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From Oppressive to Progressive Praise: How, Why, and When to Praise in Conditions of Oppression

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Abstract

Theories of moral responsibility have often assumed that praise does not require justification in the way that blame might. Recent accounts of oppressive praise have challenged this and demonstrated that oppressive praise will track and enforce oppressive norms. Existing solutions to the problem of oppressive praise have sought either to redistribute praise or to reorient praise to serve emancipatory goals. These solutions fail to acknowledge how emancipatory norms evolve over time, and the relationship between developing norms and developing practices of praise. This paper offers a practice-dependent account of progressive praise as a solution to oppressive praise, that (i) respects agent's socially self-governed agency and (ii) does not reinforce oppressive norms, but (iii) can contribute to improvements to the social moral ecology.

In March 2020, in the early days of the Covid pandemic in the United Kingdom, a government endorsed ritual known as “Clap for our Carers” was introduced. Citizens across the UK came outside weekly to clap for health workers who were perceived as on the frontline of the pandemic. Initially, the ritual was widely welcomed and endorsed. Yet, after ten weeks, the woman who had advocated to begin the clapping said: “without getting too political I think the narrative is starting to change, and I don't want the clap to be negative.”¹ This praise, initially considered to be a positive and unifying practice, has been remembered with far more negative connotations. Placards at nursing strikes in January 2023 read: “claps don't pay the bills”, and “you clapped us and then you slapped us.” This paper asks, at what point could praise become oppressive, and can praising practices be reformed to help achieve social justice aims?

In this paper, I argue that the same forms of praise can transform from progressive to oppressive in contexts of emerging and developing norms. I argue for an account of “apt praise,” which will resist signaling and thereby reproducing oppressive norms, while supporting emancipatory norms. Apt praise should be practiced for newly

emerging norms, and for pioneers transgressing oppressive norms. As the norm develops and is more widely adopted, that praise ought to decrease as it may become oppressive over time.

Existing accounts that acknowledge praise can be oppressive advocate two approaches to reforming the practice. Michelle Ciurria (2020) sees apt praise as a matter of equalizing the redistribution of praise according to positions of advantage or disadvantage, while Jules Holroyd (2021, 2023) sees it as reoriented to serve emancipatory goals. These accounts call for a redistribution or reorientation of praise. These approaches struggle to track agents' responsibility for action or inaction, particularly in cases where new norms are emerging. This paper offers an account of praise that tracks responsibility, supports the emergence and development of newly emerging norms, and which can assist in achieving emancipatory goals.

I have previously outlined a taxonomy of oppressive praise in which oppressive praise will signal expectations of agent(s) that align with oppressive background norms. Agents will be recognized as either more or less praiseworthy than they would be if judged against non-oppressive norms, and the misrecognition in turn reinforces oppressive norms (McHugh 2024). Given these potential harms associated with praise, the task is to elaborate a practice-dependent account of apt praise that (i) respects agent's socially self-governed agency and (ii) does not reinforce oppressive norms, but iii) can contribute to improvements to the social moral ecology ('progressive praise').

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 introduces my account of apt praise in contexts of emerging and developing norms. Section 2 contrasts this account with existing approaches to ameliorating praise. Section 3 argues that this account does not instrumentalize the practice of praising and aligns apt praise with a socially self-governed conception of agency. Finally, in section 4, I return to the case of "Clap for Carers" to demonstrate the pitfalls of instrumentalized accounts of progressive praise and to demonstrate the advantages of this account.

1. From oppressive to progressive praise

Praise and blame are practices that together hold agents responsible in social, political, and moral contexts. As with blaming, praising an agent will indicate that the agent has acted in a morally or normatively desirable way. This article departs from the account of praise offered in McHugh (2024, 2), which argues that "Praise is a central reactive attitude associated with moral responsibility; it is a response to and recognition of an agent's responsibility for a morally and/or normatively desirable action."

As a reactive attitude, praise will subject its recipients to what Vargas (2013, 5) has referred to as "a distinct web of practices and attitudes." Reactive attitudes, as Strawson importantly argued, may be expressed both publicly and privately. Reactive attitudes encompass a wide range of psychological responses, which includes not only verbal expressions but also internal mental states and feelings (Strawson 1974). Indeed, agents may decide to reform their judgments and certainly have control over their speech acts when expressing praise or blame. Crucially, as argued by philosophers including Ciurria, Holroyd, and myself, practices of praise will play a role in establishing and reinforcing the practices and attitudes against which moral and normative responsibility is determined.²

In light of praise's capacity to contribute to structures of oppression and/or domination, it is important to acknowledge that rational agents have the capacity to reflect and consider the context in which these attitudes will arise, and to reform their

practices when expressing praise in light of that context. Following Strawson (1974), reactive attitudes are often identified as interpersonal emotions that express—for instance—praise or blame.³ While reactive attitudes may be privately experienced, they may also have a public character. The public expression of a reactive attitude will relate to its private expression, yet may be the reformed product of a reflective process in which the agent considers the appropriateness of their emotional response. Indeed, publicly expressed reactive attitudes may be reflected upon, challenged, and developed as normative and moral convictions are considered and reconsidered.⁴ In this section, I will consider the signaling and scaffolding functions of praise that evidences and reinforces this claim; that expressed praise will inform the moral and normative environment in which it is located, in part by identifying and challenging the normative commitments that belie praise both in the praiser and in her audience.

I therefore propose a temporally sensitive, reformed practice of progressive praise which has two necessary conditions:

- 1) praise should be apt; and
- 2) praise should not reinforce oppressive or dominating norms, nor undermine desirable social justice norms.

Apt praise, at the outset of a norm's life, will include instances of praising for moral and/or normative duties. Once a norm has emerged however, apt praise will align with non-oppressive norms and therefore will not be attributable to duties. To substantiate this claim, let's consider in more depth the process by which norms emerge and develop, before analyzing how praise moves from progressive to oppressive.

Understanding the role of social and moral norms in oppression is an important task if one is concerned with how to achieve emancipatory goals. Oppressive and dominating wrongdoing often appear within our social practices. No one action or inaction, taken alone, could amount to oppression or domination. Both oppression and structural domination rely upon systems and networks of behaviors that produce and reproduce structures of power. For example, in order for women to be dominated by men there must be a suite of norms, reinforced by practices, actions, and inactions that empower men and disempower women. There will be a systemic nature to these features. One man alone could not take any action such that would bring about a state of structural domination or oppression. He is facilitated by the normative conditions of the background structure.

In this context, where feminist norms were emerging, a woman may have felt at the same time both victimized and restrained from reacting to injustices due to the social invisibility of the offenses against her. These offenses are invisible as they are the norm, and at the same time, the agents who perpetuate harms are excused by the context in which they find themselves. Responsibility practices are not insulated from these dynamics. If the reactive attitudes associated with praise and blame are levied in accordance with an errantly considered set of neutral criteria determined by reference to these unjust background conditions, then the moral ecology of the society in question will not develop to reach emancipatory aims. An ameliorative account must then be able to support the emergence and development of emancipatory norms. Let's now be more precise about the process of "normative emergence" and "normative development" and consider how praise ought to be levied in such contexts.

Abnormal moral contexts, an idea elaborated by Cheshire Calhoun, arise at the frontiers of moral knowledge when a subgroup of society makes advances in moral

knowledge, and this happens at a pace quicker than the dissemination and assimilation of this knowledge by the wider society.⁵ I take these cases to be those in which norms are newly emerging. The result in such cases is that the rightness or wrongness of some courses of action are transparent only to the knowledge-acquiring subgroup while opaque to others. As moral knowledge is not shared, the presumption that all agents are equally capable of self-legislation breaks down. In such cases, I argue, that suitable practices of reproach or appraisal (including blame) will be necessary in demonstrating that the contexts are not morally neutral. What, though, is the appropriate role of praise?

Where norms are emerging, it has been argued that blame has an important signaling function.⁶ However, blame is costly. Blame expends emotional energy, can negatively impact relationships, and can carry risks such as exclusion from a social group. Blame also faces the critique that it may be inappropriate in conditions where agents were unaware that their behavior fell short of a normative standard. In cases where norms are emerging, where they are brand-new, it is more difficult to maintain that there is the special justification required for blame when agents fall short of standards. By contrast, praise in such cases may carry fewer of such costs and serve to signal a new norm. Praise is less costly to levy and generally less destructive of interpersonal relationships. While oppressive praise can reinforce oppressive norms, praise for uptake of a new norm can be appropriate where blame for failure to take up a new norm would be disproportionate.

For a theory of praise to serve transformative aims, emerging cases must be accounted for. Some agents will be acting in accordance with old normative standards yet assessed in light of new ones that they were not aware of when they took the action or inaction in question in emerging moral contexts. Initial praise for adoption of new norms may signal emerging standards to agents in conditions where blame may require special justification. I have argued that praise can be oppressive and therefore requires justification. Yet the same forms of praise that could be oppressive where norms have emerged, in emerging cases can actually serve emancipatory goals. Initial praise can begin a process of developing a moral ecology by signaling the merit of new norms and encouraging their uptake. Oppression and structural domination are by their nature systemic and depend upon repeated practices which establish unjust normative environments. Similarly, repeated applications of praise that are out of step with emancipatory goals will contribute to oppressive expectations. This does not mean that praise must be excluded from the outset.

It is important at this point to clarify the concept of norms on which this account relies. While it is desirable that social norms should reflect moral rules, the two must be distinguished. Social norms are the focus of this paper as they play a key role in the emergence and adoption of moral rules. At times, moral rules are reflected in the use of social norms.⁷ For instance, the norm in French-speaking territories of adopting the “vous” form becomes morally salient because it relates to demonstrating respect, which is a concept with moral content. Similarly, there are moral reasons to adopt the correct pronouns for a person. However, the use of pronouns is determined by social norms. Changing norms can enable agents to meet the moral standard of apt gender recognition, and to be effective will need to be supported by responsibility practices that entrench new practices.

Following Bicchieri, for social norms to exist there must be an expectation among agents that others will sustain them. This is not the case for moral rules (Bicchieri 2005, 11). Social norms exist in a population when a sufficiently large subset of the population believe that a norm is conformed to by a sufficiently large subset of the population (the

empirical condition) and that a sufficiently large subsection of the population prefers conformity and may sanction non-conforming behaviour (the normative condition) (Bicchieri 2005, 11). Different agents will vary in their beliefs about the size of the population required to satisfy the empirical and normative conditions. These differences mean that a norm will be adopted unevenly across a population as various agents believe their threshold to have been passed (Bicchieri 2005, 11). This uneven conformity with a norm provides reasons to signal its applicability with sanctions and rewards where the goal is to improve its uptake. With regards to the sanction, feelings of shame and guilt may accompany a transgression and reinforce an agent's tendency to conform, but they are never the sole or the ultimate determinants of conformity. Nonetheless, the responses of others are definitionally key in the concept of a social norm and therefore integral to its emergence and development.

Praise applied at the beginning of a norms process of emergence does not have the effect of reinforcing oppressive expectations. At such a moment, praise signals a new standard that is a desirable alternative to expectations. The new standard is not yet widely held. It is therefore not underminable as a norm. Therefore, praise for adoption of the norm (as opposed to praise for exceeding the standards inherent in that norm) will be appropriate. To undermine a social norm, that norm must already be established. Where only one subgroup has moral knowledge of the norm, it cannot be said to be underminable in the relevant sense. By contrast, praise may support agents in finding that the empirical and normative are conditions satisfied and therefore support the emergence of a norm. Oppressive praise undermines expected normatively adequate behavior by affirming oppressive expectations. Progressive praise for new emancipatory norms can be a first step in signaling that there is an alternative standard and that the alternative is desirable.

There is an important motivational aspect to praise in such cases. Positive reinforcement of behavior can initially evoke interest in subscribing to standards. Brennan et al., describing the emergence of norms, have argued that in situations where compliance with norms is low, acting in accordance with a norm can secure positive approval. By contrast, moving to cases where breaching standards is rare, such positive approval is also rare (Brennan et al. 2013, 93). This is reflective of the transition of praise from progressive to oppressive. Were praise to continue where norms have emerged, it may serve to undermine the norm by sending erroneous signals that the behavior in question is not widely expected of agents (there is an over- or under-recognition). While oppressive praise is aligned with oppressive expectations, praise at an emergent moment is aligned with traversing those oppressive expectations. Once moral knowledge of a normative standard is widely held, then these benefits of praising will become disbenefits.

It's important at this point to clarify, I do not claim that once agents hold moral knowledge of a normative standard they will begin to follow that standard such as would be required to transform structural domination or oppressive structure. If this were the case, practical political or moral philosophy would be a simple matter of disseminating knowledge about contributions to injustice. What I have emphasized is temporal. The initial emergence of a norm occurs in an abnormal moral context. Philosophers considering praise's role in oppression have been successful in showing the risks of praise that aligns with oppressive background conditions. However, they have only considered normal moral contexts. It is key, in pursuing reform, to consider the changing role of praise in the transition from abnormal to normal moral contexts.

Abnormal moral contexts account for newly emerging norms. However, there are important further cases that track our normative development that are uncaptured by the term and that an account of political responsibility should seek to address. While Calhoun has argued for the distinction between normal and abnormal contexts, she roots her account in an assessment of whether moral ignorance relates to a morally defective point of view in the former case, or a lack of moral knowledge in the latter. I argue that the process of dissemination of moral knowledge extends to instances where new norms have emerged, but agents have not begun to attribute them with the moral or normative weight necessary to make the normative standard dominant enough to motivate action in contexts of structural domination or oppression. These I term “developing normative contexts.” An example would be our individual and collective duties towards combatting climate change. The vast majority of agents are aware and accepting of the need to do more to reduce emissions, however many—if not most—fail to act to the fullest extent possible (perhaps by refraining from driving, travelling by plane, or by becoming vegan). In this case, the norm has emerged, but has not developed in the sense that action is insufficiently motivated and adopted by agents. Praising agents for adopting or exceeding newly emerging or developing norms will help to scaffold other agents’ ability to take up those norms. These conditions are key in moving agents from a generic to a specific capacity to act.

2. Existing approaches

Philosophers defining oppressive praise have argued for two possible ways of stripping praise of its oppressive character. Solution one, proposed by Ciuirria, is to level up praise for those in positions of disadvantage while leveling down praise for those in positions of privilege. Ciuirria defines the problem as one of distribution, finding “that blame and praise are distributed unfairly in our society due to systemic inequality, sustained largely by cultural myths and narratives that privilege dominant groups” (2020, 182). Apt praise, for Ciuirria, will be redistributed. It will be leveled down for those in positions of privilege and leveled up for those in positions of disadvantage.

Solution two, proposed by Holroyd, is to praise in line with emancipatory goals by determining desert in line with these goals. Holroyd emphasizes the need to hold other agents accountable to a standard determined by emancipatory ideals. More precisely, she states that: “praise should be structured by plural reasons, including backward-looking desert-based reasons, and forward-looking reasons concerned with improving moral agency. But crucially, a further set of reasons should be considered in determining whether praise should be apportioned: reasons to do with challenging and dismantling oppression.” (2021, 19).

While I share Holroyd’s goal (to offer an account of apt praise that avoids reaffirming oppressive or dominating structures), I find Holroyd’s and Ciuirria’s solutions insufficient for this aim. Ciuirria’s proposal for leveling up praise would be insufficient to deal with oppressive instances of praising, as it could lead precisely to the type of under-recognition seen in the ableist case. Leveling up praise, based only on recognizing disadvantage and not on recognizing meritorious action, can be patronizing and condescending. It can disrespect an agent, as they may be seen as having a special disposition to behave in morally inferior ways and therefore not be considered as equally responsible for their compliance to non-oppressive norms. Given these difficulties, it seems that leveling up praise for the disadvantaged, as Ciuirria’s functionalist account advocates we do, is fraught with problems. Further, praising in a context where the

praiser does not themselves believe in the merit of what is to be praised risks using the recipient as a lever for another's moral improvement (such as third parties and/or the agent levying the praise) while effectively causing her to feel demeaned and reinforcing in her an oppressive expectation, potentially to third parties as well as to the recipient.

Holroyd gets us closer to achieving the ameliorative aims of an account of praise, and I fully endorse her analysis of the goals for an account of ameliorative praise, set out in the quote above. However, Holroyd does not specify how to balance the competing components of her account of ameliorative praise (desert-based reasons, forward-looking reasons connected with improving moral agency, and attempts to dismantle oppression). Crucially, Holroyd does not consider that praising in line with emancipatory goals neglects to take account of the important and valuable role of praise in the process of emerging and developing normative environments. Where new norms emerge, praise has a fundamental role in signaling standards and improving the uptake of these standards. On Holroyd's account, we ought to withhold praise from certain agents, such as the millionaire donor or the non-binary pronoun respecter, as praise signals an over-recognition in their cases. However, to praise in line with emancipatory norms, or based only upon background positions of disadvantage, would mean to exclude the use of praise to demonstrate the value in new emancipatory norms which are key to replacing oppressive norms. Praising these agents may be key in signaling the development of emerging or developing norms and ought not to be abandoned. An account of praise suited to achieve emancipatory goals must include instances of praising that are rejected or unconsidered by existing accounts. Importantly, the same forms of praise that could be oppressive where norms have emerged, in emerging cases could actually serve emancipatory goals. There is still promise in praise's ability to support emancipatory norms and so it must not be retracted too hastily.

Consider how Rosa Parks was famously attributed with sitting at the front of the bus because she was "just tired" (Parks and Haskins 1992). If it were the case that Parks sat down due to a physical weariness, on Holroyd's account, it seems Holroyd would argue that Parks ought not to have received any praise for her action as this would have reinforced an expectation of oppression. I will argue in the rest of this paper that, in cases where new emancipatory norms are emerging, praise will be apt. Where norms are emerging, praise will be high for adoption of the norm and blame will be comparatively low for non-adoption. Praise for action in line with developing norms will then decrease while blame will increase. This process moves from the static approaches of Holroyd and Ciurria to a dynamic approach that is sensitive to the fact that what is needed changes, as the situation changes.⁸

3. Praising for duties: a non-instrumental account

On the account I offer, in emerging contexts, progressive praise will be appropriate where an agent has fulfilled a moral or normative duty. An objector may at this point argue that this has odious consequences and inappropriately instrumentalises praise. To take this objection head on, one could imagine a slave-owner in 1840 Mississippi who decides to free those whom he has enslaved. This action would have been out of step with the social norms of his context, but clearly aligns with a minimum moral duty. Praising the (ex)slave-owner for his actions, in particular from the perspective of the enslaved, may seem disrespectful and inappropriate. Yet I defend that there are reasons to pursue this praise, and I will argue that these are not purely instrumental. Pioneers act

against their social context. While the act they perform may align with moral duties, they attract praise precisely because they traverse social norms. To demonstrate the praiseworthiness of pioneering action (even where aligned with duties) let's now consider the nature of agency in conditions of oppression and/or domination.

In conditions of unjust background norms, one may be concerned to know then whether they are responsible for errantly applying oppressive standards when attributing blame or praise. Vargas has identified a similar challenge with respect to implicit bias, and I take as a point of departure the model of responsible agency that he proposes as best suited to address this problem (2017, 228). If implicit bias were considered to diminish an agent's responsibility, then there would be a risk that a society's moral ecology would not develop in line with emancipatory goals. As agents do not choose to inculcate implicit bias, Vargas considers how some may argue that biased agents intuitively are not responsible for biased effects, which are often unknown to the agent expressing bias. However, excusing these biases may also have the effect of entrenching them and the norms which attend them through responsibility practices. Vargas's agency cultivation model seeks to overcome this possibility. According to this model, a normative account of the justification of responsibility practices can be grounded in terms of the effects of those practices on an agent's ability to self-govern in light of moral considerations (2017, 228). On this model, blaming is an important form of moral feedback. This moral feedback is necessary for the kind of socially self-governed agency that our responsibility practices (and moral ecology) depend upon. I argue that praising, like blaming, is precisely the kind of moral feedback necessary to respect the moral agency of others.

While Vargas considers the role of blame in his account of responsible agency, he gives no specific analysis of praise. Yet, praise also has a role in moral development and so a full account of responsibility must consider its contribution to our socially self-governed agency and moral ecology. Socially embedded agency is structured, constrained, and influenced in ways that are fundamental and ineradicable to who and what agents are. As a result, socially embedded responsibility practices are crucial; without them we could not have a morally significant form of self-governance. Such practices would contrast to, for instance, a model of practices that hold agent(s) responsible in line with their intended actions or which mitigate for their unconscious beliefs. To not hold an agent responsible for their implicit biases would be not to engage with them as moral agents who require feedback in order that they may develop their responsible agency. Agents receiving and internalizing such feedback in turn improve the moral ecology of a society. Praise, like blame, can be used to communicate that a better standard of behavior can be demanded of an agent and in this way avow and respect the moral agency of the recipient.

To defend my claim in more detail, let's consider a case of ableist praise elsewhere analysed by Holroyd (2023, 3) and McHugh (2024, 4). This is the case of Stella Young, a disability activist who reports having been praised for supposedly extraordinary achievements, merely in virtue of having participated in school and having completed exams appropriate for a student of her age. As a woman with physical disability, Young concluded from this praise that the praiser anticipated she was less educationally and/or socially capable than her able-bodied peers in virtue of her disability. This praise underascribed Young with the relevant type of capacity for educational and social achievement (McHugh 2024, 4).

Young's complaint was that she wants the praise she receives to track her achievement as measured against non-oppressive norms. In this case, the oppressive

norm refers to her unduly underestimated capacities to achieve social and educational goals. Clearly, there is widespread knowledge that disabled persons ought to be judged against equal standards where they have equal ability if we are to transform the ableist oppressive structure. In such a context, praise only for participation in society is oppressive. It is important however to see that Young's agency is a function of the background structure within which she sits. If Young were amongst the first ever disabled students to participate in school she would be defying expectations in a way quite different to that described above. She would not be taking action that tracks an emerged but undeveloped norm. She would be taking the pioneering action associated with generating a new norm. Clearly, physically disabled persons have always had a bare capacity to take part in education. Young in her case describes her own surprise that people thought she did not have the same educational and social capacities as non-physically disabled contemporaries. This social context is relevant. Among the first disabled students to attend school, Young would not have been surprised by her colleagues' misunderstanding. There is more to capacity than the physical ability to take an action. There is a social nature to capacity.

One might distinguish between, as Pettit and McGeer have done, a generic and a specific capacity (2015, 168–69). A generic capacity could be merely a speculation about future possibility, in the same way that we may speculate as to the future possibility of rain showers, as opposed to a claim about a particular agent's true present capacity to act given their personal disposition and circumstances. Where a moral ecology develops, the specific capacity to act in accordance with the norms associated with that ecology will be cultivated. Where pioneers act, such as for instance first disabled students attending school in an ableist structure, they take action of greater moral merit. They take action that is not in step with their moral ecology. They boldly signal new normative standards in a context where they are not supported by already emergent norms. In doing so, they contribute towards creating specific capacities in other agents. Pioneers deserve praise for taking the costly action of defying a normative environment. This holds even if they would not, in circumstances where moral norms are visible and developed, merit praise for doing what duty requires.

Young herself acknowledges that what challenges people with disability is, above physical disability, the very background conditions, she states that “[people with disability] are learning from each other strength and endurance, not against our bodies, but against a world that exceptionalises and objectifies us.”⁹ Initial praise for defying unjust and widely held norms tracks agency. There is no under-recognition where we see capacity in its social context. Moreover, this praise may be a necessary first step in undermining oppressive ideas. Some who have never seen a disabled student will be introduced to the notion that this is feasible as a new norm. This again supports Young's message that “disability doesn't make you exceptional, but questioning what you know about it does,”¹⁰ Praise, I argue, initially provokes such questions and serves benefits by disseminating knowledge of the new emerging norm of equality for disabled persons. Young's case exists in a developing context. In emerging contexts, levying this praise does not undermine ideas of equality (as there is no existing standard to be undermined), rather it promotes them.

Returning to the case of the (ex)slave-owner, I do not resist the claim that extreme praise for him could reinforce oppressive norms. However, in order to not throw the baby out with the bathwater, it is also important to note the key role of praise in the transformation of norms over time. At that time, many agents in the antebellum south rejected moral arguments against slavery, and favored arguments that created the

institutional and social conditions in which the systemic oppression and domination of slaves was made possible. The norms that made possible these conditions were reinforced by the practices of responsibility that entrenched them; including absent praise at the outset of a norm's life (such as an emerging norm of emancipation for slaves). If emancipatory norms are to be taken up widely, support must be given to their emergence. Once a norm is more widely held, this praise must be withheld. Importantly, blame for non-compliance with the developing emancipatory norm will increase. This progressive praise may lead to the political motivation to enact structural changes. It is important to recognize that development of norms will not necessarily be temporarily linear. Some norms will be weakened and strengthened at different times given background political and social factors, and others may be difficult to ascribe to in differing contexts. For instance, promise-keeping may be difficult to maintain, and so intermittent praise that corresponds to the weakness or which recognizes the difficulty of duty-compliance may be justified, so long as that praise does not serve to undermine social justice norms.¹¹

On the socially self-governed view of agency introduced, practices of praising will be key in developing an agent's responsibility. The praise will on the one hand reflect the departure that has been made from existing social norms, while on the other hand recognizing the value of a newly recognized moral or normative standard (even if this relates to a duty that ought always to have existed). This respects and enhances the agency of the praised. It is in this way non-instrumental. I concede that this type of praise may have disrespectful consequences from the perspective of victims of oppression. Nonetheless, I emphasize that the appropriateness of the practice is temporally limited and ought not to undermine the very valid claims that oppressed persons have to reject oppressive norms. Progressive praise forms part of such a process.

For praise to be apt, it is crucial that the praiser genuinely recognizes the merit of the action they respond to. This is important to avoid pitfalls such as patronizing praising (which would express an oppressive expectation) or fueling lamentable claims such as "she was only nominated for the award because she's black." I have claimed that agency has a social character. Traversing norms is praiseworthy. However, there are issues where the praiser does not themselves believe in the merit of the action to be praised. As norms develop, praise can send signals and these are valuable to a moral ecology. In order that these signals are appropriately received and do not become oppressive, the praise ought to be in line with standards held by socially self-governing agents. While remaining functionalist, this ties my account to a social notion of agency. Subgroups with knowledge of emancipatory norms, in emerging and developing contexts, should praise in line with these norms. Praising on purely instrumental grounds could have an oppressive effect as it diminishes the perception that the disadvantaged are moral agents deserving of meritocratic praise. While praise has been generally taken to be less costly than blame to levy, there are costs to disingenuous praising. Praising through gritted teeth is clearly instrumental, difficult to engineer, and likely not to support the emergence of the norm or moral standard being assessed.

In light of this, there appears a conundrum. If agents do not regard the moral merit in an oppressed group, but do regard the moral merit in a privileged group for comparable actions (such as in cases of missing praise), how then can this inequity in praising be solved without adopting undermining disingenuous praise? The alternative option is to reduce praise for privileged agents. There is no oppressive standard expressed in withholding praise for a privileged agent that acts in line with an emancipatory expectation. Considering more critically whether agents have benefitted from a privilege

which may discount the agency required for their action may be an important move away from casting the disadvantaged as perpetual victims in need of assistance and toward undermining the privilege which contours structural domination and oppression. This also avoids the harm of disingenuous and purely instrumental praising. Thinking more cautiously about how we celebrate those in positions of advantage, and rationally recalibrating our expectations may be more important to reach emancipatory goals than seeking to praise the disadvantaged in a way not consistent with our moral assessments (which will include recognizing pioneers). Withholding erroneous praise based on implicit bias, while requiring a degree of mental energy, does not generate the same disingenuity problems. This is precisely the sort of action that will develop the moral agency of the agent making the determination of responsibility and will send signals to others.

I have ruled out praise that seeks only to develop the moral agency of the praiser as part of a progressive account without meeting the aptness condition, or which is disingenuously expressed. However, some may object that certain types of instrumental praise could be justifiable—in particular, where praise is used to aid the moral development of an agent on the receiving end. After all, we often use praise to motivate improved behavior; for instance in children and students. It could at first glance seem that a level of instrumental praise which does not genuinely track merit appears not to trouble us, perhaps provided that it is not attached to unjustified virtue signaling on the part of the praiser. Certainly, this may appear true by comparison to blame—even a small portion of purely instrumental blame may be seen as unjustifiably harmful where the receiving agent has not transgressed some moral or normative standard.¹²

Against this, I argue that purely instrumental praise is both harmful and fails to be motivational. Praising agents for what they have not done obscures the moral content of the standard being praised. Yet, given my social account, many of the benefits of instrumental praise will be retained. The context of praise is important. The social nature of agency and its relevance to praise means that those who pioneer a normative or moral standard are worthy of high praise. Similarly, an agent may aptly praise a child for having produced a “beautiful drawing” that they do not truly believe would hold up the aesthetic standards they would require in a piece of art they chose from a gallery. This is because in the context of the child’s relative skills and environment, the work is praiseworthy. While the praiser may hope to encourage the child to feel confident and go on to produce future works of art, the praise is not only instrumental. Praising agents for actions they have not taken, or standards they have not met, will undermine what is really valuable about those actions or standards. This harm may be more subtle than in cases of erroneous blame, but does damage the kind of self-governed social agency that underlies moral responsibility.

4. Progressive praise in practice: a contemporary case

To make clear the pitfalls of instrumentalized attempts at progressive praise, and how my account advances, let’s return to the case of “Clap for our Carers.”¹³ *The Nursing Times*, after ten weeks, sent out a tweet asking nurses if they would like the clapping to continue. Almost every respondent stated that they would not like it to continue. One respondent, Maria, commented that she agreed with the clapping in the first instance but when asked about its continuation said she “cannot feel the same way this time round . . . I have seen too much Covid denial, general abuse and harshness towards the

medical profession since then to fully believe the sentiment is real.”¹⁴ This seemingly then reflects that Maria considers disingenuous praise as problematic.¹⁵

To praise agents without recognizing the true reason for their praiseworthiness, or to praise for reasons that do not relate to the agent, can send erroneous signals and undermine important and valid norms. Consider how other nurses responded stating that it was a “hollow gesture.” The reasoning behind this claim related to the perceived, continued lack of funding for the NHS. Nurses were also angry at the politicization of the clapping. Two problematic things are going on here. First, the praise is suggesting that nurses are heroic for their actions without acknowledging the role of underfunding in creating the need for extra effort by NHS workers. This praise, which is important in signaling a norm, is not recognizing the genuinely praiseworthy action that nurses are taking (they would like to be praised for working in extremely unsupported conditions as opposed to battling a pandemic taken to be unaffected by government decisions and citizen compliance). Nurses are rejecting the praise as hollow as it comes from a government and public which, from their perspective, has not truly recognized an important reason why nurses have had a gruelling time working in the NHS. The praise obscures the genuine merit of the nurses. This is misfiring praise. Furthermore, the anger at the politicization of the clapping relates to the desire of government and non-Covid-rule-compliant individuals to attach themselves to the image of being supportive of the NHS where this is seen as undeserved. This is undeservedly appropriate praise.

What is also interesting about the “Clap for our Carers” case is that at the outset the praise was largely welcomed. The answer to why, I argue, is that nurses hoped that the praise was fulfilling the role of signaling a normative standard. In this case, many assumed that the praise represented an acknowledgment that NHS workers were performing incredibly difficult jobs in a context of injustice. The praise for nurses was apt where it tracked their moral merit. When it became clear this was disingenuous, even the remaining praise which was perhaps expressive of the wider injustice faced by nurses became undermining. The praise became undermining as it was not accompanied by a shift in background conditions such that would respect NHS workers by taking up the norm of providing them with due resources. This reflects why praise, while important at the outset of normative change, must be complemented by a shift in attitudes and a decrease in praising behaviors. Initial praise will signal an emerging normative standard, however excess praise can go on to undermine the development of that norm. It will create an image of morally exceptional behavior that obscures the moral requirements of other agents in conditions of injustice.

5. Conclusion

Oppressive praise aligns with oppressive background conditions such that an agent is either over- or under-recognised. Further, I have shown that there are normative problems with disingenuous praise. Apt praise, conversely, will respect self-governed social agency. Apt praise can in emerging contexts attach to acts aligned with moral and normative expectations, and in developing contexts align with exceeding of those expectations.

Ciurria’s proposal to level up praise for those in positions of disadvantage seeks to achieve a level of background equality such that oppressive or dominating structures are undermined. This approach carefully considers the norms and ideas which produce, reproduce, and reify oppression and domination. Challenging particular norms (as Ciurria correctly advocates we do through applying apt blame) is necessary. What is

also necessary, however, is supporting the emergence and development of emancipatory ideas such as would form the basis of such transformation. This will require withholding praise from disadvantaged agents where it reflects an oppressive expectation or is disingenuous. There are also reasons to praise the advantaged where they are pioneers.

By contrast to Ciurria's instrumental account, Holroyd has argued that apt praise ought to be structured by tracking emancipatory aims and by desert-based reasons. This account supports her claim that both considerations are necessary, but shows that in emerging cases praising pioneers who do not act in accordance with end-state aims will be crucial. This, I have argued, respects socially embedded agency given the extra merit involved when acting in abnormal moral contexts. Progressive praise will respect desert-based reasons but not track emancipatory aims in these contexts. This account therefore takes note of the pitfalls and promises of praise and proposes a reform of the practice that addresses the former while harnessing the advantages of the latter.

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Notes

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/28/clap-for-our-carers-the-very-unbritish-ritual-that-united-the-nation>

2 Ciurria 2020; Holroyd 2021; McHugh 2024.

3 For instance, social psychologists such as Algoe and Haidt 2009 have referred to these kinds of attitudes as “other-praising emotions.”

4 For a discussion of the link between the link between positive reactive attitudes and “positive actions” see Scarantino and Nielsen 2015; Scarantino 2017.

5 Calhoun, 1989, 394.

6 Shoemaker and Vargas 2021 offer an account of blame's signaling function.

7 For a rich discussion of the interaction between social and moral norms, from which this account departs, see McTernan 2023, ch. 3; Buss 1999; Calhoun 2000.

8 Holroyd, in considering how to ameliorate praise notes that there are some desert-based and forward-looking considerations that may speak in favor of praising those who work against oppressive norms. Holroyd ultimately dismisses these reasons as they lead to what she considers an unjustifiable inequity in praise between social groups (Holroyd 2021, 20).

9 Stella Young, TedTalk: ‘I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much’, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw>.

10 Stella Young, TedTalk: ‘I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much’, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw>.

11 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

12 Contrary to proleptic blame accounts e.g., Rini 2020, 144–50.

13 I note that Zoe Johnson King considered a similar case, in Johnson King (2023).

14 <https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/coronavirus/clap-for-heroes-nurses-say-they-do-not-want-return-of-applause-07-01-2021/>

15 I do not consider this as a case of structural injustice or domination, rather an instance of praise set against an unjust background which highlights some of the potential pitfalls of praise that over- or under-recognizes agents' actions.

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