praise. Section 2 addresses the judgment view of praise and the problems private praise creates for it. Section 3 considers the action view. Section 4 develops a different objection to private praise, considering the possibility that praise is a success term.

### **1. Private Praise and the Three Troubling Theses**

Private praise is only explicitly discussed in a few places within the philosophy literature. When it is discussed, it is usually to suggest that it is not possible. Additionally, when it is discussed, it tends to be in conjunction with claims about private blame and about the symmetry between praise and blame. Consider the following provisional formulations of this set of claims:

*Private blame:* It is possible to privately blame a person. Whatever blame fundamentally is, you can do it without the person being blamed ever knowing.

*Private praise:* It is possible to privately praise a person. Whatever praise fundamentally is, you can do it without the person being praised ever knowing.

*Symmetry*: praise and blame are symmetrical opposites.

This troubling triad of claims limits our interpretive options. If *symmetry* is true and *private blame* is true then *private praise* is true. Or, if *private praise* is false, and *private blame* is true, then *symmetry* is false. There are three general approaches to denying *private praise* in different combinations with *symmetry*. First, one can remain silent about *symmetry* while characterizing praise in such a way as to suggest the exclusion of private praise. George Sher does this, saying: "...praise is always overtly bestowed. To praise a person is to express admiration of some meritorious act he has performed or of some excellence or virtue he possesses" (Sher 2005, page 71/72). This merely suggest a denial of *private praise*. However, Sher later considers praising God in silent prayer as a possible counterexample of private praise. But he dismisses it because the prayer would be appreciable to God. If he's anticipating and refuting a counterexample of it, I infer he denies *private praise*.

Second, one could start by overtly denying *symmetry* and then do whatever one wants about *private praise* or *private blame*, as they no longer seem to stand and fall together. Nomy Arpaly & Timothy Schroeder seem to do this:

"Praise and blame are not really a natural pair. Praising is an action: to praise Mohandas Gandhi for his role in Indian independence is to say (or write, or...) something nice about Gandhi. While the word "blame" can be used in a parallel way ("in his speech, Obama blamed Bush for the troubles this country is in"), this is not the main thing "blame" means. That use aside, blaming is not an action: to blame Hitler for the war is not to say (or write, or...) anything at all. Blaming is rather an attitude one takes, an attitude on the basis of which one can then act. Condemning is the true opposite of praising, since it too is an action. Crediting (as in: crediting Gandhi for his role in the peaceful transition to independence) is the true opposite of blaming, since it too is an attitude." (Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, page 159)

## Private Praise

On this view, praise and blame do not have to be able to do the same kind of thing because they are not even in the same category of things. One is an attitude while the other is an action.

Third, you could deny *symmetry* with appeal to the falsity of *private praise* and the truth of *private blame*. For example, D. Justin Coates & Neal A. Tognazzini write, while motivating the denial of *symmetry*: “The idea of private blame seems coherent in a way that private praise does not. You might discover to your horror that your spouse continues to blame you for something you did several years ago, but it seems at best awkward to say that you might discover your spouse has been praising you for several years without anyone’s knowing about it.” (Coates & Tognazzini 2013, page 4/5). This is an appealing line of thought if you take it to be obvious that *private praise* is false, but it is not an argument against it.

I suggest a fourth alternative. We can refine our understanding of *symmetry* while defending *private praise* and *private blame*.

### 2.1 Praise vs. Reactive Attitudes

Before we get to my proposal, there is another approach to dealing with that unsent letter from the beginning. You might think that Geoff did not praise Matthew, but he simply admired him. Shoemaker highlights “admiration, awe, esteem, forgiveness, elevation, pride, veneration, approval, appreciation, approbation, gratification, or warm feelings” (Shoemaker 2015, p. 20) as the sort of things involved in positive instances of responsibility. Even if we think praise can be manifested in other ways, or has more necessary conditions than the reactive attitudes, it is less controversial that praise tends to involve some such emotional component. So one might object that apparent instances of private praise are actually a private manifestation of admiration, awe

## Private Praise

or some other reactive attitude associated with praise. That does not show that these responses are instances of praise in the sense that we should care about.

The key distinction I want to make between private praise and the mere presence of positive reactive attitudes like admiration, awe or gratitude is the level of deliberate engagement in the activity. Admiration, like the rest of the emotions associated with praise, can be passive. Like most emotions, awe, pride, and admiration can just happen to us. We can indulge them or not, but when they come on, they come on in much the same way as spontaneous thoughts.

In contrast, the phenomena I am trying to point to here is more deliberate. It is an indulgence in that admiration (or awe, or gratitude, or...). We constantly recreate the conditions in our minds that bring up that sense of admiration. Private praise manifests in rumination and persistence. We hold on to it where we could let it go. If going through this persistently in one's own inner world in the negative case deserves to be called private blame, then one might think the positive analogue deserves to be called private praise.

It is not an implication of *private praise* that all instances of admiration, awe and so on are occurrences of private praise. But praise must be deliberate, and so too for private praise. We have to focus, even fixate on the target of our admiration as we mentally rehearse thinking of how good they are. So if I find myself with an unwelcome sense of awe in the face of my nemesis, that does not mean I have just accidentally privately praised them.<sup>4</sup> But if I work to keep myself in awe of something, even if I never tell anyone else about it, I might just be privately praising the thing. The fact that we have to work to praise something is what differentiates praise from just the reactive attitudes associated with it. With private praise, we often notice, appreciate, and

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<sup>4</sup> Though I might find myself begrudgingly praising them. See Stout (2020).

cultivate this pattern of attention.

One might grant this active/passive process as a relevant distinction but still object: why not follow Arpaly and Schroeder and call this process crediting? Here I think it best to appeal to language in response. Consider this example<sup>5</sup>:

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”

When Romeo praises Juliet in this soliloquy, we can assume he did not expect or intend Juliet to hear his thoughts. Nonetheless, they were actively expressed, even if only to himself. Even if we set aside considerations about privacy, it seems far more of a stretch of language to say he was not praising Juliet.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Publicity Condition and Privacy

Stout (2020) calls this requirement that praise be public the publicity condition, though he does not discuss it. In this context, the publicity condition is appealed to as reason to deny *private praise* and thus to deny *symmetry*.

This publicity condition is vague between a few readings and only the most extreme actually excludes private praise. Consider three possible formulations:

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<sup>5</sup> From Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this is complicated by the fact that we, the audience, are also an audience to Romeo's praise. But if this is so, the same worry arises in the case of private blame. One does not feel the horror until we find out that our spouse has been privately blaming us. Even the imagined cases, just as fictional as *Romeo and Juliet*, have the readers as an audience. So if we doubt that private praise is an actual phenomena because even in imagined instance of it, it becomes public upon discovery, then the same doubt applies to private blame. In this way, they stand or fall together.

## Private Praise

*Strong publicity:* praise must be expressed to the person being praised with the intention that they understand. Further, the praised must be understood.

*Moderate publicity:* praise must be expressed toward the person being praised, even if not in a way that the praised is intended to understand.

*Weak publicity:* praise must be expressed but it need not be directed toward the praised in any way. The praiser need not intend for the praised to understand.

*Strong publicity* seems like a nonstarter. To say we cannot praise without the person being praised knowing it would rule out ordinary cases of praising historical figures, praising the dead or just praising people who are far away. It would also rule out the possibility of praising people who cannot take a compliment. So if there is a publicity condition on praise, it should have to be spelled out as something more like the *moderate* or *weak* formulation.

I take it the sense of privacy at stake for skeptics about private praise is similar to the sense of privacy we see in private blame. If Pam blames Richard privately, we do not simply mean Pam blames Richard and no one other than the two of them know about it. We mean that Pam blames Richard and Richard does not know about it. Notice that even if we grant a publicity condition on praise, either moderate or weak formulations allow that sort of private praise.

### 2.3 Symmetry



I offered a provisional formulation of *symmetry* above. Elsewhere this thesis is vaguely characterized, This is just an analogy itself, since praise and blame are not the kinds of things that can be literally symmetrical. But it can be a more helpful analogy if we consider it in greater detail. Geometrically, a figure can be symmetrical in some dimensions but not others. Again, this matters for the rest of the literature about praise and blame because symmetry is appealed to in arguing about other features of praise and blame. Perhaps most importantly, the lack of investigation into praise has long been justified by appeal to this loosely defined symmetry between them.

Consider just three broad dimensions of possible symmetry: constitution, function, and norms. Praise and blame could have a *constitutional symmetry* insofar as they are constituted by the same kind of thing. So if blame is fundamentally an attitude and praise is fundamentally an action, then they are constitutional asymmetrical. Whereas if we think of praise and blame as both being speech acts, then they have constitutional symmetry in that respect.

Second, praise and blame might have a *functional symmetry*. The question here is whether they can do the same things, and whether they are part of one unified system. So on Shoemaker's view (forthcoming), praise and blame would be symmetrical in this respect, as they both serve to signal willingness to uphold a set of norms. The same is true for my Group Management Thesis about praise and blame (see next chapter). There are other functional accounts, most notably communicative accounts (McKenna 2011, Telech 2022). Or it might be a more specific kind of function. So if you think blame can cause harm but praise cannot, then that could be a functional asymmetry.

Third, praise and blame might have a symmetry surrounding their norms. If it turns out it is inappropriate to blame people who are not responsible for what they did, but that it is

## Private Praise

appropriate to praise people who are not responsible for what they did, then it looks like praise and blame have a *norm asymmetry*, that is to say, the norms surrounding praise and blame are asymmetrical.

These are just general categories. There might be lots of little features that blame has that have no analogue in praise. So even if praise and blame have a norm asymmetry they may be symmetrical or asymmetrical in terms of how they respond to different types of responsibility. Sometimes one may voluntarily “take responsibility” for something. In this way, one can invite blame upon oneself.<sup>7</sup> When people do this, we often play along and blame them. So if someone broke the coffee pot and we do not know who, I might just say “it’s my fault, blame me.” And you might. But if we are at a philosophy talk and someone else asks a great question, I cannot just “take responsibility” for their question and just expect to be praised for it. Praise and blame seem asymmetrical in terms of how they respond to a more voluntary kind of responsibility.

Many of these types of symmetry depend upon each other and it could turn out that praise and blame are symmetrical in one but not others, or that they are symmetrical in the broad categories but with little differences. For the duration of this discussion, the sense of symmetry that we will be concerned with is functional symmetry, as that determines how *private blame* and *private praise* relate. So reformulate the earlier thesis as...

*Symmetry:* Praise and blame are functionally symmetrical.

### 3. The Judgment View

The Judgment View (TJV), according to Telech’s construction, says “to praise an agent, S,

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Z.K. Payne for making this point at a work in progress talk.

for something,  $\varphi$ , is simply to form a certain belief or judgment about S on the basis of her  $\varphi$ -ing.” Telech considers a problem for this view that arises in connection to *private praise*.

“A more serious objection may be that judgements of praiseworthiness are insufficient even for private praise. Satan and the amoralist can presumably judge Alicia to have acted praiseworthily, in the sense of taking her to have done ‘the right thing for the right reasons’, say without thereby praising her. In reflecting on Alicia's having placed another's interests before her own, Satan might think something like: ‘she benevolently did the morally right thing—what a sucker!’ Presumably, this is not praise. A general way to put the problem is that the judgment view cannot obviously accommodate the way in which praisers are favorably disposed toward those they praise.” (Telech 2022 p. 3)

We can divide these troubling instances of apparent praiseworthy judgments without praise into three categories. The first involves judging something to be the sort of thing that people in general praise. The does not imply that the speaker forms the same judgment or belief of praising. As one could coherently say: “You look like someone that someone else would think is attractive” without thereby judging that someone is attractive by the speaker’s own lights. We can easily imagine such a judgment being formed with contempt or a snarky inflection. Consider a few examples:

1. “Pure Aryan blood is something the Nazis considered praiseworthy.”
2. “Subservient women were considered praiseworthy in the 1920s.”
3. “He thinks hostility is a praiseworthy virtue.”

This category is not the real problem for TJV with private praise since the sense of praiseworthiness is indexed to the judgment of someone other than the person forming the judgment. So the target is simply praiseworthy by the lights of one party and not praised by

## Private Praise

another.

The second category is more of a problem for TJV. It comes in two flavors. This involves judging something praiseworthy *by ones own lights* and nonetheless opting not to praise for other reasons. There are times when we begrudgingly withhold praise from those we deem praiseworthy. Consider...

**Denise and Marie:** Denise and Marie are friends, but they are having a fight. Marie goes to see Denise play the lead role in *Othello*, Marie's favorite play. Marie is blown away by Denise's performance. Marie thinks to herself "she was great in that performance of *Othello* tonight, but I'd never give her the satisfaction of letting her know I thought so."

So we can judge praiseworthy by our own standards, and opt not to praise because we don't want to praise. This can be for petty reasons or for principled ones. We also sometimes benevolently withhold praise from those we deem praiseworthy. Consider...

**Renee and Julian:** Renee is a small child and Julian is her father. Renee is deeply concentrating on solving a puzzle. Julian observes that Renee is progressing at an unusually fast pace. Beaming with pride at his child's accomplishment, he judges it praiseworthy. However, having read (too) many Montessori parenting books, he refrains from expressing that praise, so as not to interrupt Renee's deep focus.

## Private Praise

The problem for TJV is that if praise is just a judgment, how do we distinguish that judgment from a judgment of praiseworthiness. On this view, you might think there is no distinctively private praise because praise is always private. Public expressions of praise are simply a report after the fact of a judgment privately made. Private praise would be too easy. But it does not have to be this way.

All a more refined version of TJV would need to accommodate private praise is to distinguish three judgments. The judgments are...

1. "I praise X"
2. "I judge X praiseworthy", and
3. "Other people judge X praiseworthy."

I have shown that 3 is a distinct issue and not a problem for TJV. My positive account of private praise will try to motivate the admittedly murky difference between 1 and 2. But notice that this is not a problem of incompatibility with private praise and TJV, just a problem for praise in general on TJV.

### **4. The Action View**

The Action View (TAV) is that praise is most basically an action, rather than say, a judgment, an attitude, or an emotion. On this view, praise tends to be thought of as constitutionally asymmetrical with blame. We saw Arpaly & Schroeder make this claim earlier.

TAV is in some ways more expansive, as it could include gestures like a wink or a high five.<sup>8</sup>

However, this view appears to have a problem explaining private praise. The strongest formulation of this problem is not that praise is simply an action since many actions can be performed privately. I can clean my desk without anyone ever knowing about it. Cleaning a desk is an action. And it is private in the sense that no one but me knows about it. Perhaps I could have an odd kind of somnambulism and clean my desk in my sleep, then not even I would know about it!

What makes private praise a challenge for TAV is that praise is a particular kind of action. It's an action directed at another person. But these too are things we can do privately. I could compliment you in a way that is so veiled with irony and allusion that you will not even recognize it as such. Or I could say kind words about you in a language you do not understand. This could be private even from you, the target of my praise.

So private praise is not ruled out by TAV in its posited capacity as an action, since many actions can be done privately in the sense that no one outside of the interaction knows about it. They could even be private insofar as the intended target of the action never knew about it. It is only ruled out if TAV is paired with the view that "praise" is a success term. This is a distinct thesis, and I will argue, an implausible one.

## 5. Praise as a Success Term<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks for Farhad Taraz for these examples.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of "success term" is regularly appealed to in recent English language philosophy. Some representative examples of success terms: "vigilance" in Murray & Vargas (2020), "insight" in Hanna (2014), "knowledge" in Paul (2010), "motivate" in Dancy (2004), "being disciplined" in May (2011), "response" in Enoch (2011), "understand" in Keller (2017) or "acting

## Private Praise

There is a looming yet unarticulated threat in the background of the private praise worries for TAV and TJV worthy of further consideration. Is “praise” a success term?

Different success terms have different success conditions. There are at least two categories of success conditions for a given success term. Call these subject-side and object-side success conditions. As the names indicated, a subject-side success condition is a condition that is dependent on the agent performing the action. Object-side success conditions are dependent on the target of the action. A given success term could have one or the other or both.

Some success terms do not have agents on both sides and so do not always depend on another person cooperating. We could stipulate that I have cleaned my desk just in case it is cleaner now than it was when I started. My desk has no agency here, only I do. On the other hand, imagine two warring countries. Country A offers a truce to country B, a temporary cessation of hostilities. Whether or not they succeed in creating a truce is determined by whether or not the country B agrees to the truce. So if county A’s “creating a truce” is a success term, we could say it has object-side success conditions as well.

Consider some adjacent terms to “praise.” Many of the emotions associated with praise do not seem to be success terms with object-side success conditions. I can feel gratitude towards you whether you think you deserve it or not. The same goes for admiration and awe. If these have any success condition, they are subject-side. You could try to talk me out of my gratitude or my awe, but you cannot simply refuse it in such a way that changes the nature of my feeling.

If praise is a success term, then what we should care about is not a publicity condition,

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with compassion” Tennenbaum (2002). However, I have not found a philosophical characterization of “success term.” This seems worth pursuing.

## Private Praise

but a success condition. And if praise is a success term, we should care about its object-side success conditions. Perhaps the praised should simply understand that they are being praised. Yet one can think three types of cases in which this does not happen. First we have people who cannot take a compliment, as in..

**Libby and Hannah:** Libby compliments Hannah on the fact that her bowtie matches her socks. Hannah takes this to be mockery and is insulted. But Libby's intention was to praise Hannah's attention to aesthetic detail.

**Doug and Susan:** Doug admires Susan's encyclopedic knowledge of music. Unable to take a compliment, Susan interprets this as implying that he has devoted his mind to trifling matters. Susan's interpretation contorts the attempt at praise into a criticism.

If praise is a success term with this object-side success condition, then neither Libby nor Doug have done any praising. Hannah and Susan have effectively negated their praise. They merely attempted to praise. My intuitions pull the other direction.

A second category is when we praise people or things that cannot recognize our praise. We praise the beauty of a balloon arch. We praise the 2004 Boston Red Sox. We praise the B-side of The Clash's Bankrobber EP. None of these are the kinds of things that could recognize our praise. Again, it seems counterintuitive to say we do not praise them.

The third category is when we praise isolated qualities. We praise the excellence of a song



## Private Praise

on an album even though the rest of the album sucks. We praise the beauty of a sunset while cursing the pollution that makes it look so good. Or we praise the pristine desert landscape. When we praise these, there's often an implication that we are thereby praising the creator of this thing. But sometimes the real aim of that praise is how good the thing is, even in the absence of a creator, like an atheist might think of the sunset. For them, it is an important part of what is being admired that it came about in the absence of a creative agent. And sometimes the aim of the praise is to demonstrate how good the thing is in spite of the creator, like how you might praise *Annie Hall* as a great movie even if you think Woody Allen is a despicable person. The goodness of the work could shine more brightly when considering the wretchedness of the creator, or the absence of a creator, as the case may be.

Finally, if we look at the use of "praise" in other contexts, at least sometimes the word is used as though it had no object-side success conditions. Consider the following passage from Emerson's "History"

"We have the same interest in condition and character. We honor the rich because they have externally the freedom, power, and grace which we feel to be proper to man, proper to us. So all that is said of the wise man by Stoic or Oriental or modern essayist, describes to each reader his own idea, describes his unattained but attainable self. All literature writes the character of the wise man. Books, monuments, pictures, conversation, are portraits in which he finds the lineaments he is forming. The silent and the eloquent praise him and accost him, and he is stimulated wherever he moves, as by personal allusions. A true aspirant therefore never needs look for allusions personal and laudatory in discourse. He hears the commendation, not of himself, but, more sweet, of that character he seeks, in every word that is said concerning character, yea further in every fact and circumstance, --in the running river and the rustling corn. Praise is looked, homage tendered, love flows, from mute nature, from the mountains and the lights of the firmament." (*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. II, p. 5)

Emerson may take some creative liberties with the language of nature doing the praising. But this

## Private Praise

kind of praise seems fully determined by the praiser. If the silent can praise the wise and one can receive a look of praise, then one is at least sometime unable to deny or deflect or ignore it in a way that would change the nature of the praise.

If one were to properly argue against the very possibility of private praise, the most promising way to do so would be to claim “praise” is a success term and one that has object-side success conditions. I have included some considerations here that suggest otherwise.

### 5. Examples and Mechanics of Private Praise

Having addressed the conceptual roadblocks to private praise, all that remains is to imagine it. Consider the following motivating examples:

**Fandom:** Kitaro is in awe of the greatness of his favorite band, The Cranberries. While he has seen them several times and had the opportunity to do so, he never told the members of the place they hold in his heart. However, Kitaro will talk to anyone and everyone else about this at length and says they’re the greatest band in the world. Everyone who knows Kitaro knows how amazing he thinks The Cranberries are. But having millions of other fans, no one in the band ever finds out about Kitaro’s particular fandom.

**Friend Crush:** You go to a party and meet a charming person. After a night of observing their wonderful behavior, you do not compliment them, but you walk home alone reflecting on just how charming, funny, and kind they are. You find

## Private Praise

yourself still chuckling over their jokes and muttering to yourself “what a delightful person!” all the while wondering how you might become more like that. You cannot wait for your next opportunity to see this person. You rehearse what you’d like to say to them next time to the silent street, but you don’t tell anyone else.

Examples such as these, as well as the letter from the very beginning, should be familiar enough to motivate the idea that *private praise* is plausible. Even though we do not tend to discuss these sorts of things under the description of “private praise” the experience is familiar.

The cases above are meant to motivate the idea that something answers to the description of private praise. Next I will develop more of an picture of how it actually happens.

We often speak of praise as though it only involved two parties, the one performing the act and the one who it is about or directed at. However, we sometimes praise with an audience. So there are at least three relevant parties in an instance of praise. The *praiser* is the one doing the praising—making the gesture, saying the words and so on. The *praised* is the person, the thing or the pattern of behavior that the praise is about. Finally, there is the *audience*. They are the ones who see the praising being done.

Sometimes the praiser just thinks something is beautiful and that deserves notice, like if I praise a work of art. My praise is not necessarily directed at the artist. It’s just an invitation for someone to see the world the way I do, to notice this beautiful thing. In this kind of case, I am not saying you should paint like Monet, but that you should notice how well he paints. Our praise might get us in trouble because of this audience, not the person we praise. Imagine praising the Republican candidate at the Democratic fundraiser party. The problems this will create for you,

## Private Praise

the praiser, would not be because of the impact on the candidate. The praised is not even present. The effect on you is because of the impact on the audience observing your praise.

We sometimes deliberately make use of this feature of praise. We can praise with the intention of sending a message to the audience, rather than the praised. Imagine we are in a chess club together which is regrettably unsportsmanlike. The members are needlessly hostile and resentful when they lose. They never say “good game” or shake hands. So when we all get together and watch the world chess championship, I praise the graceful way the Ian Nepomniachtchi resigns and proceeds to discuss the game with his opponent. I do not do this for the sake of the Nepomniachtchi, far away playing in the tournament. I say it for the other members of my chess club. I want to send the message to them that this player who I praise, is modeling a good attitude towards the game. If I have any kind of influence in the club, there is a normative content to my praise. It exhorts the onlookers to emulate the behavior I praise. Just as blame can point a finger of condemnation, praise can point a finger of endorsement.

This matters for private praise because these three parties —the praiser, praised and audience— do not need to all be distinct. First consider the praiser and the praised. They certainly do not need to be different. If you praise yourself, then you are both the praiser and the praised. You could do so because you think you did something great, with no regard to your audience. Or you could also do this for the sake of your audience. You could do it to make them laugh, or perhaps to subvert expectations about modesty.<sup>10</sup>

Next, and most importantly, consider the praiser and the audience. If these can be the

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<sup>10</sup> I once knew someone who would often exclaim “you handsome genius!” when he thought of a good idea. I found it delightful.

## Private Praise

same person, there's no mystery remaining about private praise. I contend that sometimes the praiser can also be the audience. A shared feature of the cases above is that the intended audience is also the praiser. That's how private praise works. We praise someone else privately, for our own sake. This is familiar from the ways I might praise the qualities of a long dead person or even a fictional character. I don't expect them to hear it. While the praise is in a sense directed at them, it is for the audience of me. I do it to draw my own attention to that quality. When I praise the lives and the qualities of the people I admire, I praise them as part of an ongoing effort to emulate the qualities. Much in the same way I might leave myself a note saying, "remember to bring in the plants before the frost tonight." I redirect my attention to what I intend to do, but I think I might forget. It is an attempt to get a little closer to being who I want to be, to bridge a gap between my present and future self. When I privately praise, I am the praiser and the intended audience.

You might think privately praising is especially useful in two particular ways. First, it could be helpful for identifying and attending to good qualities in another person who is not overall a very good person. Perhaps they are a malicious coward, but nonetheless a very snappy dresser. You do not want to praise the person overall.

Second, it could be helpful for dealing with someone who is praiseworthy in many ways but has a bit of a problem with arrogance. The arrogance may only grow worse if we praise their many other good qualities. Nonetheless, their good qualities (other than the arrogance) might be something good for me to pay attention to.

There is value in noting good qualities worth of emulation, without emulating the whole package of other attributes a person has. If we waited to praise only the people with only good

qualities, we might be waiting a very long time.

## **6. The Emotional Experience of Private Praise**

There is still something to be said about the concern that to speak of private praise seems awkward. It does. But it is not just a problem of writing about private praise or speaking of it. The problem is imagining it. There can be something murky about imagining private praise. This chapter has highlighted many of the things that make this the case.

First, it is because private praise is ambiguous between the praise being private in a stronger or weaker sense. If praise is private from anyone other than the praiser and the praised, then that sense of private is readily brought to mind. Just think of two people alone in a room and one of them says something kind, with the right emotional and motivational states. The stronger sense of private praise needs more illustration and I have presented many such cases here.

It is a more common experience to find out that someone has been blaming you for something for a long time. But I would certainly be surprised to find out a casual acquaintance speaks highly of me all the time when I am not around. He praises my work or my style or my sense of humor. That could be just as surprising as finding out that same person went around talking about all the things I do wrong and blaming me for them to anyone who will listen, anyone other than me.

Reconsider the Coates & Tognazzini example. Something is horrifying about finding out your spouse has been blaming you for years. If I privately blame you for years without ever telling you, what keeps me going? I must remind myself of your wrongdoing. The thing I am doing is

## Private Praise

reminding myself to stay angry at you. If my goal was to let go of my grudge, I would try to find a way to let that go, to forgive or forget or whatever combination I had to do. Part of what is horrifying about private blame is not just that the person still blames me, or that they have for a long time, but that they have gone out of their way to deliberately cultivate and sustain that blame.

Now suppose you discover your spouse has been praising you for years without you knowing it. What might this look like? Imagine they never overtly acknowledge your accomplishments. You get that new job or promotion, the publication, or the new personal record in the gym: all of these elicit no discernible reaction. You try to share your joy and sense of accomplishment, but you get only a nod. You might understandably be unhappy with this or even grow resentful. Now imagine you find out after many years that they have been thinking highly of you in any of the ways considered previously: admiring you, being proud of you, holding you in ever-growing esteem. This is just as evocative as the example of them blaming you for years without your having known.

Like with private blame, discovering this would change the meaning of years of interactions. What it precisely looked like would depend on the particulars of the relationship, but one can imagine feeling relief, gratitude, resentment, or any number of morally loaded emotions. All those years that you thought they did not care, they really did. You would have to reconsider all your memories. All the icy silences now mean something different than you initially thought. This is not to say this outcome is more desirable than getting this feedback in real time. But it is probably more desirable than never finding out. And like in the case of discovering years of private blame, you might just ask “why didn’t you tell me?!?” In this instance, we can imagine

an intense and complicated emotional response that is analogous to the horror of learning about the privately blaming spouse.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that *private praise* is true. *Symmetry* is ill-defined and the truth of it depends on the which dimensions of symmetry we are concerned with. However, the assumed impossibility of private praise and the possibility of private blame is not a counterexample that breaks the appropriate version of *symmetry*, which is a functional symmetry. If one wishes to argue against *symmetry*, they will have to appeal to something other than the publicity condition. The most promising route would be to argue that praise is a success term with object-side success conditions.

Further, if *private praise* is true then a comprehensive theory of praise must be able to explain its presence, not its absence. For example, Telech (2022) develops a communicative theory of praise. On this view, praise is an invitation for the praised to see themselves more like how the praiser sees them. While this certainly illuminates part of our praising practice, it does not address private praise. Private praise may be as much a challenge for a communicative theory of praise as private blame is for a communicative theory of blame.<sup>11</sup>

The confusion about private praise is the kind of thing that the language surrounding praise and blame can distract us from. Indeed, it does sound awkward to call something “private praise.” But that should not stop us from understanding the activity. As a state of one’s inner

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this point for private blame, see Driver (2016).



## Private Praise

world, it is perfectly familiar not just to privately experience the cluster of emotions associated with praise, but to act out praising in the theater of one's own mind.

The awkward fit of a term for something is not a good reason to think it absent from our practice. This has precedent in philosophical literature. Aristotle discussed nameless virtues within his taxonomy. Buddhaghosa refers to the near enemies of loving-kindness without giving them a specific name, because they do not have one. Neither of these made the author's work revisionist. In this kind of situation, we must decide how much weight to give to two different kinds of evidence: admittedly unwieldy language use or familiar emotional states. I suggest that we should give greater weight to the familiar emotional states because they are older and admit of less variation.

Finally, the discussion of how we would privately praise reveals why we might want to. Private praise can be a positive equivalent to rumination. Privately praising is an action is just the same way privately reminding yourself to do something is an action. You might want to remind yourself of what is good in the world: what good behavior looks like, what good art looks like, what good style looks like.

“We Accept You, One of Us”

### Chapter 3

#### “We Accept You, One of Us”:

#### Praise & Blame as a System for Group Management

Billie Joe Armstrong is a punk. He is a member of an informal community of punks. One day, his band Green Day releases an album on a major label. This album was a huge commercial success. It received praise from professional music critics. Simultaneously the members of the band were blamed by the punks for releasing this album as they did. It was seen as a betrayal by their community at the time. Then Billie Joe Armstrong is not a punk anymore.

Roisin McNearney is a member of the IRA. While on trial for planting a car bomb in London, she collaborates with the British authorities, obviously against the norms of her group. This comes out later in the trial, when she receives a more lenient sentence. Knowing she snitched, her compatriots hum a funeral march in unison as she is led out of the courtroom. Then she was not an IRA member anymore.<sup>12</sup>

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We all exist in many social groups. I am in the group of moral agents. I am also in the group of Tom Waits fans. I am in the group of weightlifters, of people who play video games, of sober people. You are in many groups like this too. These groups are determined by, and partly constitutive of your social identity. All your tastes, preferences, choices and values contribute to and determine which groups you are in. We move in and out of many such groups throughout our lives. We can easily be moved from some groups. If I start drinking, I am out of the sober group, at least momentarily. We persist in other groups. If I have not listened to my Tom Waits

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<sup>12</sup> See: Keefe (2019).

“We Accept You, One of Us”

records in a year, I am still a Tom Waits fan. You do not get to decide group membership in isolation. We do it together through a kind of mutual recognition.

It is illuminating to understanding praise and blame if we think how they can function to manage those groups. This need not be the one and only function of praising and blaming, but it is an important one which has not received enough attention. Praise and blame can reveal which groups the praiser/blamer is in based on what they recognize and how they react. In praising or blaming, I can invite you into my group or kick you out of it, or move you around in the hierarchy within the group. I can draw your attention to the fact that we share a group or inquire about whether or not we do. I can warn you that your standing within our group is not very strong. I can draw your attention to your group membership and remind you that you answer to us in some relevant way. Or I can reassure you that you are still in our group, even if you doubt it or think you do not deserve it.

This chapter highlights the ways praise and blame work to manage our many group memberships. Call this idea...

**Group Management Thesis (GMT):** Praise and blame have a function of shaping and managing social groups.

Attending to this group managing feature of praise and blame highlights certain features of the practice and has the potential to resolve some standing disputes and to unify some of the disparate observations about praise and blame.

## 1. Groups

GMT is an account of praise and blame, not of what groups are. There are many interesting questions about the metaphysics of social groups.<sup>13</sup> According to Thomasson (2016), groups are unified by the norms that govern them. However, it is not clear that one enters or leaves the group via upholding norms or failing to as much as they enter or leave when other members of the group notice and respond. In the IRA case at the beginning, McNearny seems to have lost her standing in the group when her compatriots found out she violated a norm, not when she violated the norm. Upholding or violating norms often result in praise and blame. This gives some initial reason to think that there is some connection between praise and blame and group management. This account requires only the following minimal assumptions about groups:

1. social groups exist.
2. a person can be in more than one social group at one time.
3. a person can move between social groups.
4. a person can be moved between social groups.
5. some social groups are mutually exclusive.

Since I will be thinking of praise and blame here as a social practice, the groups that matter are informal human social groups. Contrast the informality of these groups with more official membership organizations. An example of an informal social group is political liberals, while an example of a membership organization is the Democratic Party in the United States. There may

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<sup>13</sup> See Thomasson (2016), Faller (2021).

“We Accept You, One of Us”

often be overlap, but there is an important difference. Liberals from other countries are not members of the Democratic party in the United States.

These groups do not need to be physically co-located. The group of Iron Maiden fans exists all through the world. We do not have to have met to share a group like this. It often comes as a surprise when two strangers start talking and they realize they are both in the group of chess players. And importantly, we all exist in many groups, some nested within each other. So the group of Iron Maiden fans will be a subset of the group of moral agents. And the groups of Iron Maiden fans can be further divided into the people who only like their early albums, and those who celebrate the whole discography. These divisions continue, seemingly without end. Beyond that, the details of group membership are determined by the theorists and practitioners of each group.

Informal social groups which constitute most of the groups we are in. Friendships and fandoms and subcultures are like this. The group of punks is largely determined by the punks. When the punks decide that Green Day is not a punk band anymore because they signed to a major label, then the members of Green Day are out of the group of punks, complete with all that entails. They do not get invited to sleep on the floors of decrepit houses rented by punks. They do not play at clubs run by punks. They do not get the nod of recognition from their fellows on the street. They effectively are not punks anymore. You might think that they ceased to be punks when they stopped abiding by the norms that characterize that group. But that group does not seem to work this way. Other punks and punk bands failed to abide by that same norm and are still considered punk(s). For example, The Ramones were a punk band on a major label but not blamed by the punks. In contrast, Green Day was praised and blamed out of the group. The mainstream music critics praised them; the punks blamed them. These went hand in hand. It was

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

the praise and blame that moved them out of the group, not just the violations of the norms.

There is a distinctive sting involved in moving across groups in a way that you do not want to. If you think of yourself as one of the punks and all of a sudden, no one else in that group recognizes you as such, it is not a good feeling. Compare this to the characteristic sting of blame highlighted by McKenna (2012). Sometimes the sting is because the groups are arranged hierarchically and you want to be in the higher up group. So if I am rich, you might try to insult me by insinuating that I am poor. If we hold fixed the context— that is, we don’t mean that I am rich in comparison to one group and poor in comparison to another— then these groups are mutually exclusive, so being put in one necessarily kicks me out of another. If I can’t be both rich and poor, then you shoving me into the poor group knocks me out of my coveted position in the rich group. On the other hand, when I join the married group I am no longer in the bachelor group. This is a painless process. Sometimes the group you are in is as small as two. I am in a group with my best friend. It is the group of our friendship.<sup>14</sup> That is a group I am partly defined by. It is a group I would like to remain in. My best friend could use praise or blame to kick me out of that group.

The most important point here is that groups are not an arbitrary unit of analysis and that is what makes them useful in thinking about praise and blame. We humans are social creatures, and we are disposed to consider which group we belong to and our standing within those groups.

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<sup>14</sup> GMT draws some inspiration from Scanlon’s relationship modification account. However, the scope is much wider and it differs in key ways. Scanlon’s account is of a distinctively moral kind of blame, while this account includes, and indeed focuses on, nonmoral instances of the sort that Scanlon explicitly rules out. Additionally, while groups are a good way to describe particular relationships that one might modify, not all groups are like this. I may share a group of people with philosophy degrees with Scanlon, that does not make us friends. Similarly, I share a group of punks with Joey Ramone, but I’ll never meet him.

“We Accept You, One of Us”

This may seem obvious. What is less obvious is the way praise and blame are used to manage our membership in those groups.

## 2. Managing a Group

What I mean by “managing” is primarily adding or removing, but this can have many variations. Praise and blame also serve to marginalize people within a group or to create a group within the group. Some examples of managing include:

1. Affirming membership in the group (“We accept you, one of us.”)
2. Challenging someone’s standing within the group (“A true philosopher would never have done that.”)
3. Inviting into the group (“You like Iron Maiden?! Come have lunch with us!”)
4. Gatekeeping the group, keeping people out. (“*Do you* like Iron Maiden? What’s your favorite album?”)
5. Maximally distancing within the group (“Fredo, you are nothing to me now.”)
6. Drawing closer within the group or forming subgroups (“you are the only one I trust around here.”)

Different groups function differently, so this management can do a lot of things. Nonmoral instances of praise and blame best illuminate some of the variations and subtleties of this practice, so my discussion will focus on those. But what I consider here should apply both to moral and nonmoral praise and blame.

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

It is an important feature of GMT that praise and blame together share this function of group management. In this respect, praise and blame do the same thing. They manage groups. An occurrence of praise or of blame is successful in this goal if it changes one’s group membership. Imagine I am in the group of people who are never late, and then one day I am late and you blame me for it. If this happens publicly enough, it bumps me out of the group of always punctual people into the group of people who are sometimes late. Notice you could do the same thing with praise. You could refrain from blaming me for being late, but instead say that it somehow humanizes me for you to see that I make mistakes. You are not just making an excuse for me or forgiving me, instead you are grateful for what I have revealed about myself and you welcome me to your group, the group of people who are sometimes late to things and understanding of other late people. You can welcome me to your group with praise.

Not all group management is praise or blame. You can be kicked out of a group or invited in by different methods, as with the PhDs. You could also leave groups in a way that does not suggest praise or blame. When I marry and I leave the group of bachelors, I did not have to endure the blame of all remaining bachelors to leave the group.

### **3. Praise, Blame and The Stickiness of Groups**

Because we can move in and out of these groups, we have a greater or lesser degree of certainty and solidity in our belonging to different groups. I might be extra sensitive to blame in a group in which I only have a tenuous sense of belonging. Thus, I might react differently to blame in a group that is nearly impossible for me to leave. A group’s *stickiness* is the degree to which we can be moved out of it by praise or blame. Some groups are nearly impossible to join or leave. I



## “We Accept You, One of Us”

will never be in the group of people who are 8 feet tall. I will never be able to leave the group of people who are from Boston, no matter how convincingly I repress my accent. There is something sticky about being from Boston. Some groups are trivially easy to join. I can just start drinking green tea to join the green tea drinker group. Those are the extremes. In the middle, most groups are possible to move in and out of, but there's some process to it, some gatekeeping, and some insecurity. Though the precise mechanics of this motion vary from group to group, the overall practice of praise and blame is a tool for doing so. What I will call *stickiness* is the quality of the group that determines how easy it is to get in or get kicked out.

Families can be sticky in this sense. Happy families are all sticky; unhappy families are each unsticky in their own way. It is not impossible to leave, but it takes more than just a few instances of praise or blame to switch groups. Wolf (2011) observes cases of angry blame within families, without the kind of relationship modification Scanlon (2008) describes. For some people this example makes sense and motivates the idea that anger is inextricably linked to blame and that it can happen in the absence of relationship modification. For others, perhaps raised on icy silences rather than angry outbursts, this can seem rather alien. Thinking of this in terms of groups can reveal why.

You can have angry blame without relationship modification *in sticky groups*. In sticky groups, like many families are, angry blame should seem less threatening. After all, if the blame of another family member might push me a bit to the margins of the family in their regard, but will not result in my full scale expulsion from the group, then I have less to fear. It is not relationship modification of the sort that concerns me because I won't lose my belonging in the group. So the more sticky the group, this more severe, angry or even violent blame may manifest

“We Accept You, One of Us”

and exist without relationship modification. The anger, door slamming, and jaw clenching can continue without causing the group to dissolve. On the other hand, if I am in a less sticky (less stable?) family, I might become hyper alert to anything resembling blame, because I know I could be kicked out of the house or worse at any time, over any perceived sleight. I could lose the sense of group belonging that concerns me.

Gender seems to be sticky, but no less policed by praise and blame. I can be blamed for being a bad exemplar of manhood any number of times without it actually threatening my belonging in the group of men, provided I am perceived as being in it in the first place. Imagine I am criticized by other men for this. They police the group and blame me for my lack of interest in football, or something else that does not fit their concept of manhood. They are trying to blame me into another group, but it is just not working. They might say that I am not a real man, but that just creates a new group. Now there is the one group of men, in the broadest sense, following whatever the right theory about gender ends up being. There is also the group of “men approved of by the other men.” So they can push me into the more contrived group with enough blame. But this group is still nested within the larger group of men. This kind of group gerrymandering happens all the time and sometimes it is all praise or blame amounts to. We can’t fully blame someone out of the group, so we blame them into the margins of it.

Sticky groups can also be hard to get into. It is hard to join the group of chess grandmasters. Less sticky groups let you come and go as you please. So while it is hard to become a grandmaster, it is easy to join your local chess club just by showing up.

#### **4. Harm and Help in Terms of Groups**

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

One might think that if what praise and blame do is just move us around in social groups, we need not worry so much about how we do it. But the consequences of being moved around in groups can be harmful. This can be because of the psychological discomfort of finding yourself misrepresented as being part of one group rather than another, or even exposed as a member of a group you were hitherto just privately a part of. At the other extreme, it can mean social exclusion, withholding of resources, or even being treated as less than human. If you are in the group of criminal suspects you may end up in prison. If you are in the group of the short list for applicants, you may get your dream job. These groupings have a significant impact on our lives.

Some harms can come to either the praiser/blamer or the praised/blamed. We each have a strong interest, stronger perhaps than we tend to acknowledge, in which groups we belong to. We care about which groups we are actually in and which groups we're *perceived* as being in. This is partly because we care about reputation. It is also partly because we care about having a certain level of autonomy and ability to self-identify. A threat to group membership can be a threat to identity. We can get put in a group we do not want to be in, or kicked out of a group we have always been in. We can also see that we've been put into the wrong group, at least in the eyes of one perceiver. This helps explain the discomfort with even the most gentle forms of blame or most well-meaning forms of praise.

Consider some specific examples of the harm that can befall you as you change groups with praise or blame. Perhaps the most obvious kind of case is when blame harms the person being blamed. This can be because I have actually done wrong and I am being punished for it. This can involve being pushed to the margins of my group or outright expelled. Or it can be that I have not done wrong, yet I am saddled with this new group membership of the wrongdoers because

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

everyone thinks I did wrong. Some kinds of blame could put me in the group of criminals, jerks,<sup>15</sup> or sellouts. Now I have to work to clean up my reputation and see if I can regain some belonging in the group of good citizens, sweethearts or a persons of integrity.

Sometimes who you blame indicates which group(s) you are in. And sometimes this can harm you. Imagine you and I read the news about a riot in the streets. We agree that this is a bad state of affairs but we disagree about why. You blame the lawlessness of the protestors. I blame the lack of restraint of the riot police. We’ve just decisively identified ourselves as belonging to different groups. Who we blame reveals what groups we belong to or ally ourselves with. Where you and I once got along swimmingly, our relationship is now tense. Where we may have helped one another before, we may be less likely to do so now.

Sometimes by praising, I create a group association between the praiser and the praised. Praise the wrong person at the wrong time and you can give evidence that you don’t belong in the group you seem to be in, like if you praise Donald Trump at a liberal fundraiser party. Additionally, this is a good way to invite a sort of blame that will get you kicked out of your group. You might also embarrass yourself by revealing what group you are in, if you wanted to keep it secret. If I praise trashy detective novels in my Tolstoy reading group, then I reveal something I may not want them to know about me: my taste in low brow literature. This can also happen in the opposite direction. Praise can harm the person being praised by implicating them in the group of the praiser. Think of Nietzsche’s work being championed by the Nazis.

Additionally, you can be praised by someone who misjudges your capacities. This mismatch can go either way. So you might be praised for accomplishing a trivial task, when in fact you are

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<sup>15</sup> See Schwitzgebel (2019) pp. 3-14.

“We Accept You, One of Us”

capable of accomplishing a much larger task. Implying that you are less capable than you are. This can sting just as much as blame for that same inadequacy might. Alternatively, you could even feel that sting if someone overestimates your abilities. Imagine I tell you, with some pride, that I read one hundred books last year. You respond, “well, it is better to read one hundred good ones than three hundred bad ones.” You take yourself to be praising my restraint and discernment. But I was trying to brag about the volume of my reading. Now you’ve placed me in the group of people who *could* read three hundred books in a year, and I am disappointed and a little embarrassed about which group I actually belong to in contrast.

## 5. Nonmoral Blame & Nonmoral Praise

It is often accepted that blame admits of nonmoral varieties. Dale Dorsey (2019) highlights the ways we can be the appropriate targets of blame even in the absence of properly moral transgressions. This is something we can understand in terms of group management, too. Dorsey considers the example<sup>16</sup> of a talented baseball pitcher who does not work hard enough to fully realize his potential. He is the target of a particular kind of blame from his fellow players. This is not because it is morally required of him to make the most of his gift, but because it is something of an insult to the rest of the team that he could be so much better than he is. He does not respect the game. This can be clearly understood in terms of groups. The same man could not be rightly blamed if he were not a baseball player. And the blaming him puts him in a marginal category of baseball players: those who do not respect the game. His peers can’t blame him out of the group, but they can put him in a subgroup which is less respected. And this changes in his standing is

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<sup>16</sup> From the movie *Bull Durham*.

“We Accept You, One of Us”

one step closer to his being officially removed from the group.

In a different category, Boulton (2021) develops an account of blame of a particularly epistemic kind. Again here, we put people in different groups by way of our epistemic blame. Perhaps we call them irrational or incoherent. Or maybe they are just a student in our critical thinking class who persists in committing logical fallacies even after we have repeatedly tried to teach them not to. Epistemic blame moves them into groups of less trusted sources of information, less reliable sources of knowledge, and so on.

Though less discussed, we can see that praise admits of nonmoral varieties as well. It is noteworthy that nonmoral praise is at least as much about the praiser as it is about the praised. This is where a lot of building groups happens. I praise your Iron Maiden shirt to show that I like Iron Maiden as much as to acknowledge that you do. I praise your record collection in part to let you know I am a fellow vinyl collector.

Anderson et al.<sup>17</sup> highlight this relationship building function of *moral* praise. I suggest it extends far more into nonmoral instances of praise. We build these groups by praising one another’s tastes, views, competence, tattoos, outfits, taste in music, sense of humor, or any number of other qualities. This kind of nonmoral praise generally forms bonds between people and organizes them into shared groups.

## 6. The Characteristic Sting of Absence

There is a characteristic sting of blame. But there is also a characteristic sting of its absence.

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, R. A., Crockett, M. J., & Pizarro, D. A. (2020). A Theory of Moral Praise. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 24(9), 694–703.

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

The same is true for praise. The absence of praise when praise seems deserved can hurt. This hardly needs articulating. It feels especially bad if you must see the people around you praised for doing the same things as you while your accomplishments get no such recognition. What is happening in terms of groups? All your peers are being promoted to new and better groups, the groups of the accomplished and the recognized within your community or your organization. But in being so regularly overlooked, you get left behind.

Less obviously, but no less in need of explanation is the way the absence of blame can hurt. This is nicely illustrated in *Crime and Punishment* with the line: “...they grieve over men, they weep but they don’t blame them, they don’t blame them! But it hurts more, it hurts more when they don’t blame!” (Dostoyevsky p. 17) His not being blamed suggests he is not even in the group of people who deserve to be blamed. This is a fate worse than simply being in the group of murderers. Being blamed for his wrongdoing would preserve his sense of belonging in one of the biggest groups of all: moral agents. In less dramatic cases, it can sting too.<sup>18</sup> If you do not blame me for my misconduct, I might be left to infer that you don’t perceive me as being worthy of blame. I might worry you’ve given up on me.<sup>19</sup> In group terms, I might worry that you perceive me as outside of the group, which puts me one step closer to actually being an outsider in the group. This is not to say that being blamed is the only way to affirm one’s membership in the group, nor is this meant as a defense of blame in any particular form. However, it is a way of illuminating this feature of blame. Blame’s absence can hurt.

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Julia Markovits for finally making this point clear to me. I don’t why it took me so long to get it.

<sup>19</sup> For more discussion on this and the distinctive harm of giving up on someone, see Kiran Bhardwaj, forthcoming.

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

A theoretical virtue of GMT is its ability to explain why praise and blame can manifest so differently in so many different circumstances. Why is there angry blame and wimpy blame,<sup>20</sup> epistemic blame and moral blame? Why does blame sometimes involve protest or relationship modification? Why does it sometimes draw closer while other times pushing away? And why does it do all of these things with such varying intensity? The reason is in the different qualities of the groups. Groups that are stickier, like Wolf’s family example, can sustain greater volatility so these tend to be environments in which angry blame can be pervasive. Those families are hard to lose, so if the tendency is towards angry blame, it can just grow and escalate without necessarily dissolving the group. Other groups, like friendships, coworkers and more voluntary types of association which we naturally move in and out of in our lives can dissolve quite readily. We should not be surprised to see a greater level of delicacy in the ways people blame in less sticky groups. In fact, the delicacy of blame in such circumstances make sense considering the type of groups involved. Some groups, like moral agents or citizens of a country, are large and amorphous so perhaps something more like protest is the most natural way for blame to manifest in them.

### **7. Grouping the Dead and Grouping in Private**

While group membership changes across time, groups themselves are not essentially sensitive to the mortality of their members.<sup>21</sup> If Jeffery Lee Pierce was a punk rocker until he died, he will always be a punk rocker. Thus, I can praise him in his capacity as an artist in this cultural

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<sup>20</sup> This is what Wolf calls Scanlon’s sense of blame.

<sup>21</sup> The group of living people is an exception. For more on the dead as a group, see: Kaspers, Tom, et al. “Speak No Ill of the Dead: The Dead as a Social Group.” *Synthese*, vol. 200, no. 3, June 2022, pp. 1–25.



“We Accept You, One of Us”

tradition. Or I can blame him in that same capacity, if I think there are special obligations members of that group have, which he failed to live up to.

We praise and blame the dead as an exercise in post-mortem group management. We see this when people blame historical figures when it is revealed that they profited from slavery, for example. Or when The Met or The British Museum removes the Sackler family name from their walls, this was group management. The museum wanted to indicate that they were in a different group from the Sacklers.<sup>22</sup>

This also happens in less moral loaded disputes that are just about how we carve up the history of a disputed social group. When Carl Sagan (1980) praises the methods of ancient philosophers, he is drawing them closer to the scientists group of which he is a part. When Stephen Hawking (2012) selectively blames some of those same ancient philosophers while praising others as scientist, he is managing the group of scientist and philosophers, putting the ones he likes in the former group and those he dislikes in the latter.

What norms govern praising and blaming the dead? There is one ongoing debate about responding to moral ignorance.<sup>23</sup> Many of the examples in that literature involve the prospect of holding the dead responsible. We do this all the time. We praise the mighty dead and blame the deplorable villains of the past. But we ought not do this so casually. There is a norm against speaking ill of the dead. But clearly, one can be bad enough that we ought to be able to speak ill of them anyway. And it seems true that we ought not blame the dead gratuitously for a variety of reasons beyond that norm.

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<sup>22</sup> See: Keefe (2021).

<sup>23</sup> For example, see: Rosen (2002), Harman (2011).

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

One such reason is that they are not here to defend themselves and it comes off as bullying and treacherous. Another reason is that our blame cannot retroactively change their behavior. And that they aren't alive to be invited into moral dialogue or to maintain relationships with us, the living blamers. So if we can blame them, and if we think praise and blame even somewhat communicative, why do we do it? One answer is that it's to signal our willingness to uphold norms (Shoemaker forthcoming). So the signal is not for the dead but for the living. Yet that seems even worse. How pathetic to signal that if Hitler stood here, you would really tell him what's what.

I suggest that we praise and blame the dead to emphasize, modify or downplay our association with them. We do it to get them in or out of our groups. We do it to claim them as our people or to show that they are not our people.

We claim these people for our groups or push them away. But the intersubjective nature of groups make it the case that neither Hawking nor Sagan have the last word on this. In Hawking's mind one philosopher was not in the scientist group, and in Sagan's mind he was. We don't need to get to an objective answer about this to see how praise and blame work in this way. It all starts in one person's mental arrangements of the world and grows from there as people compare notes, share arguments, agree or disagree and convince one another (or not). We organize the world into these groups in our minds. This is not a sufficient condition for moving the group of the actual target of praise or blame. But it is often the beginning.

Thus we can also understand private manifestations of praise and blame as a matter of group management. Private blame may be all that members of one group can safely manifest without incurring repercussions. It is not hard to imagine a political situation in which everyone

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

privately puts a leader in a worse group while no one can safely express this widely held view. Private blame may be the sandbox in which we test out the group arrangements we think the world should be in. I sure seem angry at my friend for being late *again*. Should I express this? Do they deserve to be outgrouped for this? Am I overreacting? Or do I just need lunch and I am irritable because they are standing in the way of that? I may blame the friend privately, rethink it, eat lunch (or read Shantideva) and realize I do not blame them at all.

Private praise is not as widely accepted but I have argued in the second chapter that it is a phenomenon that needs explaining. We privately praise, just as we privately blame, in the theater of our minds. This is a distinct experience from just the involuntary feelings of admiration. It is a deliberate practice. We cultivate these feelings. We indulge in the thoughts. Private praise is not just the random thoughts that pop into your mind uninvited, but the way you sit around daydreaming about how wonderful or impressive someone is. The important part is that it is active, not passive. As I argue, we privately praise for the audience of ourselves. This is similarly part of the practice of group management. I privately praise the artists who I take to be the good ones. I privately praise the people who I take myself to be in league with, however abstractly. I privately praise the kindred spirits from other times and places as a way of identifying and clustering the values I hold dear or aspire to.

## **8. Other Features of GMT**

### **a. Standing and Groups**

Standing to praise or blame can also be determined by group membership. GMT allows for two senses of standing to praise/blame. One might be charged with hypocrisy because they are

“We Accept You, One of Us”

in the group of people guilty of the very thing they are blaming someone for. We can say they lack standing to blame in this respect because they are already in the guilty group they are trying to put the blamed person into. Being in a certain group effectively disables you from moving someone with your praise or blame. You can still say the words or try to perform the act, but it lacks force because of the group you are in.

Praise/blame might may not be taken seriously or even be taken the wrong way for reasons other than hypocrisy, like lack of shared experience. This can be true of groups that it is hard or impossible to leave, like race, age or any number of other details. But also more permeable groups like veterans, artists, or public figures. The blame of anonymous internet trolls may lack the sting of the blame of your peers. Veterans may be inclined to take seriously criticism of the war from other veterans than they would from anti-war protestors who have limited shared experience. This could have little to do with the truth of the criticism, just the direct acquaintance of the critic.

Standing to praise others is what matters, not standing to praise yourself.<sup>24</sup> On this account, that standing will be determined by group membership. This tracks with intuitive cases. You cannot meaningfully praise me if you have been trying to undermine my efforts the entire time. We can make exceptions for groups whose job it is to be a constructive obstacle to others. Drill instructors might serve this role in the military. But their goal is not ultimately to thwart the soldiers in their charge, but to ensure that they are up to the task. Teachers play a similar role when evaluating the work of their students.

## **b. Reflexive Praise/Blame**

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<sup>24</sup> See Lippert-Rasmussen (2021).

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

The nature of blaming yourself in cases of tragedy<sup>25</sup> can be illuminated in terms of GMT. When I blame myself, I want to be out of my own group. I want to get away from myself, to distance myself from myself, but alas I cannot. This is part of what makes the experience so miserable. I also do not want to implicate other people in my group, so I try to kick myself out for their sake. Or at the very least, I try to distance myself for their sake. And I want to remind anyone else that I should not be in their group, or in any group of worthy individuals.

Conversely, when I praise myself, I want to show how awesome things are in my group right now. Maybe I want to invite you to join or maybe I just want to rub it in your face.

### **c. Honor in Groups and Special Obligations**

There’s an element of honor to blame and praise. We blame people who fail to uphold a nonmoral standard, *because* we share a group with them. As Anthony Appiah says, “[i]t takes a sense of honor to feel implicated in the acts of others” (Appiah 2010, p. 204) Dale Dorsey (2020) demonstrates this in his examples of blame for practice failure. The baseball player who blames someone on his team, not for a particular failing of execution, but for not taking the game overall seriously enough.

One motivation to blame, especially when we think of it as protest, is to signal that this is not what our group is about. You might think being a member of a group brings with it a special obligation to blame failures of other people within the group. Punks protest Nazis and fight them in the streets. This happens, in part, because Nazis try to make a home for themselves in punk communities. Conversely, people take issue with the absence of blame in this respect. Police

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<sup>25</sup> See Heracles cases in Chapter 1

“We Accept You, One of Us”

officers who seem conspicuously quiet on the subject of police misconduct are looked at with suspicion.

GMT explains how blame can function both to push someone out of a group and to draw them back into it. Blame can call you out or call you in.

## **9. The Ethics of Praise and Blame as The Ethics of Group Management**

If we think of praise and blame as functioning to manage groups, we can ask a different question about the ethics of praise and blame. The prevailing approaches are to ask if the responses are justified/required on metaphysical grounds (backward looking) or justified in terms of individual or overall consequence (forward looking). As an alternative, we could focus primarily on the groups praise/blame move us around in, more than the ways the praise/blame manifests. This is especially promising considering that praise can be particularly harmful. So, if praising, not praising, blaming, or not blaming, results in moving a moral agent into the group of non-moral agents or a group of non-persons, this should be a red flag. At certain extremes, this is just what happens. Angry blame can dehumanize, like in the dehumanizing speech Lynn Tyrell (2012) discusses. By comparing the target to insects or rodents, the speaker effectively puts the target in an out group, outside not only the group of moral agents, but outside the group of moral patients. This lays the groundwork for terrible, even genocidal treatment. While Tyrell does not explicitly categorize this behavior as blame, it seems that it fits the bill under any plausible description.

Relatedly, though not nearly as extreme, if blaming someone in a way that removes them from the sorts of groups that might facilitate reform might count as a reason not to do it. I am not

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

trying to develop such an account here. I just want to highlight that if we think of praise and blame and being concerned with group membership, it might be a fruitful way to think about the ethics of praise and blame to focus on those groups, at least as much as we focus on the mechanism for moving people around in them.

There is also the question of the reactive emotions associated with praise/blame. If anger is too harsh a response to wrongdoing considering metaphysical considerations about determinism, Pereboom (2014) suggest disappointment as an alternative. In response, Menges (2020) argues that disappointment is unduly harsh in the same ways as anger and if we should give up on anger, so too should we give up on disappointment. This may be so, but the two can be evaluated differently in terms of their impact on group membership. Suppose angry blame dislodges a person from their group in a permanent way, but disappointment does so in a way that allows readmission. Then even if we grant the two are equally harsh and equally metaphysically unjustified, we might still appeal to the instrumental value of disappointment over anger, if it better preserves the overall integrity of our social groups. If we consider praise and blame primarily in terms of group management, rather than directly in terms of the harm of the reactive emotion, we might come to a different conclusion.

Another reason to refrain from angry blame could be from a recognition of how not sticky most groups are. It is easy to kick people out and lose them for good. This is not necessarily because of the fragility of the blamed, but because of the power of blame (and praise) to reshape our social world. So if we want to reform our practices with respect to angry blame in particular, we could retain a better equilibrium by reducing angry blame or we could make the groups stickier. This second strategy has received far less attention.

## “We Accept You, One of Us”

The biggest problem with praise/blame is not just that praise/blame has that characteristic sting (which is bad) or that it may not be deserved (which is worse). It is that the praise/blame actually changes the social world, destabilizes it, in a way that can be unjust. In changing the groups I belong to, you have the power to change how people see me and how I see myself. You have the power to change who I am.

Recent<sup>26</sup> empirical research demonstrates that praise of college athlete’s physical prowess can diminish perceptions of their agency. That’s an example of moving them to another perceived social group. Praise of their physical stature or athletic skill seems to move them from the “smart college student” group to the “dumb jock” group. Many groups operate on problematic stereotypes like this. Putting someone in the wrong groups exposes the members to stereotype threat and biases. So it is not just blame we need be careful with. Praise can build social groups but it can also dismantle them and unfairly move people around in them.

GMT reveals that we have two options for reform. We can modify praise and blame to make them less powerful or less permitted. There is a lot of skepticism about this project. GMT provides an alternative approach. What if we could modify groups, even just how we think of them, to make them more or less sticky? If we grant that our lives lack something in the absence of praise and blame, we could still mitigate the dangers involved in the practice by modifying the stickiness of groups. We can recognize some groups as inviolable. Nothing a person can do can make them any less of a moral agent. We could reform our practice from the other end and treat the most important groups as more sticky, so that even harsh blame or inhumanizing praise cannot

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<sup>26</sup> White II, Mark H., and Ludwin E. Molina. “Inhumanizing Praise.” *Social Psychology* (18649335), vol. 47, no. 4, Aug. 2016, pp. 187–200.



“We Accept You, One of Us”

dislodge people from them.

## **10. Conclusion**

The point of this project has just been to consider one way of understanding praise and blame and their consequences. If we also want to modify our practice of praising and blaming, then there is one quality we should look for in candidates for replacing praise or blame. That quality is group management. And if we want to evaluate the permissibility of praising and blaming practices, we should do so in a way that is indexed to the groups in question, with particular attention given to the stickiness of the group. Some groups are helpfully unified by praise and blame while others are irreparably fractured.

Praise and blame are powerful tools which seem to have many functions. However, insufficient focus has thus far been paid to the ways they can manage social groups. The groups we are in, or see ourselves as being in, impact our autonomy and identity. They can modify our status as perceived agents. They can even result in losing our status as moral patients. We must use such tools carefully.

## Chapter 4 Praise in Shantideva

Insofar as contemporary western philosophy engages with the thought of the eight century Buddhist philosopher Shantideva,<sup>27</sup> it tends to be about his views on anger.<sup>28</sup> This is natural enough, since there is a rich debate<sup>29</sup> about anger in contemporary western philosophy, often connected with blame,<sup>30</sup> which Shantideva's remarks can fit into. One might be surprised to learn that Shantideva said at least as much about praise as he did about anger. It is also natural enough that this would not connect with western philosophical discussions of praise since compared to blame, these are also in their infancy.<sup>31</sup>

At different times, Shantideva claims that praise is a hindrance to practice and a source of suffering. Yet he also praises others, and the text seems to invite us to cultivate a practice of more freely praising others, letting them enjoy it and not being resentful when we ourselves are not praised. So, praise is bad for us, the audience of the text, but good for others. How can this be? If praise results in suffering, it seems this should be the thing a bodhisattva invites on to themselves for the sake of others. So why deflect it? And why praise others or take delight in their being praised? At first glance, this appears more egoistic than benevolent. One familiar with the text might ask, is this just licking honey from a razor blade (BCA 7.64)? This essay attempts to answer these questions.

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<sup>27</sup> Sometimes also transliterated "Śāntideva."

<sup>28</sup> Cherry (2022), Nussbaum (2016), and Pereboom (2021).

<sup>29</sup> Callard (2020) Cherry (2016), Reis-Dennis (2019), Silva (2021)

<sup>30</sup> Fricker (2016), Scanlon (2008) and Wolf (2011)

<sup>31</sup> Though there are a few notable examples, including: Stout (2020), Telech (2021), Telech (2022) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2021).

First, I will survey Shantideva's discussion of praise in *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*.<sup>32</sup> Second, I will consider some puzzles that seem to arise from what Shantideva says about praise, culminating in what I will call the Shantidevan puzzle of praise. Third, I will consider three interpretive tools that we can use to extract a principle and resolve this puzzle. In doing so, I will highlight some connections to other literatures on praise.

#### 4.1 The Text

Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* is often translated as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. However, this title can be misleading. The Tibetan convention is to instead translate the title as *How to Lead an Awakened Life*. I follow this interpretation of the title. Garfield (2010) explains that this interpretation can shift our view of the text "...allowing us to see it not so much as a characterization of the extraordinary moral life of a saint, but as a guide to moral development open to any of us." I highlight this because this issue of how to deal with praise within the text is best understood as a moral point that might apply to any of us, rather than just an obscure rule for the bodhisattva.

Shantideva explicitly discusses praise in most of the ten chapters of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*. This section surveys his comments about dealing with praise. These are largely concerned with praise given to others and praise (not) given to self. After considering and briefly commenting on these passages, I will attempt to extract a principle at play within them and then

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<sup>32</sup> I'm working from the Wallace and Wallace English language translation. Different English translations talk about praise in some passages but not others. However, I think the overall picture of praise in Shantideva is clear enough to be worth working on in translation. For comparison, and to show that this is not a peculiarity of one translation, I have collected these same passages from three other English translations of *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* in Appendix A.

## Praise in Shantideva

present what I take to be the puzzle. I will also aim to distinguish between comments on how one might be initially disposed to respond to things (like praise, anger, etc.) and how one aims to be. In a transformational text such as this, it's important to differentiate the observations of how one is by default and how one comes to be on the path.

We should also distinguish between three categories of passages about praise:

- a. strategies for dealing with praise,
- b. observation of one's own attitudes about praise, and
- c. instances of Shantideva praising.

Shantideva does all of these. Some things he praises freely. Shantideva makes an offering which includes "songs of praise" (BCA 2.18) and he "praises oceans of virtue" (BCA 2.23) of the Tathagatas. He also seems to praise at the end 10.14:

"Behold him whose lotus-feet are worshiped with tiaras of hundreds of gods, whose eyes are moist with compassion, on whose head a stream of diverse flowers rains down, with his delightful summer palaces celebrated by thousands of goddesses singing hymns of praise. Upon seeing Manjughosa before them, may the beings of the hells immediately cheer."

There are only a few instances of this category c in which Shantideva praises something. When he does, he praises something that is a quality or a virtue, not an individual. Since praise

has some potentially harmful effect on individuals, perhaps we should freely praise things that cannot be harmed by praise. One initial interpretation I want to consider is the following principle:

**Praise qualities not persons:** praise is appropriately targeted at qualities or states of affairs, but not individuals.

If this is the case, then we could say that Shantideva skillfully praises in a way that cannot cause suffering from the conceit or attachment that grows from praising persons. However, this cannot resolve the tension, because Shantideva also says of individuals: “[o]ne should express one’s appreciation for all good words. Having seen someone engaging in virtue, one should cheer him on with praise.” (BCA 5.75). Here it is explicitly the person we cheer on with praise, not the virtue or the good quality of the person. So it is not the case that the recommended approach is to simply praise good qualities rather than good persons.

Shantideva goes on to advise that when we are inclined to seek recognition,<sup>33</sup> we should remain unmoved, saying, “[w]hen my mind seeks material gain, honor, and fame, or when it seeks attendants and service, then I will remain still like a piece of wood” (BCA 5.51). This suggests that dealing with praise and our craving for praise is not a small task. Remaining like a piece of wood is also what we are to do when we are impatient, boastful, abusive or angry. It is one of the more actionable pieces of advice in the text.

When Shantideva advises that one should be like a piece of wood, he means that one should refrain from habitual patterns of reaction. You are supposed to wait until the more volatile

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<sup>33</sup> Translated as “praise” by the Padmaraka translation group.

## Praise in Shantideva

feelings that are stirred up in you have subsided. Only then do you respond. For example, if you step on my foot and I immediately grow angry, perhaps attributing this to your poor quality of will, I should wait before I yell at you, since there may be some other explanation.

The idea of acting like a log is connected to this passage (BCA 3.12/13) where he commits to offering up his body to others to treat it as they will.

For the sake of all beings I have made this body pleasureless. Let them continually beat it, revile it, and cover it with filth.

Let them play with my body. Let them laugh at it and ridicule it. What does it matter to me? I have given my body to them.

This can seem grim. But a lot of the anger that comes when you step on my foot comes from the idea that it is *my* foot. I have a kind of ownership over it that you do not have. I can step on it with impunity. You cannot. But Shantideva undermines this sense of ownership by giving away what he owns and thereby getting ahead of the conditions that produce things like anger.

So to remain like a log is to remain like a thing that matters, but has no need to advocate for itself. It does not follow that Shantideva is saying we have to give up our rights or our sense of self-ownership. But he highlights the connection between that sense of self-ownership and the tendency toward reactive states.

The piece of wood is not going anywhere. You cannot do anything to upset it, or unsettle it, or harm it. You might destroy it, but you can never defeat it. You would not want to spend your whole life this way, and indeed Shantideva does not suggest that. But in these certain moments when you are prone to act in such a way that you will regret, it is worth doing.

It is important to contrast this acting like a piece of wood from the Strawsonian objective

attitude (See: Strawson 1962). While Shantideva recommends something a lot like the objective attitude elsewhere, the sense of being like a piece of wood is not about pausing how you react to a certain person in light of considerations about their agency. Instead, it is a pause on how you react towards anyone or anything, in light of your own compromised agency, where your agency is compromised by your own lack of equanimity.

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Continuing on, Shantideva highlights that others enjoy being praised, yet we are often reluctant to praise them, saying “[i]f others find pleasure and joy in praising the abundance of someone’s good qualities, why, mind, do you not praise it and delight in this way, too?” (BCA 6.76). So Shantideva finds himself reluctant to praise others. But, as with many such things he highlights about his own psychology, he is seeking to change this. So he should be aspiring to praise the good qualities of others freely. And yet, when concerned about not receiving praise, he reminds himself “[p]raise, fame, and honor are not conducive to my merit, long life, strength, health, or physical well-being (BCA 6.90). Praise might feel good but it does not help with any of these desirable qualities, the sort of things a bodhisattva might benefit from in their effort to help sentient beings. Though he does not specifically say it impedes them, just that it does not help. A picture is emerging here. If we can praise in a way that is harmless, then it is just a free opportunity for joy. To fail to do so would be a missed opportunity.

As with most things we like, we suffer from losing them. Praise is no exception. Shantideva says: “At the loss of praise and fame, my own mind appears to me just like a child who wails in distress when its sandcastle is destroyed” (BCA 6.93). So the loss of praise causes suffering. But the thing we cry over the loss of was never going to last anyway. One cannot enjoy being

## Praise in Shantideva

constantly praised without the praise ending or at least yielding diminishing returns eventually. We might wonder then why Shantideva wants to freely provide to others something that they will grow attached to and that will cause suffering when they inevitably lose it.

Shantideva also recognizes a subtle difference about what exactly one is responding to with praise, saying “Since a word is not sentient, it cannot praise me. But knowing that someone likes me is a cause of my delight” (BCA 6.94). So it is not the praise to which one grows attached, and suffers from the loss of. Instead, it is the knowledge that someone thinks highly of you. It is not the quality you exhibit like courage or compassion, and it is not your particularly skillful performance, either of which one might praise without necessarily praising you as a person. After all, we can begrudgingly praise the performance of a competitor (Stout 2020). You could also praise someone’s performance in a chess match without praising them as a person. Shantideva insightfully highlights that it is this craving for a fondness of us as people, outside of anything we do, that we tend to crave. Words and gestures of praise merely signal it.

In the last discussion of praise in BCA chapter 6, he says “[t]herefore, it is because I am being praised that pleasure arises in me. But due to such absurdity, this is nothing more than the behavior of a child” (BCA 6.97). Comparison to a child indicates once again that this is a thing we should outgrow, but also marks that this is a serious issue. This is how we are before the bodhisattva path, and something we should be looking to transcend. One can read this as an effort to undermine the pleasure felt by being praised, much in the same way he shows how to undermine the conditions that create anger in the first place. He wants us to come to see praise as something that always comes with a hangover. That hangover is especially costly: “[p]raise and so forth obliterate my peace and disillusionment with the cycle of existence. They stir up jealousy



## Praise in Shantideva

towards gifted people, and anger at their success” (BCA 6.98). This may be the worst thing about being praised as a person. It makes one comfortable where one should not be. It creates further attachment to a world of suffering that is not something we should like. So being praised feels good, but it gets you attached to the wrong thing. It is not worth it. The bodhisattva goes to some lengths to be less invested in the pleasures of this existence as it is. Just when they think they get out, praise draws them back in.

Now consider responses to praise directed at Shantideva. One might stop seeking praise and nonetheless encounter it somewhat organically. One line of thought encourages the reader to remain skeptical of such praise: “If others despise me, why should I rejoice when praised? If others praise me, why should I be despondent when reviled?” (BCA 8.21). This is familiar enough. For most people, most of the time, someone has a problem with you and someone else always thinks you are great. There is no reason to get so worked up about it. But we do. This works similarly to the way considerations about anger do. Simply pausing to ask yourself why you care so much about this can start to loosen the grip it has on you.

Consider another important pair of passages from BCA 6.75/76:

“One should express one's appreciation for all good words. Having seen someone engaging in virtue, one should cheer him on with praises.

One should speak of others' good qualities in their absence and relate them again with satisfaction; and when one's own virtue is discussed, one should consider it as appreciation for good qualities.”

This seems again like the subject matter of praise should be good qualities, not persons. Again, this makes sense since good qualities are not the sort of thing that will suffer for lack of praise or grow attached to samsara.<sup>34</sup> It is also an important distinction that is not fully appreciated in contemporary discussions of praise and blame.

But again, the picture cannot be so simple as to say that praising good qualities is always safe, because Shantideva still insists on acting in such a way as to avoid their being noticed, saying “[t]his one should not be praised for a trace of an adventitious good quality, for he is full of faults. Act so that no one may know of your good qualities” (BCA 8.164). If praise of good qualities were harmless, there would be no reason to avoid showing off your good qualities.

As with other issues in Shantideva, the aim is transformation. When the subject is anger, he reports how he used to relate to anger and how one can become intoxicated by it. He also lists the considerations he wants to be able to keep in mind to change how he relates to anger. So too with praise. These passages reveal the following sketch of how he used to relate to praise (the old approach) and how he aims to in the future (the new approach). These can be summarized as follows.

For the old approach to praise, we **tend to...**

1. enjoy being praised. BCA (6.97, 8.152)
2. seek praise and have anxiety about not getting praised (BCA 1.31)
3. be reluctant to praise others (BCA 6.76)

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<sup>34</sup> The world of appearances, characterized by delusion and suffering. Not the kind of thing you should come to like.

## Praise in Shantideva

4. throw a tantrum when one loses praise (BCA 6.97)
5. not love the words of praise, but being liked by the praiser (BCA 6.94)

For the new approach to praise, we **tend to...**

1. freely praise others (BCA 6.76)
2. avoid seeking praise (BCA 8.164, 5.51)
3. know that praise targets qualities, not you. (BCA 6.76)
4. realize that praise just makes you attached to samsara (BCA 6.98)
5. express appreciation even for the words of praise (BCA 6.75)

### 4.2 The Puzzle

This is not all that different than the new approach/old approach dynamic with anger. But there is an asymmetry that is not present in the discussion of anger. The new approach with anger involves not becoming angry yourself, but also not making other people angry. Because if you do, it is you who is their tormentor (BCA 6.49). These both follow from coming to see anger as an affliction, a form of suffering. But with praise, also a contributor to suffering, the new program involves avoiding praise for yourself and more freely giving it to others.

The tension here seems to be between three particular ideas. Taken in conjunction, I see these as the Shantidevan puzzle of praise:

- (1) one should praise persons more freely
- (2) praise of persons creates avoidable suffering

(3) one should not create avoidable suffering

These are not necessarily logically incompatible. They may just be ill defined. In any event, they call out for greater explanation. The next section seeks to interpret this picture of praise and ease some of the tension between these claims. It will draw on concepts and research from recent philosophy and psychology on praise in an effort develop one interpretation to make these three claims a little more palatable together.

### **3. Interpretation**

There are variations in praisers and in praise that could help us make sense of this puzzle. First, like some Buddhist virtues, praise might admit of a near enemy, a thing with which it is easily confused. Second is that praise often involves the competence (or for Shantideva, it may be better to call it wisdom) of the praiser. Praise from one who is not competent about what is being praised may not be worth having. And third, the meaning of the praise given and received might function differently depending on who gives it and who receives it, not because of competence per se, but because of social groups of the praiser and the praised.

This section is meant to highlight some interpretive tools for resolving the Shantidevan puzzle of praise, rather than offer arguments for how and where to apply them in order to do so.

#### **3.1 Near and Far Enemies**

One framework in which we try to understand things is as having opposites. The opposite of up is down. The opposite of hot is cold. The opposite of love is hate. Another framework,

familiar from Aristotle, is that certain things, particularly virtues, exist at a midpoint between two extremes. Courage is between recklessness and cowardice. Less utilized in western philosophy is the framework of near and far enemies, but it is common in Buddhist philosophy.

The far enemy of a thing is more like its opposite. It is something we would never mistake for the thing itself and that we would use only in contrast to understand an idea. We can see this in Buddhaghosa's discussion of a different set of virtues. If loving-kindness is the virtue, ill-will is its far enemy. It is unlikely that in trying to manifest loving-kindness we would manifest ill-will by accident and think we had succeeded. But romantic or sexual attachment may be a near enemy of loving-kindness. You may debate the details, but the concept should be clear enough.

Near enemies need more of our attention precisely because they might be mistaken for the thing we seek. It may be a curiosity of translation, but many of the virtues Buddhaghosa discusses have a near enemy which we do not have a distinctive name for. So the near enemy of gladness is joy based on worldly goods. If I am seeking a state of balanced gladness, I might mistakenly think I have reached it when I buy a new record or when I win the lottery. But these are not the same. The state I am seeking is one in which I will be stably content even in the absence of those big wins in life.

While this framework is largely used when discussing virtues, we can fruitfully discuss other concepts with this framework, especially concepts that are contested, such as praise. And like those near enemies of a given virtue, praise has a near enemy which, inconveniently, is still often called "praise." This may be what threatens to draw a bodhisattva back into samsara and generally makes people suffer. It is what interrupts the flow of children when they are learning, and their parents are overly happy for them. It is what comes to be meaningless with overuse.

## Praise in Shantideva

On the other hand, genuine praise is more subtle and the difference between the two can be hard to detect.

With this in mind, we could make a distinction between something like praise and praise\*, where praise\* is the near enemy of praise. If this is the case, we might then formulate the...

**Shantidevan Praise Principle 1:** give and accept praise freely, while refraining from giving or accepting praise\*.

On this interpretation, there is a difference in the nature of the praise we should give freely and the praise we ought to avoid. To do this effectively, we would need to develop a more extensive account of the near enemy of praise, which Shantideva does not provide and which is beyond the scope of this chapter. This may be more promising as a tool for contemporary philosophy than as an interpretation. The near enemy framework would have been something known to both Shantideva and his academic audience at Nalanda. If this is the way to resolve the puzzle, it is even more puzzling why he would not make such a distinction himself.

Further, it would be especially strange for Shantideva to assume this framework but not appeal to it because it was developed in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. *Visuddhimagga* and *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* are the two most notable texts of their kind, so-called path texts, in the Buddhist philosophical tradition.

### 3.2 Praise and Competence

One reason you might not want to accept praise is because the person praising you does

not know what they are talking about. To motivate this, imagine someone says some flattering words about some moves in the most recent game of Magnus Carlsen, the world's #1 ranked chess player. Whether or not that is an instance of praise depends on who said it and what they know. If the comments are coming from someone who knows what they are talking about, then yes, that seems like praise. This praise has greater force than that of a less competent and lower ranked player. Now imagine weaker and weaker players praising the same game. The meaning of the praise would be diminished gradually until reaching a point where we might be reluctant to call it praise anymore. At a certain point, the player knows so little of the game of chess in general<sup>35</sup> as to be unable to appreciate any of what was praiseworthy about the player's move in the first place. When this happens, so-called praise rings hollow.

This competence does not need to be about something like the more objective evaluation of a chess move. It could also be that you need to be competent enough about the values and goals of the person you are praising. Now this could be a good reason to avoid praise from people who are not on the bodhisattva path. Perhaps the people who tend to praise Shantideva stand to him as the novice chess player stands to the world champion. Maybe they praise his outburst of anger because the anger is directed at someone the praiser takes to be bad. Yet this is entirely insensitive to the fact that Shantideva does not want to experience this anger in the first place. What looked like power and righteousness to the praiser looks like affliction and suffering to the praised. While it may be well intentioned and benevolent, the lack of competence makes it an

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, one can know a lot about how to evaluate something without being able to do it. But for the sake of this example, I'm assuming there is a correlation between knowing the intricacies of chess, having a higher chess rating and being able to evaluate the quality of someone else's move.

unreliable and unhelpful guide.

If competence is what makes the difference between the praise worth giving and the praise worth avoiding, we could formulate Shantideva's advice as...

**Shantidevan Praise Principle 2:** give praise freely only about matters in which you are competent, accept praise freely only from competent sources.

On this interpretation, it is the praiser that makes the difference between the praise we should give freely and the praise we should avoid. One reason to think this is what he means is that the handful of times Shantideva praises in the text, his praise concerns Buddhas and bodhisattvas, just the sorts of things we might reasonably expect him to be competent about as a scholar and a monastic. This would also give a skillful means type of explanation for the difference between the good kind of praise and the bad kind of praise, which has precedent as an explanatory tool in the Buddhist philosophical literature.

### 3.3 Praise and Groups

One last reason someone might not want to accept praise is because of the company it would put them in. This is because being praised by a certain group implicates you in the group, it can even be a step towards incorporating you into that group. Anderson et al. (2020) argue that this is the function of moral praise. I argued in chapter 3 that this is the group management function of praise in general, including its nonmoral manifestations. To see how this works, imagine being praised by your friend group for something you do well. This not only signals that



you are doing the right thing, but it also confirms your status as a member of that group. But now imagine a prominent member of the political party that you oppose praises you in an especially public way. This could be embarrassing. You do not want people to get the wrong idea about you. The idea you do not want them to get is that you are part of the wrong political group. If this kind of thing carries on too long, you too might get the idea that you are a part of that group. Because membership in so many social groups is so informal and unofficial, praise and blame can be all it takes to move us around in them.

Recent<sup>36</sup> empirical research demonstrates that praise of college athlete's physical prowess can diminish perceptions of their agency. That is an example of moving one to another perceived social group, which in many cases is a step toward moving them closer to another social group. Praise of their physical stature or athletic skill seems to move them from the "smart college student" group to the "dumb jock" group. Many groups operate on problematic stereotypes like this. Putting someone in the wrong social groups exposes the members to stereotype threat and biases. And again, in many cases, all it takes to do the damage is for the person to see themselves that way. Praise can do harm by moving one into the wrong group.

Something like this might be going on with Shantideva. As a monastic, Shantideva would have stood apart from many people living their everyday lives. He holds himself to a higher standard and he avoids certain kinds of close relationships with other people. These are the kinds of relationships that make up most people's lives— friendship, romance, family. So it makes sense that he would want to avoid the kind of interactions that get one enmeshed in such relationships.

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<sup>36</sup> White II, Mark H., and Ludwin E. Molina. "Infrahumanizing Praise." *Social Psychology* (18649335), vol. 47, no. 4, Aug. 2016, pp. 187–200.

## Praise in Shantideva

This is especially true if it happens in such a slow, incremental way as by instances of praise.

On this reading, to praise Shantideva would put him in a group of a sort that he is understandably tempted by, but still trying to avoid. The bodhisattva may avoid this just as the recovering alcoholic avoids their old haunts. This explains his strategy of avoiding praise directed at him as a person. It also explains why he would be free with his praise of other people. In praising others, he is contributing to putting them in the group of virtuous people on the bodhisattva path. In this case, he could be skillfully praising the person, appealing to that desire to be praised, to be liked, and use that to encourage the person on their way. So we could formulate...

**Shantidevan Praise Principle 3:** Give and accept praise only in such a way that tends to enlarge the informal group of people on the bodhisattva path.

On this reading, both the praiser and the praised contribute to the difference between the praise we should give freely and the praise we should avoid. At the extremes, the virtuous should praise even the vicious freely, and the virtuous should assiduously avoid praise from the vicious.

This principle uses a kind of consequentialist reasoning. If we follow interpreters who treat Shantideva as one of the earliest consequentialists, this could count in favor of this interpretation. However, if we are to refrain from assimilating Shantideva's ethical thought into a framework of western ethics, this similarity would not count for much.

## 4. Conclusion

If Shantideva sees praise as an impediment to becoming a better person, why should it be dispensed to others? I've briefly considered three possible reasons. First, because it may be a near enemy of praise, rather than proper praise that is the impediment. This would reflect a difference in the nature of the praise we ought to dispense and the praise we ought to avoid. I am skeptical of this, but it could be argued and there is some potential value in further developing a concept of the near enemy of praise. Second, because there is a difference in praise depending on who is doing the praising and to what extent they are competent when it comes to the subject matter. Third, because the meaning of praise can be changed depending on the social position of both the praiser and the praised in combination with the tendency of praise to move people around within informal social groups.

I have tried to draw out a distinction within *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, between praising a person and praising a good quality. It looks like Shantideva rightly advises that we avoid being praised as persons, but accept praise of our good qualities. Similarly, he seems to be saying that if one is on the bodhisattva path, they can thereby praise not only the good qualities of a person, but the person themselves.

It is my hope that this is not the last word on Shantidevan praise. Many interesting questions remain. Some of these questions can only be taken up by dealing with the text in Sanskrit or Tibetan. While other questions can best be taken up by further connection with the western philosophical and psychological literature on praise. It is a testament to the richness of *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* that even with hundreds of commentaries written on it, there is still so much more to say.

## Chapter 5

### Anger, Deviance and Affliction

Anger<sup>37</sup> is an outlaw emotion. The meaner, more vicious and venomous the anger, the more deviant and subversive it is. Sometimes it feels good to be angry, because sometimes it feels good to be deviant. It does not always feel good to submit to rules, especially when we didn't make or agree to those rules. So when defending the value of anger, its role in social change and in equalizing relationships is often appealed to. And when anger is effective in these things, this deviance is part of the reason why. But deviant things get their power in a way that is parasitic on the norms they transgress. So to totally normalize and accept anger would be to undermine some of its power.

The aim of this final chapter is to raise a problem for both proponents and critics of the role of anger within our moral practice. I will particularly focus on Reis-Dennis's (2019) formulation which highlights anger's scary power to shock one's interlocuter. For the sake of this discussion, I grant that anger has this power. Anger can be shocking and shock can be valuable. The problem is that if we come to value anger for this particular thing it does, it does it less well and thereby seems less valuable in that respect.

First, I will characterize two broad camps as optimists and pessimists about anger. Then I will highlight one of the many things optimists claim that anger does well, namely its ability to shock an interlocuter. I argue that this shock comes from the ways that anger is disallowed. Thus

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<sup>37</sup> Since defenders of anger often come from marginalized positions in terms of race and gender, there can be something odious about criticisms of it coming from an author such as myself outside of that group. As such, I want to clarify my criticism here is not of the anger of any person or group of persons. My target is moral theorists who criticize anger and those who defend it.

the optimists and pessimists both have a problem that their position is self-undermining with respect to anger's deviant ability to shock. I then sketch a third position about anger, which I call the *buddhist*. The *buddhist* is categorized as a pessimist by optimists and pessimists alike. However, the position is more nuanced than that. Further, the *buddhist* does not face this same problem. I end by considering compassion as an alternative to anger the *buddhist* can offer and I highlight how compassion can shock in a way that does not depend on norm violation.

### 1. Optimists and Pessimists

Some people think anger is cool. Call these people *optimists* about anger. They say anger's object is to make change (Cherry 2021, page 5), to fix things, or simply to express itself, rather than anything so unwholesome as to retaliate or to seek revenge. They survey an array of good things anger does for us. By the lights of this view, angry agents—at least sometimes—are tracking injustice, unfairness, or simply the angersome. Optimists grant that anger can go wrong. But their optimism is that somehow, somewhere, by someone, it can be done right. It happens and it happens often enough that we should not aim to get rid of anger or treat it as morally bad.

Fricke (2016), Shoemaker (2015, 2018), Reis-Dennis (2019), Cherry (2021) are what I call optimists. They tend to think the good it does for us is not just individual but happens on a broader social level too. Even though anger can be used in the wrong way by the wrong people, if it is used the right way by the right people, it can be powerful and effective. It can even things out, give a voice to the voiceless, or correct injustice.

For one example, Shoemaker (2015) spends a significant amount of his chapter on accountability, the sense of responsibility connected to anger, discussing, and defending the importance of feeling and expressing genuine anger. He thinks this anger serves an irreplaceable communicative purpose. He stipulates: "...one simply does not count as being angry at someone without having some motivational impulse to communicate that feeling to the agent qua slighted party." Shoemaker 2015, page 104). Shoemaker further notes "...that bottled up agential anger can be deeply corrosive, eating away at one's insides, creating obsessions, nightmares, ulcers, and ground-down teeth." (Shoemaker 2015, page 104). As an optimist, Shoemaker may see this as a reason to express that anger, to avoid the deleterious effects. However, pessimists see it as a reason not to feel that anger and perpetuate those same effects in ourselves and in others. My anger at you, if expressed in a variety of nonconstructive ways, can serve to bring about your own anger, in addition to any number of other difficult feelings. Even when justified, it can as often further damage our relationship as it can repair a rupture in it. Shoemaker acknowledges these sorts of reasons to "rid ourselves of anger for additional moral or prudential reasons" (Shoemaker 2015, page 106) such as the one I suggested, however, he says much more in favor of anger. Shoemaker claims "what anger motivates, most fundamentally, is making the slighter fully aware of what he has done. It is a demand to get him to appreciate, to acknowledge, the emotional havoc (and worse) that he has wreaked." (Shoemaker 2015, page 107).

On the other hand, we have *pessimists* about anger. Pessimists think anger is a problem. One example is Pereboom (2014), who argues that we lack the kind of free will that would be necessary to morally justify one's deserving anger. Another example is Nussbaum (2016) who argues that anger is fundamentally irrational. Pessimists tend to focus on the ways anger is

morally unjustified on account of the undeserved harm to another. However, some pessimists focus on the harms to the angry agent, more than the effects on the targets of their anger.

Obafemi Awolowo categorizes anger as a “negative emotion” and calls it “poisonous.” He suggests that anger, along with other negative emotions are “malignant and injurious sentiments” which, owing to capitalism, we have come to “give unfettered rein.” He goes on to describe the process of anger at greater length, saying:

“What is not well known is the danger which each of these emotions constitutes to our health and our physical well-being. Some illustrations will now be given to demonstrate that a negative emotion is a real danger to health and physical well-being.

A man cannot, by an act of his will-power, and without any physical exertion, cause his heart to beat faster. But when a man becomes violently angry, his heart will immediately begin to beat much faster. The supra-renal glands will become unduly active and will pour into his blood an excessive amount of adrenalin fluid. At the same time, the liver will pour into the blood an excessive supply of sugar, whilst the lungs will have to work faster than normal in order to provide the extra oxygen which is required for burning the excessive sugar and converting it into energy for violent physical action.

Thus in the fit of anger, the adrenalin glands, the liver, and lungs are unduly overworked and are made to supply, to the nerves and tissues, an excess of energy-supplying substances which become poisonous to the body as a whole. When the whole thing is over, there is tiredness in the limbs, and fatigue in the brain. All for being angry, and for no constructive end.” (Awolowo 1968, Page 222)

Notice that the angry agent incurs these costs, regardless of how appropriate, fitting, productive or even morally justified their anger is.

### **1.1 The Fire Analogy**

Fire has been a common image associated with anger throughout the years, at least as old as Seneca’s *de ira*. To a pessimist, it must seem fitting. The fire consumes everything. Whatever you throw at it becomes more fire. One way to think of the pessimist worry is that the fire will

destroy what we care about. But fire does not burn forever. So perhaps the optimist has actually devised a brilliant strategy to protect themselves from the damage it can bring. Perhaps the optimist about anger wants a control fire.

In the Mann Gulch fire in 1949, R. Wagner Dodge spontaneously developed a new and lifesaving technique in handling large forest fires (Maclean 2017). As the fire approached at a pace the firefighting party could not outrun, he lit another fire on the ground before him. After this patch of ground had burned, there was nothing left for the approaching fire to burn. Dodge then lay down in that patch and was ultimately one of the few of the firefighting crew who survived. No one joined him in the fire because what he was doing looked so strange, so paradoxical.

Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for optimist's approach to anger, which might also make sense to the pessimist. They create for themselves a space of safety amidst the approaching fire of the anger of others. And in doing so, they help hasten the fire's end and bring it a little more under control.

## **2. Shock and Diminishing Returns**

One way the optimists might use such a control fire is by highlighting what anger does for us. And one thing that the optimist can highlight is the way anger works to confront someone. For example, David Shoemaker says "...the angry tone has a much more memorable dramatic impact. To really get across a message, it makes sense to say it in a way that will make the target more liable to pay attention to and remember it, and the angry tone does just that." (Shoemaker 2015, page 110). Along similar lines, Reis-Dennis says

"Expressions of anger are effective in getting transgressors to reconsider their behavior, and in prompting them to engage in the status-balancing apology ritual, because of the



expression's connection to *action*, even violent and physical threats. Simply put, anger is scary." (Reis-Dennis 2016, page 457)

While the tagline here is that anger is scary, I take the point to be something Shoemaker could agree with. When anger is effective in this way, it is not because it scares the interlocutor away, as this would not prompt apology so much as avoidance. Instead, it is because it shocks the target of the anger. Call this anger's *shock value*. This is the scary, shocking, stunning power that anger has to get an interlocutor out of their habitual way of behaving. It wakes them up and prompts them to take the angry agent seriously. This is a part of what makes anger powerful. It can bring one to attention. It makes the angry agent hard to ignore or dismiss.

We might make a distinction here between the shock of the unexpected and the shock of the disallowed. These have a different character and prompt different kinds of response.

Consider...

**Shock of the Unexpected:** There is no expectation of formality in his department, but Vikram always wears a suit and tie to teach anyway. After years of doing this, one day he shows up in a t-shirt and jeans. His students are shocked, but things more or less carry on as before.

And...

**Shock of the Disallowed:** In 2023, there are rules against physically harming your students. Ludwig has a difficult student and takes to hitting the student's knuckles with a ruler. All the other students are shocked. Ludwig loses his job.

Anger could be shocking in either way. However, my focus here is on the anger that gets its power from the shock of the disallowed. This is because the shock of the disallowed involves violations of norms which one could be called to account for violating, that is to say, it prompts a response. When the unexpected does not overlap with the disallowed, it does not prompt dialogue as much as it leaves one speechless. If you shock me with unexpected anger, not connected to any norm violation, it does not prompt me to take you seriously, or at least it does not for long.

There are norms that disallow expressions of anger. These vary with context, time, place, power dynamics, who is angry and about what issue. And these norms are often bad and unfair in a variety of ways, such as those that would tolerate an angry outburst from a man while harshly criticizing a woman for doing the same thing. But still, there are norms. Those norms are partially informed and motivated by the moral and social concerns raised by pessimists. The shock value of anger is partly derived from the fact that it violates those norms. We could imagine a world, or indeed even a corner of the world, which was maximally permissive to overt expressions of anger. Someone in that corner of the world who loses their temper all the time does not prompt everyone to take them seriously. In fact, it tends to be just the opposite. In such an environment, anger would lose much of its ability to shock. So changing the norms to be more permissive about anger should diminish anger's shock value.

If optimists claim anger is an acceptable response, morally or otherwise, they deprive it of some of its shock value insofar as they succeed because the norms against it fall away. And if pessimists prohibit anger as unjustified, they give it some of the power that makes it appealing to the optimist. This is a problem for both. Insofar as the shocking element of anger goes, pessimists make possible what they deem problematic. And if optimists change the norms around anger, the emotion they champion loses a good deal of its power.

### 3. A Middle Way

Both *optimists* and *pessimists* seem to think of Buddhists as pessimists about anger. For an example from the pessimists, Derk Pereboom mentions Buddhists as among the most forceful critics of anger (Pereboom 2021, page 5). And from the optimists, Myisha Cherry categorizes Buddhist philosopher Shantideva as a pessimist, saying

“Some of those who subscribe to the broad-strokes picture of anger as destructive and uncontrollable, even going back as far as eighth-century Buddhist sage Santideva, recommend its elimination. They think that we should replace anger with meekness or sadness.” (Cherry 2021, page 11)

Shantideva’s relationship to anger is more complicated than this. With a more nuanced reading we might develop a position I will call *buddhist* about anger, lower cased and italicized to individuate it from a particular Buddhist thinker or school of thought. I do not claim this as a general Buddhist orthodoxy. But I want to highlight that the *buddhist* in this sense is its own category, neither optimist nor pessimist.<sup>38</sup> But importantly, this is a view still capable of being in dialogue with both optimists and pessimists.

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<sup>38</sup> ...or perhaps both optimist and pessimist?

Shantideva offers methods and strategies for doing without anger, for transforming anger, and for understanding anger. These are offered on the assumptions that anger is something you want to get rid of. However, these considerations are not necessarily normatively binding for others the way pessimists are supposed to be. They are hypothetical imperatives. *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* starts with the idea that it is just an account of his own work on himself.

Shantideva is just writing<sup>39</sup> it in case you happen to have a similar psychology to him:

“Here I shall say nothing that has not been said before, / and in the art of prosody I have no skill. / I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others; / I wrote it only to habituate my mind. / My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while, / that I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way. / But others who now chance upon my words / May profit also, equal to myself in fortune.” (BCA 1.2 and 1.3)

It is a mistake to categorize Shantideva as a pessimist, but an understandable one.

Notable aspects of the view are shared with the pessimist. For Shantideva, anger is not essential, and it is a changeable part of our nature. Like for Awolowo, anger is a form of suffering for the angry agent. And like Pereboom, Shantideva does seem to appeal to considerations about determinism<sup>40</sup> to neutralize one’s own anger in the moment. However, there are moments when Shantideva seems to have an affinity with the optimist.

Recall that Cherry presents Shantideva as recommending the elimination of anger and replacing it with sadness and meekness. However, Shantideva also speaks of using anger as he wages war against his own shortcomings. Saying “This shall be my all-consuming passion. /

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<sup>39</sup> You might be suspicious of this explanation and wonder why then he wrote anything at all. According to the lore, he was pressured to by his peers at Nalanda in an attempt to humiliate him. You might also think of it like his tenure review was coming up or his dissertation was due.

<sup>40</sup> Though he was likely unconcerned with a concept like “free will.” For more on this see Garfield (2019) in Reppetti ed.

Filled with rancor I will wage my war! / Defilement of this kind will halt defilement 'And for this reason it shall not be spurned" (BCA 6.43). This is part of what makes a *buddhist* position so slippery. The kind of anger the *buddhist* is concerned to get rid of is a cause of suffering, or perhaps a manifestation of suffering. But again, it starts from the assumption that the angry agent does not like it. If you love your anger and it feels great and solves all the world's problems, the *buddhist* is not trying to stop you.

This *buddhist* advice against anger is not moral finger wagging. It is not a matter of someone telling you how to feel and saying you are bad for feeling the way you do. It is advice about what kind of emotions are going to be harmful to you in the long term, even if they feel good and appear to be working in an immediate sense.

#### 4. Compassion

The optimist sees anger, at its best, as having two important qualities. It motivates change (Cherry 2021) and it can be shocking, even scary (Reis-Dennis 2019). In this section, I highlight the ways compassion can be a less paradoxical moral disposition which shares these core features.

Compassion is conceptually distinct from empathy. Empathy is limited. We can only feel it for few people and those people tend to be those close to us and with superficial resemblance to us. Empathy is also exhausting to experience because of how much we feel the suffering with the other person. Compassion is neither. It is a state we can be in with no emotional fatigue<sup>41</sup> and one we can apply to anyone.

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<sup>41</sup> What is sometimes called "compassion fatigue" would be better called "empathy fatigue."

Compassion admits of several definitions, one thing that tends to unify them is the motivation to change. Bloom (2016) criticizes empathy for being insufficiently motivating whereas the sense of “rational compassion” he advocates to replace it does motivate. Ricard (2016) characterizes compassion from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective and highlights this same motivational and even energizing feature. When Addias et al. (2022) studied the spread of compassion, they highlighted this tendency to motivate change as part of what they used to identify compassion contrasted with other states.

Compassion can be not just motivating but protective. In Buddhist philosophical thought, compassion is distinguished from its near enemy which Garfield calls sloppy sympathy<sup>42</sup>. This same distinction comes up in Ricard (2016) and Tenzin Gyatso (2018). The main distinction is that empathy, slopy sympathy or any kind of feeling with the other person is exhausting. This is reflected in MRI studies on Tibetan monks (Ricard). According to these, empathy and compassion are not only conceptually distinct, but they represent different brain states. The monks reported feeling emotionally exhausted after engaging empathetically with images of human suffering. However, when they approached the same material from a place of compassion, they reported feeling able to do so indefinitely. Compassion, it seems, protects against emotional exhaustion.

Compassion can be just as shocking as anger. Consider the following story:

Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One Evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal.

Ryokan returned and caught him. ‘You may have come a long way to visit me,’ he told the prowler, ‘and you should not return empty-handed.’ Please take my clothes as a gift.’

The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away.

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<sup>42</sup> In conversation.

Ryokan sat naked, watching the moon. 'Poor fellow,' he mused, 'I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.' (Reps & Senzaki Ed., page 27)

Such an act of compassion can come as quite a surprise, especially in a context such as this where a different emotion (like anger or indignation) would be expected. This Zen koan even makes a point of highlighting that this was Ryokan's disposition even in the absence of the thief. Compassion shocks but persists. I would go so far as to say it can be scary in much the same way anger can, when it is so dramatically different than what one expects.

This is a recurring theme in Zen literature, especially Koans. Consider just one other:

When Bankei held his seclusion-weeks of meditation, pupils from many parts of Japan came to attend. During one of those gatherings a pupil was caught stealing. The matter was reported to Bankei with the request that the culprit be expelled. Bankei ignored the case.

Later the pupil was caught in a similar act, and again Bankei disregarded the matter. This angered the other pupils, who drew up a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief, stating that otherwise they would leave in a body.

When Bankei had read the petition he called everyone before him. "You are wise brother," he told him. "You know what is right and what is not right. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I do not? I am going to keep him here even if all the rest of you leave."

A torrent of tears cleansed the face of the brother who had stolen. All desire to steal had vanished. (Reps & Senzaki Ed. 1957, page 61)

In this case compassion is used explicitly as an alternative to anger or punishment.

These stories also highlight the shocking effect compassion can have on those to whom little to no compassion has been shown historically. Compassion can shock, and it can transform.

However, it is not part of an account of compassion that it gets its power from an analogous kind of shock value. It has the shock of the unexpected, if not the shock of the unpermitted. In this way the *buddhist* can sidestep this problem for *optimists* and *pessimists*.

## 5. Conclusion

Anger's shock value comes from its subversive nature. But what is accepted cannot subvert. The *buddhist* position is not simply a pessimistic one about anger, but a distinctive view. And the *buddhist* can use tools like compassion to do much of the good that anger does. They can keep the ability to shock via compassion without falling into the self-undermining worries for the *optimist* and *pessimist*.

The *buddhist* can also agree with the optimist on perhaps the optimist's most central point. A *buddhist* transforms their relationship to anger in one way and an optimist does it another way. The *buddhist* frees themselves from the tension between having anger and not wanting it by getting rid of the anger. The optimist gets rid of the same problem by getting rid of the aversion to anger. That might be worth the cost of anger losing its shock value.



### **Appendix: A Comparison of English Translations of Shantideva on Praise**

How a translator understands a word in the language they are translating a text into partly determines the word choice. This is so obvious as to hardly need saying. However, sometimes there is disagreement across translators, not about what the word in the original text means, but about what the word in the language which it is translated into means. This is especially true when the word is philosophically loaded. Consider the difference between translating Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as "*Phenomenology of Spirit*" or as "*Phenomenology of Mind*." Or Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* "*World as Will and Representation*" vs. "*World as Will and Idea*."

There is some inconsistency in the way Shantideva's discussion of praise is translated into English. I submit that this is not owing to an ambiguity in the earlier Sanskrit or Tibetan texts, but to variability in the way English language translators understand praise on a philosophical level.

The debates that are just starting to unfold about praise in English language philosophy scholarship have tacit adherents among translators of Shantideva. What one person calls praise and another calls approval need not be owing to a lack of understanding of either Sanskrit/Tibetan or English, but owing to one philosophical understanding of praise over another. For the most part this should not be a problem since there is a fairly wide consensus on how to understand most standard examples of praise. But there are many complicated instances in which it is not so clear. Several of them have been considered in this text. For example, it is unclear whether and to what extent intentions matter when it comes to praise. If I utter words of praise ironically, saying "nice party" by which I mean it has been a terrible party, how do we categorize

## Appendix

this? Is it praise? What if I praise you sincerely but I do not understand what I am talking about and thereby insult you? “Praise” becomes more like “Geist” at the margins.

Praise is also morally loaded, as Shantideva is observing. It can go wrong. It can cause suffering when we do not receive it. It can cause short term enjoyment and longer-term harm when we do get it. There is an important difference between the words of praise and the attitudes that people hold. Perhaps, for Shantideva, your well-meaning but poorly executed kind words are worth more than my ill-intentioned kind words. But that is not the whole story. Even the well-intentioned kind words are to be avoided, since they just make you like samsara.

This is not a philological project. The goal is not to nail down what specific word should be translated as praise. There is already good reason to think the text most translations come from is not the original text from Shantideva anyway. Further, if the anecdotal accounts are to be even partially believed, it was not Shantideva who wrote it down, but rather his audience after he spoke the entirety of the text. So even the most faithful copy of the text will be an interpretation. There is some value in having multiple interpretations of that teaching. While some could be so egregiously off base as to not deserve consideration, there will also be many ways of breathing life back into the text and making it accessible for people today.

I have collected here a list of all the passages that discuss praise across three other English language translations. The exact wording matters for how we interpret this text philosophically. For example, what Batchelor translates as “approval,” Crosby and Stilton translate as “praise.” Approval is more generally considered an attitude, although clearly one that can manifest as an action. In contrast, the nature of praise is debated. Some argue it is more fundamentally an action than an attitude. So which is it that Shantideva recommends? Ought I adopt a certain attitude or

## Appendix

perform a certain action? Similarly, praise and approval imply different positions with respect to their target. I can praise that which is still somewhat beyond my grasp. I praise the chess player who is better than me. I praise the work of my philosophical heroes. In contrast, I approve of the paper my student wrote. Considering how much Shantideva says about praise—nearly as much as he says about anger—this difference matters.

This is partly a survey of all the passages in which a word is translated as “praise.” It comes up around 25 times in the text. When there is disagreement across translators, I have included the wider set of all passages under question. For example, when Crosby and Stilton translate BCA 5.75 with the word “praise” and Batchelor translates it with “approval,” then I have included the passage from Batchelor, even though it does not literally mention “praise.”

This highlights a philosophical problem on the part of the translator. I do not mean this as a disparagement. But I want to highlight that the way the translator *philosophically* understands praise, is having an impact of how they choose to translate passages. Is it an action or an attitude? Does it have limits? What are the primary targets of praise? Shantideva is clearly making a distinction between praising people and praising qualities of people. It is one thing to have a certain attitude, say admiration, towards a set of human virtues. It is something else to publicly speak highly of them. Perhaps the wanton coward should praise the courage of others, but it is a fundamentally different activity than simply admiring them.

Since praise is a morally loaded concept, and Shantideva’s advice is for the transformation of our moral phenomenology, it matters a lot what praising is. Are we to cultivate a pattern of attention? Or a certain attitude? Or even a cluster of attitudes?

When Shantideva praises the excellence of the teaching, he may be feeling gratitude for

## Appendix

it and encouraging the cultivation of that attitude, but surely, he is also expressing that gratitude. And, as I suggest, he might be inching himself closer to association with that good quality, or the people who possess it.

### **1. Crosby and Skilton Translation**

“Even if someone returns a favor, he is praised. What, then, can be said of the Bodhisattva, who does good without obligation?” (1.31)

“People honor someone who gives alms to a few people saying ‘He does good!’, because he contemptuously supports their life for half a day with a moment’s gift of mere food” (1.32)

“To those formed of goodwill I also offer those shining clouds that are celestial places, ornamented at the entrances in the four directions, splendid with pendulous ropes of pearls and precious stones, entrancing with songs and poems of praise.” (2.18)

“I praise the Oceans of Virtue with hymns that are a sea of notes and harmonies. Let clouds of chanted praise arise no differently among them.” (2.23)

“Today my birth is fruitful. My human life is justified. Today I am born into the family of the Buddha. Now I am the Buddha’s son.” (3.25)

“My mind seeks acquisitions, reverence, or renown, or against wants and audience and attention.

## Appendix

Therefore I remain like a block of wood.” (5.51)

“One should express one’s appreciation of all that is well said. When one sees someone doing something meritorious, one should encourage them with praises.” (5.75) [makes it sound instrumental]

“One should speak of others’ virtues in their absence, and repeat them with pleasure, and when one’s own praise is spoken, one should reflect on that person’s recognition of virtue.” (5.76)

“If others take pleasure and joy in praising the strength of someone’s virtues, why, mind, do you not similarly rejoice in praising it.” (6.76)

“When your own virtues are being praised, you and others to be pleased as well. When the virtues of other are being praised, you do not even want to be pleased yourself.” (6.79)

“Praise, good repute, and honor lead neither to merit nor long life, are no advantage to strength or to freedom from disease, nor do they bring me physical pleasure.” (6.90)

“Like a child that howls a wail of distress when his sandcastle is broken, so my own mind appears to me at the loss of praise or renown.” (6.93)

“Because it lacks consciousness, I must admit that a word cannot praise me. Undoubtedly, the

## Appendix

cause of my delight is that another is delighted with me.” (6.94)

“Therefore, it is because I am praised that delight is produced in me. In this case, too, because of such absurdity, it is simply the behavior of a child.” (6.97)

“Praise and so one gives e security. They destroy my sense of urgency. They creates jealousy towards this who possess virtue, and anger at success.” (6.98)

“Superiority causes jealousy. Equality cases rivalry. Inferiority causes arrogance. Praise cause intoxication and criticism causes enmity. When could there be a benefit from a fool?” (8.12)

“Some detest me. Why am I exultant when praised? Some extol me. Why am I depressed when criticized?” (8.21)

“He should not be praised for his chance share of virtues, for he is full of faults. Act so that no one might know of his virtue.” (8.164)

“Look at that one! His lotus feet are honored by the crowns of hundreds of deities. His gaze is moist with compassion. On his head rains down a stream of many flowers let fall from the upper stories, delightful with the signing of a thousand Devine damsels, eloquent with praise.’ On being Mañjugosa before them, may those in hell immediately send up a roar of delight.” (10.14)

## 2. Padmarkara Translation Group

## Appendix

“People praise as virtuous donors / Those who with contempt support / A few with plain and ordinary food: / A moment’s gift that feeds for only half a day” (1.32)

[next verse, how much more will Bodhisattvas be praised]

“To those whose very nature is compassion / I will give vast palaces, resounding with fair praise,  
/ All decked with precious pearls and beautiful pendant gems, / Gleaming jewels that deck the amplitude of space” (2.18)

“To these vast oceans of good qualities / I offer praise, a sea of airs and harmonies / May clouds of tuneful eulogy / Ascend unceasingly before them.” (2.23)

“Those who thus with clear intelligence / Take hold of the awakened mind with bright and lucid joy, / That they may now increase what they have gained, / Should lift their hearts with praises such as these:” (3.25)

“Or when you want to fish for praise, / Or criticize and spoil another’s name, / Or use harsh language, sparring for a fight, / It’s then that like a log you should remain.” (5.50)

“Praise all whose speech is worthy. / Say, ‘Your words are excellent!’ / And when you notice others acting well, / Encourage them in terms of warm approval” (5.75)

“Extol their qualities discreetly; When they’re praised by others, praise them too. / But when the

## Appendix

qualities they praise are yours, / Reflect upon their skill in recognizing qualities.” (5.76)

“When others take delight / In giving praise to those endowed with talents, / Why, O mind, do you not find / A joy likewise in praising them?” (6.76)

“When praise is heaped upon your qualities, / You’re keen that others should be please thereby. / But when the compliment is paid to others, / You feel no inclination to rejoice as well.” (6.79)

“Veneration, praise, and fame / Serve not to increase merit or my span of life, / Bestowing neither health nor strength / And nothing for the body’s ease.” (6.90)

“Children can’t help crying when / Their sand castles come crumbling down. / My mind is so like them / When praise and reputation start to fail.” (6.93)

“Short-lived sound, devoid of intellect, / Can never in itself intend to praise me. / I say that it’s the joy that others take in me, / It’s this that is the cause of delight.” (6.94)

“The satisfaction that is mine / Form thinking, “I am being praised,” / Is unacceptable to common sense / And nothing but the antics of a silly child.” (6.97)

“Praise and compliments distract me, / Sapping my revulsion with samsāra. / I start to envy others their good qualities / And thus all excellence is ruined.” (6.98)



## Appendix

“Jealous of superiors, they vie with equals / Proud of those below, they strut when praised. / Say something untoward, they seethe with rage, / Why good was ever had from childish folk?” (8.12)

“Why should I be please when people praise me? / Others there will be who scorn and criticize— / And why despondent when I’m blamed, / Since there’ll be others who think well of me?”(8.21)

“This ego is by nature rife with faults, / Its accident gifts I should not praise. / Whatever qualities it has I’ll so contrive / That stye remain unknown to everyone.” (8.164)

“Behold the hundred gods who lay their crowns before his lotus feet, / The rain of flowers that falls upon this head, his eyes moist with compassion, / The splendor of his house that echoes praises of a thousand goddesses!’ / May those in hell thus cry on seeing Mañjugosha” (10.14)

### **3. Stephen Batchelor Translation**

“If whoever repays a kind deed / Is worthy of some praise, / Then what need to mention the Bodhisattva / Who does good without its being asked of him?” (1.31)

“To those who have the nature of compassion / I offer palaces resounding with melodious hymns, / Exquisitely illuminated by hanging pearls and gems / That adorn the infinities of space.” (2.18)

“I glorify the Oceans of Excellence / With limitless verses of harmonious praise; / May these clouds of gentle eulogy / Constantly ascend to their presence.” (2.23)

## Appendix

“In order to further increase it from now on, / Those with discernment who have lucidly seized /  
An Awakening Mind in this way, / Should highly praise it in the following manner:” (3.25)

“Whenever I am eager for praise / Or have the desire to blame others; / Whenever I have the  
wish to speak harshly and cause dispute; / At (all) such times I should remain like a piece of wood.”  
(5.50) ?

“I should say, ‘Well said,’ to all those / Who speak (Dharma) well, / And if I see someone doing  
good / I should praise him and be well pleased.” (5.75)

“I should discreetly talk about the good qualities (of others) / And repeat those (that others)  
recount. / If my own good qualities are spoken about / I should just know and be aware that I  
have them.” (5.76)

“Should someone else find joyous happiness / Upon praising (my enemy) as an excellent person,  
/ Why, mind, do you not praise him too / And likewise make yourself happy?” (6.76)

“It is said that others are made happy through (being praised) in this way. / But if, in this way, you  
do not want (them to have) this happiness, / Then, (since it makes them happy), you should cease  
giving wages and the like (to your servants). / But you would be adversely affected both in this  
and future lives.” (6.78)

## Appendix

“When people describe my own good qualities / I want others to be happy too, / But when they describe the good qualities of others / I do not wish to be happy myself.” (6.79)

“The honour of praise and fame / Will not turn into merit nor life; / It will give me neither strength nor freedom from sickness, / And will not provide any physical happiness.” (6.90)

“When their sandcastles collapse, / Children howl in despair; / Likewise when my praise and reputation decline / My mind becomes like a little child.” (6.93)

“Since short-lived sounds are inanimate / They cannot possibly think of praising me. / —But as it makes (the bestower of praise) happy, / (My) reputation is a source of pleasure (for me)—” (6.94)

“But whether this praise is directed at myself or someone else / How shall I be benefitted by the joy (of he who bestows it)? / Since that joy and happiness is his alone / I shall not obtain even a part of it.” (6.95)

“Therefore the happiness that arises / From thinking, “I am being praised”, is invalid. / It is only the behaviour of a child.” (6.97)

“Praise and so forth distract me / And also undermine my disillusion (with cyclic existence); / I start to envy those who have good qualities / And all the very best is destroyed.” (6.98)

## Appendix

“They are envious of superiors, competitive with equals, / Arrogant towards inferiors, conceited when praised, / And if anything unpleasant is said they become angry: / Never is any benefit derived from the childish.” (8.12)

“If there is someone who despises me / What pleasure can I have in being praised? / And if there is another who praises me / What displeasure can I have in being despised?” (8.21)

“He is honoured, but I am not; / I have not found wealth such as he. / He is praised, but I am despised; / He is happy, but I suffer.” (8.141)

“I should not praise my naturally fault-ridden self / For some temporary good quality it may have, / I shall never let even a few people know / Of any good qualities I may possess.” (8.164)

“If (my body) knows no anger when derided / And no pleasure when praised, / For what reason / Am I wearing myself out like this?” (8.182)

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