

Standing to Blame and Standing to Praise?

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Abstract

Praise and blame are both forms of moral assessment. Yet, the literature on standing has focussed on blame – to blame appropriately one needs standing to do so. Praise has been mostly ignored. This paper argues that the asymmetrical treatment of praise and blame is unwarranted: there's no good reason to think that we need standing to blame, but don't need standing to praise. This conclusion is important because it provides a new line of argument for scepticism about standing to blame.

Keywords

standing; blame; criticism; praise; moral assessment

Introduction

The literature on standing has thus far focussed on criticism, blame, and punishment, and (with few exceptions) neglected another form of moral evaluation: praise and compliment.² Why? The literature provides no answer: those whose work shares this focus, and exhibits this neglect, rarely remark upon them—much less explain them. But one plausible hypothesis is that, by and large, philosophers working in this area see an asymmetry between blame and praise, criticism and compliment: one needs standing to blame or criticize (or to do so correctly, or permissibly);

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² For literature that analyses standing to blame/criticise/punish and not praise or compliment see Bell (2013), Cohen (2006), Dover (2019), Duff (2010), Edwards (2019), Herstein (2017), O'Brien (2022) Tadros (2017) and Todd (2019, forthcoming), Todd and Rabern (2022), Wallace (2010). There is also a literature discussing who has standing to forgive: see Chaplin (2019), MacLachlan (2017), Norlock (2008), Pettigrove (2009), Urban Walker (2013) Lippert-Rasmussen (2023).

but one does not need standing to praise or compliment (correctly, permissibly).³ Here, I will argue that this view is unwarranted: there's no good reason to accept this asymmetry between blame and praise.

My turn to praise is anticipated by Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2021, 2023) and Daniel Telech (2024). Each gives illuminating arguments that one needs standing to praise (correctly), and that standingless praise is wrongful. However, my approach here differs from theirs. I will not argue that correct or permissible praise requires standing. Rather, I aim to motivate only the conditional claim that *if* blame requires standing *then* praise does too (the symmetry view). This claim is significant in at least three ways. First, it provides a new line of argument for scepticism about standing to blame (one might be sceptical that we need standing to blame or one might be sceptical that we should enforce norms around standing): I find it implausible that praise requires standing.⁴ Sceptics who agree can contend that we don't need standing to praise appropriately, and since the symmetry view is correct, neither do we need standing to blame appropriately. Second, if this sceptical argument is correct, and we *don't* need standing to blame, then philosophers will need to rethink the cases meant to motivate the view that we *do*. For example, what goes wrong with hypocritical blame, if not the lack of standing? Third, my arguments highlight the moral magnitude of praise, and thereby contribute to a recent wave of work aiming to show that praise deserves the same kind of theoretical attention from philosophers as blame does.⁵

³ I treat blame and criticism the same and similarly so for praise and compliment. For others in the standing literature who do the same with respect to standing to blame and criticise see: Bell (2003), Herstein (2017), Dover (2019), O'Brien (2022), Todd (forthcoming).

⁴ This also distinguishes my work from Lippert-Rasmussen's and Telech's. Those in the literature who are sceptical about standing to blame include Bell (2013), Dover (2019), King (2019), O'Brien and Whelan (2022)

⁵ For work on praise see Telech (2022, 2024), Holyrood (2023), Lippert-Rasmussen (2023).

I will start by presenting the rival, *asymmetry* view and providing some intuitive motivation for it. To be clear, the asymmetry view is neither explicitly formulated nor defended in the literature. My hypothesis is that it functions as a background assumption that informs the literature's focus on standing to blame and neglect of standing to praise. I then aim to undermine the view: I will consider three reasons that might be given in support of it and argue that none of them is compelling. I will then return to the intuitive motivation and explain how it goes wrong.

1. *The Asymmetry View*

The standing literature typically claims that in order to blame or criticize another person – or, at least, in order to criticize them appropriately – one must have *standing* to do so. The thought is that even when we know someone has done something wrong and is worthy of criticism not just anyone can do that criticizing. We need to find a person who has standing. But on the other side of the coin – praise – standing does not much come up. Rather the assumption seems to be that once we know that someone is praiseworthy *anyone* can do the praising. We don't need to look for a particular person who has standing. This is the asymmetry view. Why might one accept the asymmetry view? It may seem intuitively correct, based on consideration of cases like the following pair about Aoife. Aoife is constantly on her phone even when her friends are trying to talk to her about something important. She is always checking her messages or aimlessly scrolling. In each case Aoife is out to dinner with her friend Alex:⁶

Aoife the Critic

At dinner Alex hears her own phone ding and reaches into her pocket to check it. Aoife immediately comments 'Really? I wish you'd keep off your phone. I'm trying to talk to you about which job offer I should take'.

⁶ Here is another pair of cases: imagine a stranger at the playground who is critical of a child who bullies another child. The intuition here is that it's not the stranger's business so they don't have standing and so the parent can reject their criticism. However, if instead the stranger praises the child who includes an awkward kid in their game on the playground then there isn't anything inappropriate about that and the praise is allowed and not rejected by the parent.

Aoife the Complimenter

At dinner Aoife is trying to talk to Alex about which job offer should she take and Alex’s phone dings. However, in this case, instead of unlocking her screen and replying, Alex just switches her phone off without even looking to see who had been trying to reach her. Aoife immediately comments, ‘Thank you. You’re so good about your phone and you don’t let it distract from your friends.’

Standardly, a “mismatch” between someone’s behaviour and the norms she espouses—between “the walk” and “the talk”—makes her a hypocrite.⁷ Both cases above exhibit this kind of mismatch. In the Critic case, Aoife is saying one thing—it’s bad to ignore your friends for your phone — and doing another—being on her phone all the time. In the Complimenter case, she is again saying one thing—it’s good to set your phone aside and listen to your friends—and doing another—not setting her phone aside. And in each case Aoife makes an exception of herself by engaging in moral evaluation of others’ behaviour, but not of her own. However, it may seem that different reactions would be appropriate in the two cases. The standard picture says that, in the Critic case, Alex could appropriately rebuff Aoife’s *criticism* by pointing out the mismatch. But in the Complimenter case, it seems that she could not: we would not expect Alex to rebuff Aoife’s *praise* by commenting on Aoife’s own phone habits.

Philosophers standardly explain the appropriateness of the rebuff, in the Critic case, by appealing to the notion of *standing*: Alex can appropriately rebuff the criticism because Aoife *lacks the standing to blame*.⁸ So, if the rebuff seems inappropriate in the Complimenter case, we might be tempted to explain this difference by adopting the asymmetry view: Aoife does not need

⁷ Isserow and Klein (2017) use the term ‘mismatch’ in describing the hypocrite. Dover (2019) titles her paper ‘The Walk and the Talk’.

⁸ See Edwards (2019), Herstein (2017) Lippert-Rasmussen (2023).

standing in order to praise correctly; so, there is nothing objectionable about her praise, despite the mismatch between her talk and her walk.

Next I will examine three reasons that might be given in support of the asymmetry view and will argue that none of them succeeds. And so, the symmetry view ought to prevail.

2. *Do We Have an Interest in Not Being Criticised?*

One reason that might be given in support of the asymmetry view is that criticism differs from praise in that criticism is bad for us or something we have an interest in avoiding, and that standing norms—like the norm against hypocritical blame—protect us from it to some extent. Since praise is *not* bad for us we need not have any standing norms governing it. R. Jay Wallace (2010) says something close to this about blame in his discussion of hypocrisy and standing. He contends that we have an interest in not being criticised or blamed.⁹ As do Fritz and Miller (2018) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2023).¹⁰ However, these philosophers don't explain the conception of interest with which they are working. I will argue that being criticised can improve our moral characters, help us live autonomously, and help us achieve our goals. In so far as these things are in our interest then we sometimes actually do have an interest in being criticised or blamed. When we are held accountable for our actions through blame and criticism we are properly treated as autonomous agents. When our friends criticise us for taking them for granted, they help us improve our moral character and in so far as being a good friend is one of our projects they help us achieve this goal. Indeed, much of our everyday lives and practices reflect the thought that criticism is good for us – therapy, mentorships, coaching, peer-review to name just a few. All these practices are valuable in part because they involve feedback that

⁹ p.328

¹⁰ Lippert-Rasmussen acknowledges that sometimes we might have an interest in being blamed (2023 p.166 fn 42). However, he seems to think we only ever have an interest in being praised (p.166).

inevitably involves some criticism. You can't miss another family dinner - it will hurt your father's feelings. You need to follow-through more on your serve. Your conclusion doesn't follow from your premises. The critical aspects of these practices help those on the receiving end, even if they initially don't like being criticized. Moreover, criticism can also be a sign of respect – it takes work and time to learn about someone and their practices or arguments, and to invest in them such that you're able to offer criticism that helps. Criticism can help us to do better next time and make important changes. What our critics and blamers ought not do is mock or ridicule or embarrass us and perhaps this is what those who contend we have an interest in not being blamed *publicly* are getting at.¹¹ It is also true that those who criticise us should be considerate in their timing and delivery. They should not, for example, be petty or arrogant in their criticism or criticise us for our absentmindedness with emails at our big birthday party. However, we should not confuse the idea that there are better and worse ways to criticise with the idea that we have an interest in not being criticised. Nor should we confuse the fact that at least initially we often don't like being criticised with the claim that we have an interest in not being criticised.

It's not just that criticism can be good for us. It is also the case that praise is not always good for us. Indeed, it can be bad for us. It can be bad for us in at least three corresponding ways: it can harm our moral character, inhibit our ability to live autonomously, and hinder our pursuit of our goals. Praise may go to our heads making us arrogant and unsympathetic to others' faults and mistakes making us less nice and good people. As well, praise may make us less pro-active about putting effort into our projects and make us ungrateful for help when we get it. Moreover, praise can make us feel self-conscious or embarrassed. Praise, even sincere well-intended praise, can be bad for us in this way. Another way praise can be bad for us is that the compliment, while

¹¹ For example, see Wallace (2010, 328). Here, I contrast public criticism with private criticism, that is criticism that happens in a private conversation rather than publicly for everyone to hear and see.

sincere and well-meaning, is not something it's good for us to be complimented on and so can undermine our autonomy and our pursuit of our projects. An example of this is where someone compliments us on how we look – in particular, complimenting our weight loss and will-power. It is nice to be told we look good. However, compliments on weight loss can be harmful for people—even more so for people who have struggled with disordered eating.¹² Especially when we don't know the context our praise can be harmful. Perhaps the person has been ill and that's why they have lost weight. Or perhaps they are grieving the loss of a parent. And if the person struggles with food and body image the compliment could trigger negative thoughts around needing to maintain the weight loss or encourage obsessive thoughts around eating and exercise. Additionally, if we become reliant on others' praise we can become obsessed with external validation and may abandon our own projects for those that will make others happy and court their praise. Given that praise can be bad for us it is possible that we have an interest in not being praised. And so, as others argue about blame, perhaps one needs standing to praise.

My point here is that it is not straightforward to claim that criticism is bad for us and that we have an interest in not being blamed or criticised, as some writing in this area seem to suggest. And, as I've argued, it is similarly not straightforward to claim that praise is good for us and that we have an interest in being praised. Indeed, if anything, the similar sort of complexity in each case supports the symmetry view about praise and blame.

3. *Justifications for Standing*

Here is another reason that might be given in support of the asymmetry view: the arguments standardly used to justify the view that hypocrites lack standing to criticise do not apply also to

¹² As well as further entrenching fatphobia and diet culture.

hypocritical praise. However, this is also mistaken: the arguments apply to praise and blame alike.¹³

In the literature we find two arguments to justify the view that hypocrites lack standing to criticise: 1. The hypocrite's lack of commitment and 2. Concerns for equality. The first argument is offered by Patrick Todd (2019). He claims that the hypocrite who loses standing to criticise does so because she fails to show sufficient commitment to her professed norms. The thought seems to be that consistently failing to live up to one's claimed norms gives us reason to doubt that you are properly committed to those norms. And so the hypocrite loses standing to criticise. The thought here is that a person engaged in moral evaluation, specifically, criticism, needs to be properly committed to their professed norms. The same sort of worry arises surely for the case of Aoife the Complimenter.¹⁴ We might be worried about her lack of commitment because it may indicate that the view she is professing is wrong, or that she does not really believe in the merit of her view such that she is lying or misleading those she praises or criticises. For example, someone might express blame only to display to fidelity to her political party. But she could express praise for those same reasons. And so if we are worried about her criticising when she is not really committed to those norms we should also be worried about her praising when she is not really committed to those norms.

The second argument is about a concern for equality. Wallace (2010) argues that the hypocrite in particular lacks standing because in virtue of their hypocrisy they deny the equal standing of persons.¹⁵ This denial of equality of persons is demonstrated in the hypocrite's lack of concern for their own victims, but demonstrated concern for the victims of those they criticise. If we

¹³ Lippert-Rasmussen (2023) also contends that these standard justifications apply in the case of praise.

¹⁴ Telech (2024) argues that the one who has standing to praise is appropriately committed.

¹⁵ Fritz and Miller (2018) give a similar equality-based account of lost standing.

think Wallace is right that the hypocrite qua hypocrite denies the equal standing of persons, then surely the hypocrite who praises or compliments does so as well. Aoife the Complimenter recognises the goods of not being on the phone and indeed enjoys being in the company of persons who are not on their phone all the time. But praising Aoife displays an asymmetry of treatment – she recognises the goods that come of treating people a certain way (displayed through her praise) so cares about the beneficiaries but does not care about her own victims (the persons who, for example, try and talk to her while she is glued to her phone). Wallace contends that the hypocrite violates the principle of equality which is fundamental to practices of moral assessment and engagement. The hypocritical praiser seems guilty of the analogous sin and so by Wallace and others' lights should lack standing to praise. Given that praise is also a form of moral assessment and engagement.

When we think about why we might want to limit who can do the criticising – because we want that person to really be committed to the values they are espousing or because we want them to be properly instantiating a commitment to equality – we see that these potential concerns are also at play in the case of praise.

4. *The Educational Role of Blame and Praise*

Another possible reason that could support the asymmetry view relies on noting the educational role blame can play in a moral community. It is plausible to think not just anyone can teach and as such one needs standing to do so appropriately. Perhaps, praise does not play this same role and so while we need standing to blame we don't need standing to praise. But I contend that praise can in fact serve a similar educational purpose in a moral community. And so, if we need standing to blame because of blame's educational role then, given praise's educational role, we also need standing to praise.

In her writing on blame and standing, Macalester Bell (2013) emphasizes the educational value and role of blame.¹⁶ She contends that blame motivates and educates the wrongdoer and the rest of the moral community. Bell contends that blame has five aims and modes of value: it marks damage done, it helps the wrongdoer know they've committed a wrong, it motivates its target, it educates and motivates the wider moral community, and it is a way to stand up for one's principles. Praise and compliment can have similar educational and marking roles to play in a moral community. Consider the following case of **Zoe the Brave**: In the school yard Sarah is picking on the new student, Seamus. She is teasing Seamus about his name and saying that he won't make any friends. The other kids in the grade are beginning to gather and watch Sarah taunt Seamus. Sarah's mean behaviour makes them uncomfortable but no one really does much. Zoe walks up to Seamus, ignoring Sarah, and invites Seamus to play a game with her. Zoe behaves commendably and some of the other children notice. In particular, Lisa notices and goes up to Zoe and says that what she did was really good and even comments on Zoe's bravery. Lisa praises Zoe's behaviour and in doing so she marks Zoe's valuable act as kind and brave, she confirms for Zoe that her act was good (and helps the wrongdoer see her act as wrong), she motivates the wider moral community to act as Zoe did and not mimic Sarah, and she stands up for her own principles. So praise like criticism and blame can play an educational and motivational role, and so the educational role of blame does not support the asymmetry view.

5. *Return to Aoife*

I began this paper with Aoife the Critic and Aoife the Complimenter and suggested that our intuitions tell us that hypocritical Aoife cannot criticise (appropriately) but that she can praise (appropriately). The cases are meant to give life to the asymmetry view. But I have argued throughout that there are not good reasons to support the asymmetry view. What then should I

¹⁶ Bell wouldn't accept this reason; it's only inspired by her work.

say about the cases of Aoife? I hazard that what explains our intuitions about Aoife is the idea that criticism is bad for us and that we have an interest in avoiding it. But I have argued against this view of criticism. Nevertheless, there are better and worse ways of criticising one another. We should not criticise and blame each other in ways that are petty, cruel, gleeful, and out to shame. Criticism laced with this type of spite is mean and the critic seems almost glad that we made the mistake just so that they could be the ones to point it out to us. This sort of criticism is not only not aimed at helping us, but it is aimed at hurting us. And when we have made a mistake most of us are already vulnerable and so a mean and gleeful criticiser has an opportunity to hurt us. This is bad. This is not how we should engage with each other.¹⁷ But notice this doesn't get less bad if the person has standing. A teacher who is petty and spiteful in his criticism of his student's paper is not less badly behaved because he has standing to do so.¹⁸ I worry that the fact that criticism can be delivered badly and cruelly muddies the water in the literature on standing. If we want to show that standing is valuable, we need to do so in an example with thoughtful criticism delivered respectfully.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to highlight the similarities between praise and criticism – namely I have sought to show that there is no good reason to treat them differently with respect to standing. The literature on standing has focussed on criticism and all but ignored praise. This paper has surveyed possible reasons to support the asymmetrical treatment of praise and

¹⁷ At least, I think this is true most of the time. I am open to there being some cases where perhaps this is what is appropriate.

¹⁸ Indeed, the teacher may be *more* badly behaved because of the fiduciary relationship between student and teacher. Here, I disagree with Todd (forthcoming). Todd argues that, while it might be bad to criticise meanly, it is worse to criticise meanly without standing. And moreover, Todd says, to the critic who is merely mean one can say 'Don't be mean!' but to the mean critic who also lacks standing one can say 'Don't be mean! And who are you to blame me for this anyway?' I think that when you are petty and spiteful in your criticism, that is a serious way to be wrongly behaved. And so the target of that criticism has a solid rejoinder to their critic. Yes, if one accepts (which I don't) that the standingless mean critic can also be scolded for not having standing (as well as being mean), then the target of their mean-spirited criticism has more grievances to list in their reply. But why should we think that having more to say is better than having one forceful response?

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criticism and found them wanting. Criticism like praise can be good for us. Praise like criticism can be bad for us. Acts of praise raise concerns about commitment to principles and equality just as acts of blaming do. And praise like blame can play an educational role in a moral community. So if we need standing to blame, then we also need standing to praise. Or, perhaps more controversially, if we don't need standing to praise, then we don't need standing to blame.

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