



# “We Accept You, One of Us”: Praise, Blame, and Group Management

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## Abstract

Praise and blame can function to manage membership in informal social groups. We can be praised into groups, like if you remark on my good taste in music and invite me to have lunch with you. We can be blamed out of groups, like if I’m rude to your spouse and you stop inviting me to parties. These can move in the opposite direction, with praise removing you from a group and blame drawing you in. If we attend to the way praise and blame shape our social world, we can revisit some debates about the ethics of praise and blame with new eyes.

**Keywords** Social groups · Praise · Blame · Ethics of praise and blame

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 other punks for releasing this album as they did. It was seen as a betrayal by their community. Then Billie Joe Armstrong is not a punk anymore.

Roisin McNearny is an Irish Revolutionary in 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 is not in the IRA anymore.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Example from Keefe (2019).

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We all exist in many social groups like this. I am 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 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.

In this paper, I claim that praise and blame can move people around within these informal social groups. Call this idea the...

**Group Management Thesis (GMT)** Praise and blame can function to shape and manage informal social groups.

It is illuminating to understanding praise and blame if we notice how they can function to manage those groups. I am not claiming that this is the one and only function of praising and blaming. I am not here offering a functional definition of praise and blame.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that praise and blame seem to have this power is an important feature 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 we do. I can warn you that your standing within our group is not very stable. 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.

Attending to this group management 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.

The first three sections of the paper will clarify the scope of this claim. In Sect. 1, I will explain the expansive sense of what I mean by praise and blame. In Sect. 2, I will characterize what kind of groups I am referring to. For skeptics about the ontology of social groups, this section highlights a minimal set of assumptions needed to motivate GMT. In Sect. 3, I will more precisely characterize what I mean by managing those groups. In Sect. 4, I will highlight a familiar feature of these kinds of groups which I will call *stickiness*. In Sect. 5, I will consider some competing explanations of how we are moved around in these groups—namely by recognition and by violation of norms. I argue that neither of these explain the cases as well as praise and blame do. In Sect. 6, I will consider some implications of GMT for the existing literature on praise and blame.

<sup>2</sup>A notable example of this is Shoemaker and Vargas (2021), also Shoemaker (2024). For a discussion of another particularly social function of praise, see Holroyd (2024).

## 1 Praise and Blame

GMT is an overarching claim about praise and blame. If it's true, it should be a constraint on how we can characterize praise and blame. A good account should have to explain how praise and blame move people around in these groups. As such, I'll remain neutral on a precise characterization of praise and blame. In fact, my hope is that in recognizing GMT, we might make some headway in entrenched debates about these topics. I'll consider some of the many things we observe praise and blame doing and the ways we can use them. Since there is more of a discussion about it, let's look at blame first.

Following Pereboom (2017), I'll be assuming that "blame" is a Wittgensteinian family resemblance term (Wittgenstein 2009). As such, my considerations here aim to include as much as possible of what we call blame and the different ways it manifests. This includes Scanlon's (2008) sense of blame that modifies relationships even with the absence of reactive attitudes. It also includes Wolf's (2011) sense of angry blame grounded in reactive attitudes that does not modify a relationship. This is not a project in pursuit of the true nature of blame. Instead, I hope for it to be a tool that helps resolve some of the debates about that issue.

I will also assume for the sake of this project that praise and blame admit of non-moral varieties. It is often accepted that blame admits of nonmoral varieties.<sup>3</sup> Dorsey (2020) 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 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 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 in the group of baseball players. 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 change in his standing is 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.

I mean to take the same approach to praise. Praise often has a similar emotional component to blame, which Shoemaker (2015) characterizes as including awe and admiration. Telch (2022) surveys some of the attempts to characterize praise in a unified way. As should be familiar from the literature on blame, each of these seems to capture something intuitive and compelling about praise, while seeming to miss something else. This is only a problem if we think there is one unified sense of praise.

Anderson et al. (2020) 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

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the ethics of nonmoral blame, see Milam & Matheson (2022).

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.

Though less discussed<sup>4</sup>, 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 much group building 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 signal that I am a fellow vinyl collector.

There is one thing all these different types of blame and praise have in common. They manage our standing in a certain kind of informal social groups. I'll discuss these groups in the next section.

## 2 Groups

GMT is an account of something praise and blame do with respect to groups, not of what groups are. There are interesting questions about the metaphysics of social groups better handled by others.<sup>5</sup> According to Thomasson, groups are structured by the norms... "for how members of the group are to behave, or for how others are to regard or treat them." (2019, pp 4840). However, it is not clear to me that one enters or leaves a group simply by upholding norms or failing to as much as they enter or leave when other members of the group recognize, notice and respond. In McNearny's case from the beginning, she seems to have lost her position in the group at the time *her compatriots found out* she violated a norm, not at the time she violated the norm. Praise and blame often emerges when your peers notice the violation of a norm. This gives some initial reason to think that there is some connection between praise and blame and group management. But for skeptics about social groups, 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 (by others) between social groups.
5. some social groups are mutually exclusive.

I want to highlight two features of the groups that I'm discussing here. First, I'm not concerned with all possible permutations of social groups, such as the group composed of everyone who ever lived at street addresses starting with 5. The groups that concern me are groups with particular social and psychological significance. They are groups that we are concerned to be in and *to be perceived* as being in. They are closely tied to a sense of identity. Second, since I will be thinking of praise and blame here as a social practice, the groups that matter are *informal* social groups. Such groups do not tend to have an official procedure for joining and leaving. Contrast the informality of these groups with more official membership organizations. An example of an informal social group is political liberals, while an

<sup>4</sup>For an earlier distinction between moral and nonmoral praise, see Smart (1961). Though again for my discussion of social groups here, I will be considering moral and nonmoral varieties of both praise and blame.

<sup>5</sup>For examples, see Thomasson (2019), Faller (2019).

example of a membership organization is the Democratic Party in the United States. There may 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 pleasant 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. 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, I'll leave the details of group membership to be determined by the theorists and practitioners of each group.

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 suddenly, 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 (2013). Sometimes the sting is because the groups are arranged hierarchically, and you want to be in the higher up group. 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>6</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.

I mean for this claim to be neutral about the mechanics of specifically theorized groups. While it might be fair to say that there is a social group of women, and it may be informal in the way I'm talking about here, this isn't an account of what it is to be in that particular group. I trust that these are handled well by theorists of their groups.

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

When thinking of praise and blame outside this context of group management, it's fairly intuitive that blame can be harmful. More recent work on praise highlights the ways it can be harmful too. Jeppsson and Brandenburg (2022) discuss types of praise that can be harmful by revealing that the praiser had an unfairly low opinion of the praised, or unfairly low opinions of themselves in relation to the praised. Holroyd (2021, 2024) also discusses ways praise can reflect and entrench oppressive social norms and reveal unjust expectations, such

<sup>6</sup>GMT draws inspiration from Scanlon's relationship modification account of blame, but its 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 relationships that one might modify, not all groups are like this. I share a group of people with philosophy PhDs with Scanlon, but we aren't friends. Similarly, I share a group of punks with Joey Ramone, but I'll never meet him.

as when fathers are disproportionately praised for minimally caring for their children while mothers doing comparable care receive no public recognition.

However, one might think that if what I'm concerned with here is simply praise and blame moving us around in informal social groups, we need not worry so much about how we do it. But 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 why the target may feel discomfort with even the gentlest 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 everyone thinks I did wrong. Some kinds of blame could put me in the group of criminals, jerks,<sup>7</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. This can also happen in the opposite direction. Praise can harm the person being praised by implicating them in the group of the praiser.

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

<sup>7</sup> See Schwitzgebel (2019) pp. 3–14.

natively, 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.

### 3 Management

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 subgroup within the group, or to fracture a group into different groups. 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 real 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. Marginalizing 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.").
7. Groups fracturing<sup>8</sup> ("she did that way before it was cool")

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.

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 social 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

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<sup>8</sup>This can happen when a group splits over some issue, like if fans of an artist are divided over some public scandal or major change. There was a split between people who liked Green Day *only* before their major label releases and those who continued to celebrate their work afterwards. For some reason, this also happens a lot with early adopters of something initially fringe which comes to be popular. There is a special esteem the early adopters share for each other. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this into focus.

who are sometimes late to things and understanding of other late people. You can welcome me to your group with praise.

Of course, not all group management is praise or blame. You can be kicked out of a group or invited in by different methods. 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.

## 4 Praise, Blame, and the Stickiness of Groups

Because we can move in and out of these groups, we can 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 where I only have a tenuous sense of belonging. 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 difficult to join or to leave. National identity is an example. This is distinct from citizenship status or anything official. Bobby Fisher, born a US citizen, renounced his US citizenship and died as an Icelandic citizen. But we could imagine American fans of his would no doubt recognize him as characteristically American while Icelandic critics of his would also refrain from treating him as Icelandic, regardless of his citizenship status. For Fisher, being an American was a sticky group. You could coherently ask if someone is a real Columbian or a real Russian, and what you're asking isn't about where the person citizenship status is. You're asking about the informal groups they're part of. In contrast, some groups are trivially easy to join. I can just start drinking green tea to join the green tea drinker group. If I do, and that's your drink of choice, I might find you complimenting my good choice.

Those are the extremes. In the middle, most social 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.

There is more subtlety to the stickiness of groups than I can fully explore here. For example, some groups are sticky only in certain dimensions but not in others. Homophobic parents who disown their gay child display a family culture that is not sticky (I would say not sticky *enough*) with respect to sexuality. That same family might be more sticky with respect to violations or betrayals that would justify one's removal from some other group. Sometimes the essential or characteristic attributes of the group contribute to its stickiness. Though many of the groups in question here emerged organically and can lack central principles. Further, many of our groups are concerned with what you are, even without a clear story about what makes you that way. So thinking back to the punk example, it's coherent for a punk to recognize someone as a punk even if they don't like or listen to punk music.

It is not impossible to leave a family as a social group, 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 some-



one raised on icy silences rather than angry outbursts, this example can seem rather alien. Thinking of this in terms of groups can reveal why.

You can have lots of 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. The more sticky the group, the more severe, angry or even violent blame may manifest and exist without relationship modification. The anger, door slamming, and jaw clenching can continue without causing the group to dissolve or to fracture. 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.

A 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, 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 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.

## 5 Alternative Explanations

You might grant that we are moved around in informal groups in this way and that this is morally important but deny that it happens by way of praise and blame. Consider two alternate explanations.

### 5.1 Norms

One candidate explanation is the violation of norms. This has a certain appeal, especially since norms and groups are so closely related. Many groups are structured around a shared set of norms. We blame people for violations of norms. Both praise and blame are clearly involved with norm maintenance (see Shoemaker 2024). So why think it's the act of praising or blaming that does the work? Because things seem to change not when the norm is violated, but when the violation is noticed.

Let us return to the two cases from the beginning of the paper. Take Green Day first. 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 for this. This was true at the time, when there was no such norm against being on a major record label. But it's still true today in retrospect. Even as the norms changed, the punks didn't start blaming The Ramones. In contrast, Green Day was both praised and blamed out of the group, they didn't simply fall out by way of violating norms. The mainstream music critics praised them; the punks blamed them. These went hand in hand. It was the praise and blame that moved them out of the group, not just the violations of the norms.

Relatedly, Roisin McNearney<sup>9</sup> violated the norms of being an IRA member by snitching on her comrades. She did this long before they found out. But suppose they didn't find out. She could have gone on to be a double agent, collecting information on the IRA. It seems wrong to say that if that happened, she wouldn't be a member of the group. In fact, her being an informer would depend fundamentally upon her functioning as a member of the group. In many cases, violating a norm doesn't get you kicked out of your group unless you get caught.

## 5.2 Recognition

Recognition clearly plays a role in managing informal groups. Again, why think praise and blame are the primary mechanisms and not recognition? We need not! After all, in the cases I consider, the punks cease to recognize Green Day as a punk band and the other IRA members cease to recognize McNearney as a member. However, it appears that blame is one way in-group members communicate to other in-group members that someone has lost their position. To simply stop recognizing their membership in the group might work too. As ever, the details will vary depending on the group.

Here we can think of praise and blame as moves in a great social game. Like pieces on a chess board, we move each other around in the social world. Blamed moves you from the

<sup>9</sup>Note that this case is not clean cut. McNearney joined the IRA group through some official procedure. However, the way she left wasn't by anything official. Her former comrades didn't strike her name from the list, or officially exclude her. This would have been difficult since most members denied being in the IRA anyway. Instead, she was blamed out, and would likely have been murdered in response if she didn't change her name and go into hiding. From the text: 'Before sentencing Price and the other defendants, Judge Shaw announced that the jury was acquitting Roisin McNearney. Addressing McNearney—a small girl with penciled eyebrows, in a white shawl and a pink blouse— Shaw said that he hoped she had learned "not to dabble in murderous enterprises." Referring to her decision to betray her comrades, he said, "I do not know when you leave this court what other dangers may confront you." As McNearney was ushered out of the hall, the remaining defendants began to hum a tune, in ominous unison. It was "The Dead March" from Handel's *Saul*, a standard feature of the musical repertoire at funerals. Hugh Feeney reached into his pocket and came out with a coin. He hurled it at McNearney, shouting, "Here's your blood money!" She rushed out of the courtroom, sobbing.' Keefe (2019).

popular group to the outcasts. Praise might bring you from the people who go unnoticed to the noteworthy. All these aspects of our moral and social lives move us around in this game.

To take the image further, imagine we are playing this chess game with no board. We both know the game well enough to keep track of the position in our respective minds, but we have nothing to appeal to but our own mental representation. We may generally be honest enough that we would never willingly misrepresent the conditions of the board. But as the game goes on and the position becomes more complex, it becomes harder to merely represent it in the privacy of your own mind.

Now imagine we have spectators. I call out e4 and you respond with e5. I update my board; you update yours and the audience does the same. Once again, as the game goes on, we all represent an increasingly complex position. Some spectators' attention falters and then they have a different position in mind. Someone mishears a move, and another position is different.

It seems to me that this is what many of our informal social groups are like. There's a common ground that only works insofar as enough people (or the right people, or all the people...) buy into it. These groups often have hierarchies, to be sure, and some members count for more than others. But they don't always have official procedures for coming and going so recognition can be difficult. Praise and blame can signal who is one of us and who isn't.

## 6 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. Two<sup>10</sup> approaches in thinking of praise and blame 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 that praise/blame move us around in, more than the ways the praise/blame manifests. This is a promising strategy for recognizing harms that stem from praise as well as blame. Otherwise, harmful praise is more likely than its blame counterpart to fly under the radar.<sup>11</sup> We should be concerned about situations in which praising, not praising, blaming, or not blaming, results in moving one into a group that is no longer perceived as a moral agent or moral patient. At certain extremes, this appears to be just what happens. At the extremes, 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 genocidal treatment. While Tyrell does not explicitly categorize this behavior as blame, it seems that it fits the bill.

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 trying to develop such an account here. I just want to highlight that if we think of praise and blame as being concerned with group membership, it might be a fruitful way to

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say the only two. Strawsonian projects might be considered a third way.

<sup>11</sup> Again, see Holroyd (2021, 2024); Jeppsson and Brandenburg (2022).

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 in light of metaphysical considerations about determinism, Pereboom (2014) suggests disappointment as an appropriate. 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. Without taking a side in this, I want to highlight that the two can be evaluated differently in terms of their impact on group membership. Suppose, hypothetically, that angry blame dislodges a person from their group in a permanent way, but disappointment does so in a way that allows readmission.<sup>12</sup> 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, provided it better preserves the overall integrity of the group in question. 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. 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.

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.<sup>13</sup>

White et al. (2016) show demonstrates that praise of college athlete's physical prowess can diminish third party's perception 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 something like 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. 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 some 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. We could reform our practice from the other end and treat the most important groups as stickier,

<sup>12</sup> The details, of course, would depend on the nature of the group, especially its stickiness. This is not to say that anger *is* worse than disappointment. In the right context, disappointment could certainly be more painful. But GMT gives us a way of thinking it beyond what is deserved or what feels worse.

<sup>13</sup> Again, see Thomasson (2019).

so that even harsh or dehumanizing blame or infrahumanizing praise, oppressive praise, or patronizing praise cannot dislodge people from them.

## 7 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 our identity. They can modify our status as perceived agents. They can even result in losing our recognition as moral patients. We must use such tools carefully.

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