Feminist Philosophy Quarterly

Volume 10 | Issue 1/2 Article 1

2024

The Distortions of Oppressive Praise: Challenges for Practice-Dependent Theories of Moral Responsibility

Jules Holroyd
University of Sheffield
j.d.holroyd@sheffield.ac.uk

Recommended Citation
Holroyd, Jules. 2024. "The Distortions of Oppressive Praise: Challenges for Practice-Dependent Theories of Moral Responsibility." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (1/2). Article 1.

The Distortions of Oppressive Praise: Challenges for Practice-Dependent Theories of Moral Responsibility

Jules Holroyd

Abstract

Practice-dependent approaches to moral responsibility appeal to our practices of moral responsibility in order to identify and justify the conditions for holding each other responsible. Yet, our practices are shaped by oppressive norms. For example, attributions of praise can be shaped by ableist norms, antifat norms, and norms of toxic positivity. I argue that such cases pose methodological and justificatory challenges for practice-dependent approaches of various stripes. In considering what resources these approaches might have to confront these challenges, I formulate some supplementary norms for theorizing about our practices of moral responsibility and for structuring those practices themselves.

This paper makes the following novel contributions: First, it advances examples that show that reactive attitudes can be oppressive irrespective of patterns of comparative distribution. Second, it articulates the implications of oppressive reactive attitudes for a range of post-Strawsonian approaches to moral responsibility. Third, it more fully articulates the norms that ought to shape our responsibility practices and locates them in relation to two recently proposed approaches to moral responsibility, from Shoemaker and Ciurria.

Keywords: moral responsibility, praise, oppression, practice-dependent theories, amelioration

Practice-dependent approaches to moral responsibility appeal to our practices of moral responsibility in order to identify and justify the conditions for holding each other responsible. Yet, our practices are shaped by oppressive norms (Ciurria 2020a, 2020b, 2023; Holroyd 2021). For example, attributions of praise can be shaped by ableist norms, antifat norms and norms of toxic positivity. I argue that such cases pose methodological and justificatory challenges for practice-dependent approaches of various stripes. In considering what resources these approaches might have to confront these challenges, I formulate some supplementary norms for theorizing about our practices of moral responsibility and for structuring those practices themselves.

In section 1, I outline the key Strawsonian move that instigated the development of "practice-dependent theories" of moral responsibility. In section 2, I present new examples of oppressive praise, which show how reactive attitudes can be oppressive irrespective of their patterns of comparative distribution. In section 3, I articulate the implications for post-Strawsonian theories of moral responsibility. I then formulate some supplementary norms for theorizing about our practices of moral responsibility and for structuring those practices themselves. I show how each approach from section 3 could incorporate these norms and the implications of their doing so. This work goes beyond previous work on oppressive praise in two key ways: First, the cases I use (in section 2) show that praise can be oppressive without any comparative or distributive concerns arising. Second, rather than simply arguing that practices of praise should be sensitive to a norm about challenging oppression, this paper shows how such a norm could be incorporated into different post-Strawsonian approaches to moral responsibility (section 4).

1. The Social Turn

One of the most influential approaches to moral responsibility in the second half of the twentieth century is Strawson's 1962 essay "Freedom and Resentment" (reprinted in his 1974 book, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*). There, Strawson advanced an approach to moral responsibility that shaped much theorizing about responsibility that followed. Rather than see responsibility as threatened by determinism, or as a purely instrumental practice, Strawson argued that we should see our practices of holding each other responsible as a fundamental and unforesakeable part of interpersonal relationships as we know them. We are deeply committed to these interpersonal social relationships; we cannot, and should not want to, give them up. And indeed, when we look at our social practices, Strawson argued, we see that the sorts of considerations that *do* lead us to step back from holding another responsible have nothing to do with metaphysical theses of determinism. Rather, (drawing on Watson's reconstruction of the Strawsonian view) when we look at our practices, we find that "to be responsible is just to be a (possible) fit target of that sort of attitude" [viz, the reactive attitudes, praise and blame] (Watson 2014, 16). These "personal reactive attitudes rest on, and reflect, an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree of goodwill or regard on the part of other human beings towards ourselves" (Strawson [1974] 2008, 15; see Watson 2014, 19). In practice, when we modify or withdraw from the reactive attitudes, Strawson claimed, it is due to the presence of certain exempting or excusing conditions that show us that the action did not manifest the agent's quality of will.

Strawson's work marks what we might think of as the "social turn," which has prompted the flourishing of rich lines of thought and argumentation that attempt to draw insights about the concept of moral responsibility and the conditions for its

application from observations about our social practices of holding each other responsible.[1] In a recent volume on social dimensions of moral responsibility, Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana (2018, 2) write that "most (if not all) of the recent social approaches to moral responsibility—directly or indirectly—owe a debt to P. F. Strawson's" work on this topic (see also Shoemaker and Tognazzini 2014). Characteristic of these approaches, they argue, is that "we identify what it means for an agent to be responsible by examining the practices under which we hold agents responsible. . . . Strawson therefore develops a *practice-dependent* theory of moral responsibility" (Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana 2018, 4). Another way of characterizing the social turn is in terms of Strawson's key insight (in Victoria McGeer's words) "that philosophers can make real progress in understanding what traits or capacities are required to be a responsible agent by focusing on our attitudes and practices of holding responsible" (McGeer 2019, 301).

In turning to the social, Strawson was not impervious to the fact that the practices might be shaped by, and take on, particular instantiations that may vary according to cultural context. Far from describing a universalist conception of how we respond to each other, Strawson attends, albeit briefly, to "the great variety of forms which these human attitudes may take at different times and in different cultures" ([1974] 2008, 26). Indeed, some aspects of our practices may demonstrate, Strawson observed, a "seamy side," which might make us "rightly mistrustful" of the relationships and attitudes that he takes as fundamental to our responsibility practices. Our blaming responses might be shaped, for example, by self-deception, guilt transference, unconscious sadism, he notes. Nonetheless, these troubling manifestations, Strawson submits, are a "factor of comparatively minor importance" (26), which should not lead us to revoke our commitment to—or see, on the whole, any less justification for—our practices of holding each other responsible.

My contention is that these observations—about the "seamy side" of our practices—in fact have greater significance than Strawson was willing to countenance. The systematic distortion of our practices by oppressive norms is not after all a factor of minor importance. Rather, it presents considerable challenges to practice-dependent approaches to theorizing about moral responsibility and requires revision both to our practices of attributing and to our theories of moral responsibility. The challenge is this: if our practices function, in systemic ways, to

[1] "The social" is broad, and it includes some things that were outside the remit of Strawson's primary concern; for example, social institutions and—as we will see—the dynamics of social power and social hierarchy. However, I use this terminology in order to follow the language of recent discussions about how post-Strawsonian theorizing has the capacity to be sensitive to social dynamics of the sort that are the focus of this paper (see, in particular, Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana 2018).

enforce oppressive norms, rather than track whatever qualities are supposed to be relevant to moral responsibility, then looking to those practices is unlikely to illuminate the conditions for moral responsibility; rather, it is likely to misrepresent them. On the Strawsonian approach, being a responsible agent just is a matter of having what it takes to be an apt participant in interpersonal relationships characterized by concern for reciprocal quality of will. There is no reason to believe that what it takes to be a participant in those relationships will be in step with what it takes to be a participant in interpersonal relationships characterized by (inter alia) instrumentalization of reactive attitudes for the enforcement of oppressive norms.[2] Nor, if oppressive, are those interpersonal relationships well placed to provide justificatory support for our responsibility practices.[3]

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I present cases of praise which are inflected by oppressive norms (section 2). These cases demonstrate how even positive reactive attitudes require careful scrutiny, since they can encode stereotype-informed expectations and misrepresent the contours of morally responsible agency. Moreover, the specific cases I focus on advance our understanding of how to diagnose the problems with oppressive praise (cf. Holroyd 2021). The challenges these cases pose for practice-dependent theories will depend on the particular kind of practice-dependent theory. So, in section 3, I draw on the work of Victoria McGeer to tease out three different ways in which we might understand the relationship between practices as we find them and our theories of moral responsibility. Our practices might

---

[2] Note that our practices should not be instrumental to oppressive ends; this does not entail that they should not have instrumental purposes for other, legitimate, goals. See section 4.

[3] For other challenges to the Strawsonian approach, see Watson (2004, 282–83), McKenna and Russell (2008, 12–14) and Fischer and Ravizza (1993,18), and the more recent authors, discussed in 2.1. However, none has framed the challenge in the terms I do here, regarding the ways that patterns of praise challenge the methodology and justification of practice-dependent approaches.

The concerns I raise here won't apply only to these practice-dependent approaches. Approaches to moral responsibility that articulate the metaphysical conditions for moral responsibility won't be vulnerable in exactly the same way, but related problems may present: the articulation of the metaphysical conditions themselves may be influenced by oppressive social practices; epistemic problems may arise if individuals' beliefs about whether those conditions are met are distorted by oppression; and, if oppressive practices prevent individuals or groups from meeting those conditions, then the matter of who is responsible may be shaped by oppression. These are substantial questions that require treatment on their own terms, and I do not have space to fully address them here.

constitute, or be *evidence about*, or partly *construct*, moral responsibility. I consider the resources that each approach has available to address the concerns I raise. The core problem facing each view is that, to adequately deal with the phenomena of oppressive reactive attitudes, some *practice-independent norms* are needed. This motivates some supplementary norms for our practice, and for our theories of moral responsibility, which I articulate in section 4. I show how these norms supplement the three approaches canvassed in section 3. Finally, I locate my preferred account in relation to recent attempts to justify our (perhaps revised) practices of holding one another morally responsible.

2. Oppressive Practices, Complicated Distortions

Mich Ciurria writes that "responsibility theorists *must* be concerned with the asymmetries of power that influence intuitions about responsibility" (2020c; see also Ciurria 2023). With a focus specifically on Strawson, one key problem, Ciurria writes, is that while attending to our social practices, "he does not address social injustice, he (mis)represents the social ontology as basically egalitarian, human beings as basically rational, laws and institutions as basically fair, and the reactive attitudes as basically objective and unbiased" (2023, 40).

A few theorists have recently examined the systematic distortions of our responsibility system. For example, Marina Oshana (2018) has examined the ways that asymmetries of power can affect who is regarded as having the status to hold another to account and for what one might be held accountable—as well as whether one is given the opportunity to account for oneself. Catriona Mackenzie (2018) has examined how the "moves" one is able to make in relationships of accountability—as well as for what one is accountable—can be affected by power dynamics. Likewise, Vanessa Carbonell (2019) has argued that power relationships can affect who is regarded as having the moral standing to hold others responsible. Katrina Hutchison (2018) has cautioned that biases might inform assessments of individuals' capacities, and hence their inclusion within relations of responsibility, especially for members of marginalized groups. Ciurria (2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021, 2023) has pointed to the ways that our practices of blame are systematically distorted, and in ways that might obscure the conditions for moral responsibility.

All these theorists are focused primarily on blame, or accountability following (presumed) wrongdoing. Like Ciurria, Carbonell, Oshana, Mackenzie, and Hutchison, I am concerned with bringing these effects of social power on practices of moral responsibility to light and with the implications of doing so for theorizing about moral responsibility. However, my focus is on how praise might be involved in such distortions.

There are important gains from this focus on praise. Ciurria's powerful analyses, across a number of papers, suggest that when we focus on these power

asymmetries, we will find distinctive patterns of unequal distributions of praise and blame. Focusing chiefly on blame, Ciurria (2020a, 167) argues that distortions skew the "responsibility system against disadvantaged [participants], who are more likely to receive blame rather than praise compared to privileged [participants]." And thus, for example, "we should expect women to receive less praise and more blame than men" (2020a, 160). Ciurria makes a convincing case that, in many instances, those in privileged positions escape blame—via "disappearance narratives," or due to flawed conceptual frameworks that make it difficult to identify and blame for wrongs. And, Ciurria argues, those in positions of disadvantage are more likely to be blamed: witness the victim-blaming of those women, cis and trans, who experience sexual assault and the excessive punitive treatment of black people, including children.[4]

We might suppose the inverse pattern characterizes praise in societies structured by oppression: those in privileged positions as recipients of praise (see Ciurria 2020a, 180–82); those in oppressed positions as less likely to be praised. Yet, as we will see, things are not so straightforward when it comes to the ways in which praising responses might be distorted. Those in positions of disadvantage may be praised more (Holroyd 2021). Occupying a marginal position or being socially oppressed does not mean one will not be praised. Rather, praise can function as a tool of oppression, and it can do so where there is no obvious concern about the comparative distribution of praise. In making this claim, I go beyond my earlier (Holroyd 2021) analysis of oppressive praise by showing that problems of oppressive praise are primarily to do not with the comparative distribution of praise but with praise's role in perpetuating stereotypes about how people are or how they ought to behave. Next, I articulate the complex ways in which praising responses misrepresent the contours of moral responsibility and the distinctive problems this poses for practice-dependent theorists. In doing so I build on existing analyses in two ways: first, I articulate a more complex relationship between oppression and the reactive attitudes than other theorists have supposed; then, in section 3, I tease out more fully the implications for contemporary post-Strawsonian practice-dependent theorists of moral responsibility.

2.1. Antifat Appraisal

The author Aubrey Gordon (2021), formerly writing under the pseudonym "Your Fat Friend," remarks on the problematic positive appraisals she receives as a fat person: "*You're not fat you're beautiful*. As if I couldn't be both." Some such appraisals have explicitly moral content, as when Gordon writes of her objection to being praised

[4] See also McKiernan (2022) for a discussion about reactive attitudes in contexts of oppression, but again with a focus on blame.

for her "bravery" in wearing what she ultimately describes as a rather "unremarkable, standard" dress:

> I was only *brave* if my body was meant to be a source of shame, something to be shut away, covered up, rarely seen and never discussed. And she [the appraiser] simply couldn't conceive of someone with a body like mine daring to get dressed, daring to be seen, daring to show up in the same places as someone with a body like hers. (Gordon 2020a)[5]

There are multiple problems with this expression of praise for being "brave." One problem is that this appraisal expresses expectations: that people—women in particular—ought to be thin (if they are to be beautiful), that fat people ought to be ashamed of their bodies, that the intensity of this shame is such as to require great—praiseworthy degrees of—courage to overcome. There are multiple harms here, in terms of the disrespect expressed in the rude and unwanted evaluation of appearance, the assumptions about body ideals and Gordon's relationship with her body, the false and harmful beauty norms communicated, and the body-shaming the appraisal involves. These problems can be identified without there being a comparative or distributive issue, concerning whether praise is systematically apportioned more, or less, to thin or fat people (cf. Holroyd 2021, Ciurria 2020a).

What I want to focus on here are the implications of such appraisals for thinking about moral responsibility. As described by Gordon, her appraiser is attributing praise for supposedly displaying a certain quality of character: courage. Yet, Gordon rejects this ascription of courage. Appraisers are wrongly attributing moral virtue and, accordingly, praiseworthy behavior here.[6] Note that, contra Ciurria's suggestion, in this instance Gordon is being accorded praise when no praise

[5] While concerned with attire, this appraisal is moralized in two ways. First, norms of appearance often take on ethical or moralized content (Widdows 2018). Gordon (2020b) elsewhere writes of the perception that fat people should relate to their bodies as "character flaws or moral failings." Second, the character trait of bravery is widely considered a moral trait (or virtue), and one which will interact with other traits in ways that influence our interpersonal relationships. See Brink (2021, 45–47) for narrower and broader understandings of Strawson's notion of "quality of will," ranging from regard or concern, to character trait, to mesh of relevant psychological attitudes.

[6] This is not to say that it is never courageous, e.g., to disregard restrictive norms of appearance, and ignore the anticipated shaming attitudes from others. Rather, it is to point to instances where the attribution of courage is problematized and rejected.

is (by Gordon's own lights) warranted.[7] This is of course consistent with acknowledging that another aspect of antifat oppression is that the personhood of fat people is overlooked and denied (Gordon 2020c) and with the claim that fat people face negative reactive attitudes due to antifat bias and marginalization. Fat people are encouraged to see their bodies as "moral failings" (Gordon 2020b).

The first key point I want to emphasize is that the way patterns of appraisal are shaped by oppressive norms appears to be complex: sometimes attributing moral traits of character or virtue when none is exercised, other times denying personhood, and other times holding people accountable and blaming for supposed moral failings. The second key point is that such appraisals multiply misrepresent the contours of moral responsibility, treating people as having done something for which they are esteemable when they have not, as having done something for which they can be held to account when they have not, and sometimes denying personhood at all. The appraisals are not tracking moral qualities or moral regard. Instead, they enforce oppressive antifatness norms.

2.2. Ableist "Inspiration Porn"

Drawing on Stella Young's work, Joseph Stramondo describes the tendency of able-bodied people to use the lives and experiences of disabled people as "inspiration porn." Young developed the term to capture her experiences of being appraised as "inspirational," saying:

> I've lost count of the number of times that I've been approached by strangers wanting to tell me that they think I'm brave or inspirational. . . . They were just kind of congratulating me for managing to get up in the morning and remember my own name. (Young 2014, 4:33)

The problem with this kind of positive appraisal, Stramondo (2020, 8) writes, is that "it gives voice to the very low expectations the world has for disabled people. By treating the completion of ordinary tasks as if they were monumental accomplishments, it shows just how incompetent people assume we are." One of the problems with praise is that it can express stereotype-informed expectations. This problem can be diagnosed without identifying any problematic comparative distribution of praise (cf. Holroyd 2021, Ciurria 2020a).

This phenomenon was widely publicized on Twitter in 2019 with the viral hashtag started by activist Imani Barbarin, #DisabledCompliments. Participants in the

[7] The praise is of course bound up with other negative moral attitudes, as Gordon (2020a) writes: the presumed courage was related to overcoming "the shame we're meant to carry for simply living in our bodies."

thread share the putative compliments that express low expectations for disabled lives. These putatively positive appraisals express low expectations for disabled people and entrench stereotypes of disabled people as "helpless, hopeless, nonfunctioning and noncontributing members of society" (Kemp 1981; quoted in Stramondo 2010, 124). Such patterns of appraisal are informed by what Eli Clare has described as the "supercrip model" of disability, writing that this way of thinking "frames disability as a challenge to overcome and disabled people as superheroes just for living our daily lives" (Clare 2001, 360).

The primary wrongs here are the disrespect conveyed by such appraisals, the low expectations they express, and the harms related to the ableist stereotypes they entrench. But I again want to focus on the implications for how the contours of moral responsibility are misrepresented. Ciurria has articulated the ways in which oppressive ableist norms can shape attributions of responsibility, writing that "according to ableist tropes, disabled people are either morally 'impaired' or culpably evil" (2023, 44). Ciurria elaborates:

> According to ableist stereotypes, disabled people are either subhuman or villainous. If the first claim is true, then we deserve condescending pity and patronizing caretaking, but if the second claim is true, then we deserve scorn, resentment, and punishment. (Ciurria 2023, 45)

While bringing to light how ableist norms threaten the Strawsonian project, Ciurria's focus on the negative reactive attitudes overlooks the distorted positive appraisals also informed by ableist norms, such as those that Young, Stramondo, and Clare each articulate. This complicates the picture of how ableist norms operate in the domain of moral appraisal. On the one hand, positive appraisals express the stereotype-informed low expectations for disabled people, according to which any achievement has to be qualified in such terms. The praise is underpinned by a view of disabled people as lacking in agential competence—consistent with Ciurria's diagnosis. But on the other hand, these low expectations inform misrepresentations of *moral* responsibility. Because of the expectation of incompetence, the performance of mundane activities is attributed to heroic and inspirational levels of moral character, and courage in particular. Since those expectations of incompetence are unwarranted and unfounded, these authors, Young and Stramondo, each reject the attributions of heroism, bravery, or inspirational degrees of courage, as Clare rejects the "supercrip" narrative.[8] We can observe the precarity of this rejection, given the tendency Ciurria

[8] Again, this observation is consistent with the thought that there will be some instances in which disabled people do display bravery in overcoming obstacles. But I take first-person testimony as (ceteris paribus) authoritative on these matters, and

notes for ableist norms to deny the agency of disabled people, sometimes construing disabled people as "subhuman." The ways in which ableist norms misrepresent the contours of moral responsibility is thus more complicated than Ciurria allows. Crucially, such appraisals—both positive and negative—are misrepresenting the contours of moral responsibility: sometimes denying personhood, other times identifying exercises of courage and qualities of character when (by the lights of the appraised person) they are not manifested, in that instance. The appraisals are not tracking moral qualities or moral regard; they are instead enforcing ableist oppressive norms.

2.3. Toxic Positivity

Consider next the positive appraisals remarked upon by those experiencing serious illnesses. For example, writing about her experiences of cancer treatment, Megan-Claire Chase writes of the difficulties of being positively appraised for the strength and bravery they are presumed to possess:

> It's impossible to be this tower of strength all the time. A lot of us get annoyed when we are told: "Oh, you're so brave," or "I don't know how you do it." When that happens, all I'm thinking is "Do I want to live or do I want to die. It's not a fair choice." (Chase 2020)

These objections to praise for "bravery" chime with Barbara Ehrenreich's critiques of the toxic positivity she encountered in her "cancer career":

> Those who are in the midst of their treatments are described as "battling" or "fighting," sometimes intensified with "bravely." (Ehrenreich 2010)

These appraisals for bravery are part of a trend which Ehrenreich (2010) critiques according to which "there is no kind of problem or obstacle for which positive thinking or a positive attitude has not been proposed as a cure." Thus, confronting one's illness with a positive attitude and bravery becomes part of the normative expectations facing cancer patients, despite there being no evidence supporting the idea that a positive attitude improves one's prognosis (American Cancer Society 2020).

One of the problems with such appraisals is that they express these pernicious normative standards—the expectation that people be positive, brave, strong in the face of grave diagnoses. Other—perfectly reasonable—negative emotional responses

---

my focus is on the cases in which the targets of the appraisals problematize and reject the praise.

are invalidated, even prohibited. When bound up with false assumptions about the causal efficacy of such positivity, such expressions entrench ableist expectations of health and wellness, which it is assumed can be achieved by mere exercises of positive attitude. The flip side, of course, is that if one is not positive and brave, then one is to blame for any failure to recover. Illness becomes constructed as the fault of the person and their failure to live up to norms of positivity. In rejecting these normative expectations, both Ehrenreich and Chase write of the various supposedly taboo negative emotions in their experiences of cancer and treatment: anger, loss, grief, frustration, despair. Once again, while my earlier (Holroyd 2021) analysis emphasizes problematic, stereotype-informed distributions of praise, in cases of toxic positivity we can articulate the problems without there also being any comparative distributive concern (whether praise is attributed more or less than to a comparison group).

What I want to draw attention to here is that in praising for such "bravery," these appraisals again misrepresent the contours of moral responsibility. Such praise elevates the moral character of the patient—in ways that, as above, Chase rejects in annoyance and Ehrenreich resists. Yet these misrepresentations are again complex, with these elevations of moral character sitting alongside denials of personhood. Ehrenreich (2010) writes of experiences whereby "*I* had been replaced by *it*, was the surgeon's implication." Chase (2021) also writes of her experiences of her pain not being taken seriously and of being outright dismissed.[9] Ehrenreich and Chase report on sometimes experiencing denial of their personhood alongside mistaken positive appraisals of their moral characters. These appraisals are not functioning to track moral character or moral regard, but to entrench oppressive ableist wellness norms.[10] In the next section, I tease out the implications of these insights for contemporary practice-dependent approaches to responsibility.

3. Three Challenges

Practice-dependent theories of moral responsibility, recall, "identify what it means for an agent to be responsible by examining the practices under which we hold agents responsible" (Hutchison, Mackenize, and Oshana 2018, 4). The challenge, in methodological terms, to the Strawsonian project is this: if our practices at least sometimes are concerned with enforcing oppressive norms, rather than responding

[9] This in the context in which evidence shows that black people's pain is not taken seriously (see, e.g., Trawalter and Hoffman 2015).

[10] My examples here all focus on courage and bravery. I think these cases best exemplify the problem, but the wider literature contains other cases that do not involve attributions of courage and that can also be understood as involving misrepresentations of the contours of moral responsibility: see, e.g., Holroyd (2021), Jeppsson and Brandeburg (2022).

to whatever are the responsibility-relevant properties, why think that attending to the practices will deliver an adequate picture of those properties? Moreover, even if attending to the practices helped us to see the conditions for moral responsibility, there remains the question of whether, once we notice their oppressive dimensions, the practices can be justified by appeal to their role in social and interpersonal relations. As Mackenzie puts it, these worries raise a skeptical challenge to the Strawsonian project:

> If our moral responsibility practices and reactive attitudes are indeed so entwined with dynamics of power and oppression, then how can these practices and attitudes provide any kind of justification for moral responsibility ascriptions? (Mackenzie 2018, 76)[11]

Mackenzie raises, but does not fully address, this skeptical worry. In what follows, I consider these challenges. This requires identifying what exactly is the connection between an examination of the practices of holding agents morally responsible and what it means for an agent to be morally responsible, for different practice-dependent theorists. Victoria McGeer (2019) helpfully teases out three ways of understanding the relationship between social practices and our theories of moral responsibility. In this section, I consider what resources they each have to address these methodological and justificatory challenges.

3.1. Conventionalist Views

One way of thinking about the connection between our practices and our theorizing about moral responsibility is to see the practices as wholly determining the conditions for moral responsibility. The practices are governed by a series of norms—which can change and shift—and those practices determine what it is to be a morally responsible agent. As McGeer puts it, on the conventionalist view,

> What it is to be a responsible agent is simply to have whatever it takes to be deemed an "appropriate" target of reactive attitudes and practices, as determined by the generally accepted norms (whatever those happen to be) that govern those attitudes and practices. (2019, 302)[12]

[11] See also Smith (2007) for concerns about what we can read off the contours of our practices of holding responsible.

[12] This reading seems to best cohere with Watson's (2014) reconstruction of Strawson. Shoemaker's (2017) view also appears to be best understood as conventionalist in this way (though see McGeer's [2019] discussion of Shoemaker's

McGeer provides the example of "fashionable" as a useful analogue. There are facts, at any particular time or in any particular context, about what is fashionable. Something or someone can have the property of being fashionable. But these facts, or possession of the property, are wholly determined by the norms of fashion and by the practices involved in it. There is no independent, objective property that fashion-related practices track. As Shoemaker (2017, 482), who defends a version of this view, puts it: "There simply is no question as to its [the 'system of responsibility responses'] correctness or incorrectness from an external stand-point." Those practices determine the properties. As with fashion, so for the conventionalist picture of moral responsibility: the practices determine—by constituting—the facts about moral responsibility.

On this practice-dependent view, the distortive practices I have set out above will determine facts about morally responsible agency, and praiseworthiness in particular. Fat people just *are* morally responsible, and laudable, for existing in public. Disabled people just *are* exercising responsibility-relevant capacities, and doing so in a praiseworthy way, for getting up in the morning. Ehrenreich and Chase just *are* exercising morally responsibility relevant capacities, demonstrating moral character, and are praiseworthy for bravery and positivity (despite protestations to the contrary). This is the case since the norms of the practice identify exercises of morally responsible—and, indeed, praiseworthy—agency, in the cases described in section 2.

It is clear why the conventionalist looks to social practices as a methodology: on the conventionalist view, there *are* no practice-independent facts or properties about moral responsibility. But as a methodology, such practices don't seem well placed to deliver anything like the Strawsonian claim that our reactive attitudes track participants' concern with one another's quality of will or responsibility-relevant traits or behaviors. Being an apt target of attitudes that function to enforce oppressive norms is unlikely to coincide with what it takes to be an apt target of reactive attitudes that track quality of will. Nor, where we find the practices enforcing oppressive norms, will this strategy provide effective justification for those practices (see Ciurria [2023] for a thorough articulation of some of the ways responsibility practices might further function to enforce oppressive racist, ableist, and misogynistic norms.)

But are there more critical responses available to the conventionalist? McGeer (2019, 303) observes a distinction between individual and collective fallibility to which

---

views at 318n10). I discuss Shoemaker's view more fully in section 4. See also Brink's (2021, 39–41) discussion of response-dependent views. Brink's characterization of response-dependent views coheres with McGeer's conventionalist. In McGeer's articulation of them, indicative and constructivist views would amount to response-independent (because realist) views, for Brink.

the conventionalist might advert.[13] Individuals can always be wrong in their application of the relevant norms. For example, if I praise someone for their cruelty, praising just how bad they have been and how terribly they have failed to live up to the relevant normative demands, I have misunderstood the norms of the practices of praising and can be criticized and corrected accordingly. Collectively, though, there is no room for fallibility—given that the practices of the collective generate the norms, the practices cannot be wrong. (Compare, sticking with McGeer's analogue: while I might get the norms of fashion wrong, the teams of fashionistas coordinating the Paris fashion week cannot—they determine what is fashionable.)

Might we think that the problematic instances I have described, in section 2, are cases of individuals getting the norms of the practice wrong? One consideration against this interpretation is that the instances of praising of the kind I've identified are not incidental; they are not cases of isolated error but rather are one amongst a pattern of similar responses (recall Young, above: "I've lost count of the number of times . . ."). The problem is not with an individual who misapplies the norms but with the *patterns* of appraisal we find—with the norms themselves, as identified and critiqued by the authors in section 2.

But still, there is scope for addressing this within the conventionalist picture: as McGeer notes, there will be "norm-guided property recalibration" (2019, 304), whereby the collective norms evolve or change (and hence will shift the relevant properties considered to ground moral responsibility, praise and blameworthiness). One mechanism by which this recalibration might occur, attention to which enables us to finesse McGeer's claims here, is by nuancing our understanding of "the collective" that generates norms. McGeer writes as though there is relative homogeneity in the norms of a practice, with an emphasis on *the* collective. But—with respect to fashion, grammar, and moral responsibility practices, inter alia—this oversimplifies. There will be subcultures within a society, characterized by different constituting norms.[14] And it is from within these subcultures that resistance to the dominant norms can be generated and that pressures toward certain kinds of norm-generated recalibration can be applied. For example, feminist and antiracist movements identify and challenge norms that distort moral responsibility and generate praise in sexist and racist ways; disability rights movements identify and challenge ableist constructions of moral responsibility and praiseworthiness. Still, a problem remains: how is the conventionalist to determine which evolutions of norms are valuable ones? That is, how might they adjudicate whether dominant or subcultural norms should be endorsed? Since there are no practice-independent

[13] See also Brink (2021, 40–42) on the impossibility of systemic error for such views.

[14] Compare Calhoun's (1989) discussion of subcultures who challenge moral understandings. See also Moody-Adams (1994) and Isaacs (1997).

properties to guide the recalibration of the conditions for moral responsibility, the conventionalist will need to appeal to supplementary norms to identify welcome and progressive evolutions of the practices.

The take-home messages for the conventionalist, then, are twofold: First, they should take care to identify subcultural practices that contribute to the evolution of the practices and shaping of the conditions of moral responsibility, rather than attending exclusively to the dominant norms of the practice. Second, they will need supplementary norms to determine which evolutions are welcome and progressive ones. I propose such norms in the final section.

3.2. Indicative Views

As McGeer characterizes it, an indicative approach to moral responsibility holds that

> what it is to be a responsible agent is to have whatever it takes to be an objectively appropriate target of reactive attitudes and practices, as indicated by the underlying nature of these attitudes and practices. (McGeer 2019, 304)

The idea here is that there is some metaphysically realist property that our practices are tracking (perhaps imperfectly).[15] Examining those practices helps us to articulate what that property is. While those practices are helpful indicators, the relevant property exists independently of our social practices and is not constituted by them. McGeer's analogue here is with the property of "red"—there is some objective property that certain surfaces have, which means that beings like us experience it as red. Features of ours (our particular visual systems) make this property interesting to us, but its existence is not dependent upon us. Likewise with properties relevant to moral responsibility, for the indicative theorists. Some objective properties exist, and they determine facts about moral responsibility, about praise and blameworthiness.[16] Those facts are particularly interesting to us, given features that we have qua human beings (say, being sensitive to norms and caring about others adherence to them, or quality of will toward ourselves and others). But the relevant properties are not dependent upon us. However, we can look to our practices in order to identify and articulate what that property is. What is the relevant property? This is of course the crucial question. Drawing on what theorists identified as indicativists have argued,

[15] See, for example, Brink and Nelkin (2013), as discussed by Watson (2014), and Brink's (2021, 39–42) articulation of the "realist" interpretation of Strawson.

[16] This view seems to be operative in the work of, e.g., Oshana (2018), Hutchison (2018), and Carbonell (2019).

McGeer (2019, 305) articulates the relevant property as "the capacity for understanding and living up to normative demands/expectations as these are expressed in our reactive attitudes and practices"; "normative self-governance" for short.

The indicative approach is not hostage (as the conventionalist arguably is) to the claim that the norms of the social practices *just are*—since they constitute—the norms of moral responsibility. However, the indicativist faces the challenge that looking to the practices, if they are distorted by oppressive norms, is methodologically dubious: they may well be *poor indicators* of the relevant underlying properties. If the practices of praising are distorted, then we will not have good indications of the relevant properties for praiseworthiness. If the practices of blaming are distorted, then we will not have good indicators of the relevant properties for blameworthiness. And if the practices regarding when morally responsibility is exercised at all are distorted, because the practices function to enforce oppressive norms, and not only (or rather than) to track interpersonal concern, then we may not even have a good indication of who is—or should be—within the domain of morally responsible agents.

Instead, attention to the practices may lead us to believe that praiseworthiness has to do with conformity to antifat ideals, or ableist conceptions of "achievement," or norms of toxic positivity. Attention to the social practices, insofar as they misrepresent when morally responsible agency has been exercised at all, may instead lead us to distorted conceptions of what the conditions of moral responsibility are. Scholars have indeed argued that theorists have been guided by the wrong properties in articulating the conditions for moral responsibility: that the "normative self-governance" conditions of the sort articulated by McGeer in fact illegitimately exclude some who should not be excluded—some children, cognitively disabled, neurodivergent, or mentally ill persons (see Ciurria 2023). Moreover, the practices may lack justification if they fail too widely in their tracking or indicating of the relevant properties.

How might the indicativist respond to this challenge? They could point to the possibility of collective fallibility: it is a consequence of the indicativist position that everyone, or almost everyone, could be systematically wrong about the relevant properties for moral responsibility, in the presence of certain distorting factors. Thus, the indicativist has available a process of "property-guided norm recalibration," as described by McGeer (2019, 306):

> Because the property we are triangulating on . . . under appropriate (normal or standard) conditions is a perfectly objective feature of the world, it stands to reason that as our understanding of that property improves, so will our understanding of what constitutes the right sort of conditions for discerning that property, as well as our understanding

> of the kind of things that possess it. This may lead to some important recalibration in the norms we embrace for determining when our responses are accurate or adequate.

Because of the need to ensure that we continue tracking the same property across the calibration process (to avoid changing the subject), such recalibrations, McGeer suggests, are likely to be conservative.

Given my argument in section 2, with respect to the systematic distortion of our norms of moral appraisal, I want to suggest that McGeer radically underestimates both the mechanisms and the consequences of such property-guided norm recalibration. Firstly, once we notice that "normal or standard" conditions of accessing the relevant properties are conditions of oppression, we might become more circumspect about the extent to which our social practices really do indicate the relevant properties (rather than serve the interests of those in positions of power and privilege). We might worry that we have not homed in on the "underlying nature" of those attitudes and practices. At best we may have an incomplete picture of the properties relevant to moral responsibility; at worst we are quite misguided in the properties to which we have attended.

Second, depending on the extent to which our practices are distorted, we might think that any recalibration of the norms might be quite radical, rather than conservative. We might determine that under nonoppressive conditions, different understandings of the properties that ground moral responsibility would be revealed; these revisions might counsel in favor of new norms for attributing praise and blameworthiness.[17] If one shares these concerns, how might the recalibration process be embarked upon? I point to the norms that might guide such a process in section 4.

3.3. Constructivist Views

McGeer offers (and endorses) a third way of understanding the relationship between our practices and the conditions for moral responsibility. This strategy, which builds on the indicative approach, is to see our practices not only as indicating but as themselves shaping—scaffolding—our agency and normative sensitivities, such that they construct us as morally responsible agents. The capacities of relevance—as

[17] McGeer rejects the indicative and conventionalist views, as they stand, finding that neither are adequate to meet intuitions about desert that Strawson held dear—the conventionalist because desert has no practice independent role; the indicativist because the dispositional version of the relevant property (to respond to reasons) is ill placed to explain why blame is deserved when the disposition does not manifest (see also McGeer and Pettit 2015). Instead, she develops the view outlined (and critiqued) in 3.3 here.

McGeer has it, the capacities for normative self-governance, or responsiveness to moral reasons—are essentially developmental. They can be enhanced or inhibited, over time, depending on the extent to which they are exercised, honed, and nurtured. As with any skill, these capacities require environmental feedback, and the significant kind of feedback for our responsibility-relevant skills concerns feedback from others. This includes the kinds of moral responses with which we are familiar: praise, blame, holding responsible, holding to account; the range of Strawsonian reactive attitudes. The key insight of this view, then, is that these responses are not just reactive in the backward-looking sense. They have a forward-looking dimension, in that they shape—and are intended to shape—the capacities and sensitivities of those to whom they are directed. We expect others to react to these moral responses; they are "evocative" of morally responsible agency, as McGeer puts it (see also McGeer and Pettit 2015; McGeer 2015). They are "proleptic" moral responses.[18]

This conception sees the properties relevant to moral responsibility as crucially shaped by the moral responses to which they are subject. These responses are apt if we are liable to be sensitive to them and have the capacity to develop our moral sensibilities in light of them. This account is striking and unusual for its emphasis on and foregrounding of the extent to which we—specifically, our responsibility-relevant capacities—are shaped by the social relationships in which we stand.

However, once we note the oppressive dimensions of our social practices, this makes visible the ways in which our moral sensibilities can be constructed in troubling ways. As a methodology, looking at the practices may reveal this. So long as we have attention trained on those oppressive dimensions—something that, until recently, has not been the case for responsibility theorists—as a methodology this may be useful. But justifying the practices remains challenging. For the constructivist, observing the ways that praise (or blame) can encode oppressive norms means recognizing that moral responses may shape our capacities for normative self-governance in accordance with those oppressive norms. Praise might be evocative in encouraging people to conform to norms of appearance that privilege thin, white, cisgender, bodies and subscribe to antifat ideals. Praise might be evocative of attitudes that invalidate negative emotional responses to illness. Praise might communicate low expectations and fail to engage with the capacities of those who do not already conform to dominant ableist norms. As various authors have argued,

[18] For other "proleptic" conceptions of moral response—in particular, blame—see Fricker (2016). The formulations of McGeer and of McGeer and Petit focus primarily on the proleptic dimensions of blame, and little is said about praise in particular. See Holroyd (2023) specifically on proleptic praise. Note that there is an instrumentalist rationale for our practices, on these approaches—that of cultivating morally responsible agency.

oppressive norms can be internalized and integrated into the self, and it can take considerable work, including in collective consciousness raising, to identify and address the ways in which they have been internalized (Bartky 1990; Mackenzie 2018; Widdows 2018).

Thus, the challenge for the constructivist is that our practices of moral response may construct sensibilities in ways that sensitize people to oppressive norms, and shape moral responses in accordance with oppressive or stereotyped expectations. Although McGeer does not attend to these oppressive dimensions, one virtue of the constructivist approach is that it directs our attention to these phenomena, since it emphasizes the role of social feedback in shaping our responsibility relevant capacities (McGeer 2019, 313). Methodologically, attending to the social practices is a useful way of elucidating these aspects of how we might be "scaffolded" in better or worse ways. However, if morally responsible agency requires having the sensitivity to respond to and develop one's capacities in light of moral responses, the constructivist must have the resources to articulate *which* moral responses it is important to be sensitive to, and which moral responses can and ought to be resisted, if those practices are to be justifiable. Again, some supplementary norms are needed.

In this section, I have argued that those who pursue post-Strawsonian strategies of articulating and justifying our moral responsibility practices by appeal to our social practices face distinctive challenges, once we observe the extent to which those social practices are shaped by oppressive norms. In the following section, I propose some supplementary norms both for our practices of moral responsibility and for theorists articulating the contours of those practices. These norms resonate with those I proposed elsewhere (Holroyd 2021). I show how they would inform the approaches outlined in section 3. And I here give a fuller articulation of what those norms are and how they are located in relation to two recent approaches, from Shoemaker (2017) and Ciurria (2020a, 2020b).

4. Ameliorative Pluralism

What sort of tools might practice-dependent theorists need in order to be able to identify and uncover oppressive aspects of our responsibility practices, rather than reproduce them? In this section I propose and defend two supplementary norms to guide the practice of attributing praise and the development of theories of moral responsibility.

4.1. Two Supplementary Norms

The first supplementary norm I propose concerns how practice-dependent theorists of moral responsibility ought to proceed—and as such, this is a norm

addressed to those engaged in such theoretical work. It is essentially a norm for nonideal theorizing.[19] As Charles Mills (2005, 2017) describes it, ideal theory abstracts away from actual injustices and so lacks the resources to understand, much less address or provide remedy for, real world injustices. Ciurria applies this approach to moral responsibility, arguing that "a nonideal theorist trains her attention on real-world hierarchies of power" (2020b, 17). A nonideal approach directs theorists to attend to how oppressive norms, structures, and institutions might be visible in our practices of holding each other responsible:

> i) *Supplementary norm for practice-dependent theorists*: practice-dependent theorists should attend to how oppressive norms, structures, and institutions may be visible in our practices of holding each other responsible, and they should provide tools for articulating and addressing these aspects of our practice.

What sort of tools might this involve? This brings us to the second supplementary norm: a supplementary norm internal to our practices of moral responsibility. The articulation of this norm draws on the work of Ciurria (2020a, 2020b), who has argued that practices of attributing blame should serve to dismantle oppression. (I contrast my approach with Ciurria's in section 4.2 below.) I propose the following supplementary norm:

> ii) *Supplementary norm for the attribution of praise*: apt praise should avoid reinforcing and, where possible, should challenge oppressive norms.[20]

How would this norm supplement the three approaches considered above? For the conventionalist, the norms for attributing responsibility are constituted by the practices, so such a supplementary, practice-independent norm would qualify any practice-derived norms. (There may also be a blame-related norm, but that is beyond

[19] See Curry (2021) for concerns with nonideal theorizing. However, I take Curry's concerns to provide reasons to keep a careful eye on the empirical data so as not to import false assumptions or overgeneralize when doing nonideal theory.

[20] This norm will inherit difficulties that arise where there is disagreement over what norms are oppressive. In such cases, there will be disagreement over whether praise is apt or not. This merits further attention but is beyond the scope of this paper. Note though that one consequence of such disagreement is that we should expect subcultural practices that diverge in their application of responsibility-relevant norms (such as this one) to persist.

the scope of this paper.) Moreover, where subcultures have different practices, this norm could be appealed to in adjudicating which evolutions of norms are progressive ones. (I articulate this approach in more detail in 4.2.)

The indicative approach sees our practices as pointing to, or triangulating upon, the (objective) properties relevant for responsibility. For these theorists, this supplementary norm could be useful in isolating the parts of the practice on which to focus (those where appraisive practices avoid reinforcing, or perhaps challenge, oppressive norms) and which parts to disregard (those where they reinforce oppression).

The constructivist, like the indicativist, is a realist about the responsibility-relevant properties but sees them as being not only indicated by but also shaped by those very practices. The supplementary norm, on this approach, would help us identify not only which parts of the practice are most likely to help us triangulate on the relevant properties but also which sorts of shaping of moral sensitivities can be endorsed, if the practices are to be justified—those in which our appraisive practices avoid reinforcing oppression and, rather, challenge it.

My contention is that such a norm enhances the appeal of any such practice-dependent approach.[21] But I will here say a little more about the constructivist approach, since I consider it the most defensible of the three. On McGeer's constructivist approach to moral responsibility this norm would supplement both desert-based norms for attributing praise (or blame) and forward-looking norms or values, concerned with cultivating moral sensitivity.[22] For example, McGeer aims to offer an analysis of the properties necessary for moral responsibility that respects a desert norm: the idea that there is "a normatively substantial sense in which their activities redound to their credit or discredit" (2019, 307).[23] This desert norm sits alongside what we can think of as an "improvement" or "agency-cultivation" norm—that apt moral responses ought to improve the moral sensitivities of the appraised

[21] Note that insofar as the supplementary norm is practice-independent, its incorporation would render any conventionalist view no longer a genuinely *response-dependent* one, in Brink's (2021, 42) terms—unless it eventually became incorporated into the psychological dispositions of praisers, such that their appraisive dispositions shifted.

[22] Crucially desert norms need not be formulated in terms of "basic desert": neither Vargas nor McGeer endorse such a notion. For another recent rejection of the idea of basic desert, see Bennett (2024).

[23] Note that McGeer (2019, 314) does not endorse the description of desert norms as "backward-looking" moral responses, since, on her view, blame is deserved when it is appropriate because the agent is capable of expanding their capacity for responding to reasons.

(and perhaps of others) and that our practices are justified insofar as they serve to do so (the instrumentalist component of these approaches). McGeer (2019, 314) frames this in terms of the "evocative" or "proleptic" functions of moral responses: that reactive attitudes "[call] for a particular response," which includes committing to doing better in the future. Moral responses are therefore in part justified by the role they play in improving our moral sensibilities.

The norm can supplement other pluralist approaches. Manuel Vargas also argues for a theory of responsibility that incorporates desert norms alongside a focus on forward-looking agency-cultivation. For example, central in our practices Vargas argues, is a desert norm: "A person deserves blame in virtue of being a responsible agent and doing something morally bad in a way that manifests bad quality of will" (Vargas 2013, 250; see also pp. 115, 241). Meanwhile, the practices are justified if such desert-based norms for attributing blame (or praise) "[foster] moral considerations-sensitive agency" (2013, 199)—that is, if the practices help us to improve our morally responsible agency.[24] As such, "blame is deserved partly in virtue of the good it can bring to agents subject to it" (2013, 265) with respect to their ability to improve their morally responsible agency.

These accounts are pluralist, incorporating multiple norms or values into the justification of our responsibility practices. The supplementary norm I have proposed adds to the plurality of norms which should structure our practices of attributing praise.[25] Importantly, the practice-independent norm would inform the application of the desert and agency-cultivation norms, identifying distortive applications of them. It may also constrain the application of these norms, directing agents to refrain from even deserved praise if doing so would entrench oppressive norms. Thus, praise that entrenches antifat biases, or ableist norms—or other oppressive norms (e.g., cisnormative, heteronormative, racist, classist)—will be inapt. Praise should instead, where possible, challenge those oppressive norms, though this will not always be easy to do. This norm is addressed to participants within the practice, who ought to take into consideration the role of their praise in reinforcing or dismantling systems of oppression. But it is also addressed to theorists who, at a distance, might evaluate attributions of praise or make recommendations for when praise ought to be

[24] McGeer worries that on Vargas's view, instances of attributing blame may be vulnerable to a "justificatory gap," where the desert norm and the forward-looking norm might come apart (McGeer 2015). See Holroyd (2018) for a comparative analysis of Vargas and McGeer's approaches.

[25] My focus here is on praise. I think such a norm will likely extend to other reactive attitudes, but I do not have space to argue for that here and so leave it an open question whether the case can be made, on similar terms, for other reactive attitudes.

attributed. Evaluations of, or recommendations for, attributions of praise should take into account its role in resisting oppressive norms.

This approach is pluralist. This second norm should sit alongside the other norms that structure our practices—desert-based and agency-cultivating norms. Apt praise will sometimes require careful consideration of how these norms interact, since their prescriptions won't always align, and careful judgement is needed concerning how to proceed. It may be impossible to satisfy all norms at once, in which case, some instances of praise might be apt in some ways and inapt in others. This approach is also ameliorative: the norm is not intended as articulation, or description, of norms that *in fact* structure our practices as they presently are. They are norms that *ought to* structure our practices of holding responsible, if those practices are to be justified (see Holroyd [2018] and Ciurria [2021] for a defense of ameliorative approaches to moral responsibility). Accordingly, this approach is revisionist. But because it supplements rather than supplants desert-based or agency-cultivation norms, it is less radically revisionist than alternative approaches.

To better clarify and defend the role I envisage for these norms, I contrast my ameliorative pluralism with two recently proposed approaches to moral responsibility.

4.2. Two Approaches

For Shoemaker (2017), who aims to stay true to the Strawsonian project, being responsible is a function of being held responsible, which is a function of how people are disposed to respond to you (with reactive attitudes of anger, resentment, etc.). (This approach is most closely aligned with the conventionalist view, considered in section 3.) But of course, we can't settle for just any dispositions to respond, since people's dispositions to respond with, for example, anger might be wrong (Shoemaker 2017, 497). Indeed, drawing on concerns from John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1993, 18), Shoemaker considers systematic distortions that might track social identity, such as "a community whose members all resented the profoundly intellectually disabled or refused to resent women and minorities" (2017, 497). What matters rather is that the response is merited or fitting. *Fitting* responses determine facts about moral responsibility (2017, 508). But what guides our evaluation of whether a response is fitting? This will be a matter of sensibility, and we will have reason to trust those whose sensibilities are well honed (2017, 511). But Shoemaker does not give us more precisely specified tools for ascertaining whether some sensibilities are more refined than others or which responses are more fitting than others. My first supplementary norm directs us toward some such theoretical tools, encouraging us to consider specifically how oppressive norms might shape participants' senses of what responses are fitting. It directs us to draw on the critical resources that theorists have provided in articulating how oppressive norms are

visible in our practices. Appraisive responses that entrench oppression are likely to result from distorted sensibilities that may erroneously judge such attributions as "fitting." As such, Shoemaker could appeal to the epistemologies of domination (see Tremain 2017) that produce oppressively distorted sensibilities. But note that the norms I propose are practice-independent: prescribed as norms for how the practices *ought to be*, irrespective of whether they are, and of whether current participants view responses prescribed by the norm as fitting. As such, incorporating such norms is a departure from the conventionalist approach: practice-independent norms must have a role in setting which reactive attitudes are fitting. Such norms can be used to identify which evolutions of the practice are progressive or regressive.

A second approach with which my view is helpfully contrasted is that from Ciurria. Ciurria endorses a norm that resonates with my second supplementary norm: that blame should promote the norms of an intersectional feminism (202a, 18). Apt blame thus tracks contributions to oppression systems (2020a, 15, see also Ciurria 2021).

However, Ciurria's proposal is radically revisionary: this norm supplants desert norms such as those advanced by Vargas or McGeer, described above. On the picture Ciurria proposes, moral responsibility is not agency-tracking. Deserved blame "doesn't track features of the perpetrator's agency—it tracks a perpetrator's *action(s)*, and their role(s) in systems of power and domination' (2020a, 82). Ciurria embraces and endorses the radically revisionary implications of this, writing:

> I grant that most people will take IF [intersectional feminist] reasons to be the "wrong reasons" to blame people, and will thus experience IF reasons as morally alienating. But I deny that this is a problem because, unlike Vargas, I *want* to alienate ordinary folks from their ordinary moral intuitions. Since we live in an asymmetrically structured society, many of our acculturated moral intuitions will be deformed, and adopting an IF framework will alienate us from those reasons. Good! (2020a, 85)

While it will be clear that I am sympathetic to the norm that Ciurria proposes, it seems to me a mistake to see this norm as exhausting the domain of moral responsibility practices, rather than as supplementary to desert or agency-cultivating norms. My concern is not that it is the "wrong reason"—since I am happy to endorse such a reason—but rather that it cannot be the *only* reason that structures our practices of moral responsibility. This is because it becomes hard to see why a practice structured by Ciurria's norms is a practice of moral responsibility at all. Maybe it is a practice we

need, but insofar as it is not concerned with tracking agency, it isn't clear it is a practice of attributing moral responsibility.[26]

Ciurria might respond by saying simply "so much the worse for practices of 'moral responsibility'—whatever we call it, a practice structured by this norm is the practice that we need." But it is unclear that Ciurria themselves really can cogently reject any such agency-tracking norm. After all, once we focus on causal contributions to oppression, rather than exercises of morally responsible agency that contribute to oppression, why focus, as Ciurria (2020b) does, on the responsibility of men who impregnate women, rather than the sperm that is also, and indeed more proximally, causally implicated? If what matters is tracking contributions to oppression, we might blame the chimneys that pour out pollutants into neighborhoods rather than the governmental policy makers and CEOs who decide that such emissions are acceptable. Rather, our concern is, and should be, with *agential* contributions to oppression.[27]

An ameliorative pluralism endorses the idea that our practices ought to be attuned to challenging oppression. The supplementary norms I propose, for both our theorizing about moral responsibility and deployment within practices of holding responsible, are needed. They would require revisions to our practice—and perhaps quite considerable revisions at that. But this approach maintains the conviction that challenging the ways our responsibility system is implicated in oppression is done by articulating the ways that oppressive norms distort our ability, as participants in the practice, to track desert or to cultivate agency.[28]

---

[26] This issue has been taken up by other commentators—e.g., here is John Doris (2022): "Then the natural question to ask is, does Ciurria develop a theory of moral *responsibility*, or [are they] doing something else entirely?" And here is Vargas (2022): "Is the proposal at hand a change in topic, rather than a proposal about responsibility? . . . It is unclear to me whether the proposal for revision leaves enough of blame intact to be a theory of blame."

[27] It is my view that omissions, or actions done without awareness—the sorts of cases that motivate Ciurria's concerns with tracking agency—constitute exercises of agency for which one can be held responsible (for further discussion, see Holroyd 2015).

[28] See also Argetsinger and Vargas (2022) for methodological concerns that fix on the relationship between theory and practices that might be distorted by biases and heuristics. Their focus is on pervasive psychological biases, such as framing effects—rather than on the distortions due to oppressive norms and stereotypes. The view I offer here is most closely aligned with the view they call "ascriptivism": a view that takes the practices as the explanatory target of a theory of responsibility and has to justify departures from the practices as we find them. In this case, the departures I identify are justified by the norm for dismantling oppression.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for feedback from audiences in Leeds and at the Society for Applied Philosophy annual conference (2022). I am also grateful for the very helpful comments from Jessica Isserow, from Mich Ciurria, and from the anonymous reviewers for this journal.

References

American Cancer Society. 2020. "Effect of Attitudes and Feelings on Cancer." Last revised March 28, 2023. https://www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/attitudes-and-feelings-about-cancer.html.

Argetsinger, Henry, and Manuel Vargas. 2022. "What's the Relationship between the Theory and Practice of Moral Responsibility." *HUMANA.MENTE Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15 (42): 29–62.

Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.

Bennett, Christopher. 2024. "Desert and Dissociation." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 10, no. 1 (March): 116–34. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.42.

Brink, David O. 2021. *Fair Opportunity and Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brink, David O., and Dana K. Nelkin. 2013. "Fairness and the Architecture of Responsibility." In *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, Vol. 1, edited by David Shoemaker, 284–313. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Calhoun, Cheshire. 1989. "Responsibility and Reproach." *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (January): 389–406. https://doi.org/10.1086/293071.

Carbonell, Vanessa. 2019. "Social Constraints on Moral Address." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98, no. 1 (January): 167–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12450.

Chase, Megan-Claire. 2020. "Toxic Positivity and Grief: The Reality of Living through Cancer." Pharmaphorum, October 22, 2020. https://pharmaphorum.com/views-analysis-patients/toxic-positivity-and-grief-the-reality-of-living-through-cancer/.

———. 2021. "Part I: Why Isn't Chemo Induced Peripheral Neuropathy Taken More Seriously?" *Warrior Megsie* (blog), December 18, 2021. https://warriormegsie.com/2021/12/18/part-i-why-isnt-chemo-induced-peripheral-neuropathy-taken-more-seriously/.

Ciurria, Michelle. 2020a. *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2020b. “The Mysterious Case of the Missing Perpetrators: How the Privileged Escape Blame and Accountability.” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 (2): article 1. https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2020.2.7322.

———. 2020c. “Politicizing Moral Responsibility.” *Pea Soup* (blog) post, January 29, 2020. https://peasoupblog.com/2020/01/calendar-saving-political-phil-post/.

———. 2021. “A New Ameliorative Approach to Moral Responsibility.” *Verifiche: Rivista Trimestrale di Scienze Umane* 50 (2): 159–82.

Ciurria, Mich. 2023. “Responsibility's Double Binds: The Reactive Attitudes in Conditions of Oppression.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (February): 35–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12604.

Clare, Eli. 2001. “Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness.” *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (Fall): 359–66. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-13-3-359.

Curry, Tommy J. 2021. “Must There Be an Empirical Basis for the Theorization of Racialized Subjects in Race-Gender Theory?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 121, no. 1 (April): 21–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoaa021.

Doris, John. 2022. “Responsibility as Politics.” Commentary in online symposium on Michelle Ciurria’s *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Syndicate network. https://syndicate.network/symposia/philosophy/an-intersectional-feminist-theory-of-moral-responsibility/.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2010. “Smile! You’ve Got Cancer.” *Guardian*, January 2, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jan/02/cancer-positive-thinking-barbara-ehrenreich.

Fischer, John Martin, and Mark Ravizza, eds. 1993. *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Fricker, Miranda. 2016. “What’s the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation.” *Noûs* 50, no. 1 (March): 165–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12067.

Gordon, Aubrey. 2020a. “Please Don’t Call Fat People ‘Brave’ Just for Existing.” *Self*, October 12, 2020. https://www.self.com/story/fatness-bravery-bias.

———. 2020b. “Weight Loss Surgery and the Unbearable Thinness of Being.” *Medium*, May 5, 2020. https://humanparts.medium.com/weight-loss-surgery-and-the-unbearable-thinness-of-being-23fabdf978f5.

———. 2020c. *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*. Boston: Beacon Press

———. 2021. “It’s Time to Retire ‘You’re Not Fat, You’re Beautiful!’” *Self*, January 19, 2021. https://www.self.com/story/not-fat-beautiful.

Holroyd, Jules. 2015. “Implicit Bias, Awareness and Imperfect Cognitions.” *Consciousness and Cognition,* vol. 33 (May): 511–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2014.08.024.

———. 2018. “Two Ways of Socialising Responsibility: Circumstantialism vs. Scaffolded-Responsiveness.” In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, 137–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2021. “Oppressive Praise.” *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (4): article 3. https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2021.4.13967.

———. 2023. “Proleptic Praise: A Social Function Analysis.” *Noûs*. Published ahead of print, November 20, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12482.

Hutchison, Katrina. 2018. “Moral Responsibility, Respect, and Social Identity.” *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, 206–30. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hutchison, Katrina, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana. 2018. “Introduction: Moral Responsibility in Contexts of Structural Injustice.” In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana, 1–37. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Isaacs, Tracy. 1997. “Cultural Context and Moral Responsibility.” *Ethics* 107, no. 4 (July): 670–84. https://doi.org/10.1086/233765.

Jeppsson, Sofia, and Daphne Brandenburg. 2022. “Patronizing Praise.” *Journal of Ethics* 26, no. 4 (December): 663–82. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-022-09409-2.

Kemp, Evan, Jr. 1981. “Aiding the Disabled: No Pity, Please.” *New York Times*, September 3, 1981. https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/03/opinion/aiding-the-disabled-no-pity-please.html.

Mackenzie, Catriona. 2018. “Moral Responsibility and the Social Dynamics of Power and Oppression.” In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, 59–80. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGeer, Victoria. 2015. “Building a Better Theory of Responsibility.” *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 10 (October): 2635–49. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0478-1.

———. 2019. “Scaffolding Agency: A Proleptic Account of the Reactive Attitudes.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (June), 301–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12408.

McGeer, Victoria, and Philip Pettit. 2015. “The Hard Problem of Responsibility.” In *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, vol. 3, edited by David Shoemaker, 160–88.

McKenna, Michael, and Paul Russell. 2008. “Introduction: Perspectives on P. F. Strawson’s Freedom and Resentment.” In *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P. F. Strawson’s Freedom and Resentment*, edited by McKenna and Russell, 1–18. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

McKiernan, Amy. 2022. “Blaming from Inside the Birdcage: Strawsonian Accounts of Blame and Feminist Care Ethics.” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 8 (1): article 3. https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2022.1.14303.

Mills, Charles W. 2005. “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology.” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (Summer): 165–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00493.x.

———. 2017. *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Moody-Adams, Michele M. 1994. “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance.” Ethics 104, no. 2 (January): 291–309. https://doi.org/10.1086/293601.

Oshana, Marina. 2018. “Ascriptions of Responsibility Given Commonplace Relations of Power.” In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, 81–109. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shoemaker, David. 2017. “Response-Dependent Responsibility; or, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Blame.” *Philosophical Review*, 126, no. 4 (October): 481–527. https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-4173422.

Shoemaker, David, and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds. 2014. *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility.* Vol. 2, *“Freedom and Resentment” at 50*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Angela M. 2007. “On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible.” *Journal of Ethics* 11, no. 4 (December): 465–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-005-7989-5.

Stramondo, Joseph A. 2010. “How an Ideology of Pity Is a Social Harm to People with Disabilities.” *Social Philosophy Today* 26: 121–34. https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday20102610.

———. 2020. “Gender, Disability, and the Violent Undercurrents of Parenting Inspiration Porn.” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (Spring): 8–9.

Strawson, P. F. (1974) 2008. “Freedom and Resentment.” In *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, 1–28. London: Methuen and Co. Reprint: New York: Routledge. Page references are to the Routledge edition. Essay originally published in 1962. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203882566.

Trawalter, Sophie, and Kelly M. Hoffman. 2015. “Got Pain? Racial Bias in Perceptions of Pain.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9, no. 3 (March): 146–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12161.

Tremain, Shelley L. 2017. *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Vargas, Manuel. 2013. *Building Better Beings: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2022. "Feminist and Ameliorative Responsibility." Commentary in online symposium on Michelle Ciurria's *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Syndicate network. https://syndicate.network/symposia/philosophy/an-intersectional-feminist-theory-of-moral-responsibility/.

Watson, Gary. 2004. "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme." In *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*, 219–65. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

———. 2014. "Peter Strawson on Responsibility and Sociality." In "*Freedom and Resentment" at 50,* edited by David Shoemaker and Neal A. Tognazzini, 15–32. Vol. 2 of *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Widdows, Heather. 2018. *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77j2q.

Young, Stella. 2014. "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much." Filmed April 2014 in Sydney, Australia. TED Talk video, 9:26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw&t=2s.

JULES HOLROYD (they/them) is a senior lecturer at the University of Sheffield, and has recently been working on a book on the oppressive dimensions of praise. Previously, Jules has published work on topics such as implicit bias, collective vice, intersectionality, and gender-inclusive language.