Abstract
Praise, unlike blame, is generally considered well intended and beneficial, and therefore in less need of scrutiny. In line with recent developments, we argue that praise merits more thorough philosophical analysis. We show that, just like blame, praise can be problematic by expressing a failure to respect a person’s equal value or worth as a person. Such patronizing praise, however, is often more insidious, because praise tends to be regarded as well intended and beneficial, which renders it harder to recognize and object to. Among other things, a philosophical analysis of patronizing praise helps people on the receiving end articulate why they feel uncomfortable or offended by it, shows patronizing praisers how their praise is problematic, and provides input for further philosophical analysis of blame.

In the first section of the paper, we discuss how hypocritical praise, just like hypocritical blame, can fail to respect the equality of persons by expressing that the praiser applies more demanding moral standards to the praisee than to themself. We further discuss obstructionist praise, which loosely corresponds to complicit blame, and can similarly express that certain moral standards apply to others but not to the praiser. In the second part of the paper, we discuss another variety of patronizing praise. Praise can be an inaccurate appraisal of a person based on irrelevant considerations – like race, gender, or class – and thereby constitute a failure to recognize their equal worth as a person. We identify three ways in which such praise can manifest.

Keywords Praise · Blame · Equality of persons · Respect · Oppression · Hypocrisy
1 Patronizing Praise

The literature on the ethics of praise is scarce, unlike its abundant blame counterpart. It has long been assumed by philosophers that whereas it is important not to wrongly blame since blame is unpleasant to receive, praise is pleasant and therefore unproblematic (Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Vilhauer 2015; Telech forthcoming). We concur with Stout (2020) and Holroyd (2021) that praise warrants more careful philosophical analysis. Stout writes that since there are several asymmetries between praise and blame, we cannot understand praise by simply transferring our preferred theory of blame to its opposite. For starters, wrongdoing is at least a prima facie ground for blameworthiness, but the converse does not hold. A person may be prima facie blameworthy for stealing, but typically not praiseworthy for walking through a store without shoplifting. Unless they, for example, have struggled hard to overcome their kleptomania – doing right despite great difficulties can ground praiseworthiness, but mere right-doing generally does not.

Another asymmetry mentioned by Stout is the lack of a non-hypocrisy condition for proper praise. If Robert constantly cheats on his wife, only to blame his sister Sally for cheating on her husband, the standard view says that Robert lacks standing to blame Sally, since doing so would be hypocritical. However, if Alice gives to charity herself, this does not undermine her standing to praise Joe for doing the same. Stout goes on to argue that the closest analogy we can find in the praise case might be that praise seems less valuable if it comes from someone with bad moral character (ibid.: 219). Suppose that Alice detests Robert for his sexism and generally disrespectful treatment of women. If Robert tells her that she is a boring do-gooder and should relax a bit more, otherwise no man will want to date her, she might easily shrug off his criticism; it is not worth taking seriously, coming from someone like him. If he says, on the contrary, that he thinks it is great that she does charity work, she might likewise not take his praise seriously, thinking that Robert cannot recognize moral goodness even if it stares him in the face; he might praise her for charity work that is genuinely morally good, but she might think it more likely than not that he does so for at least somewhat mistaken reasons (e.g., thinking she lives up to his sexist and stereotypical images of what a “good woman” is supposed to be like).

We will not dispute Stout’s examples of the asymmetries between praise and blame. However, we believe that there are other interesting similarities to be found, if we look at R. Jay Wallace’s and Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller’s explanations of why hypocritical blame – or at least one important species of it – is wrong. Someone might lack standing to blame a person because they apply different standards to themselves and the blamee, thereby failing to respect the equality of persons. We argue that praise can be problematic for similar reasons. Thus, we will not attempt to cover all ways in which praise can be morally problematic, but focus on praise that fails to recognize a person’s equal value or worth. We refer to such praise as patronizing praise: it suggests that one person is superior by putting someone else down, whilst remaining outwardly friendly and (seemingly) well-intended.

In the first half of the paper, we discuss two ways in which praising, similar to blaming, can be hypocritical in ways that express a failure to respect equality. In the second half of the paper, we conceptualize another variety of praise that fails to rec-
t the equal worth or value of persons, which does not (yet) have a counterpart in the blame literature. Praise appraisals can fail to respect the equality of persons by inaccurately appraising someone on the basis of irrelevant considerations like for example their gender, race, or, for that matter, something as inconsequential as listening to the “wrong” bands. We discuss three ways in which such praise may manifest. Belittling praise, which underestimates the praisee on the basis of irrelevant considerations. Self-aggrandizing praise, which places the praiser above the praisee on the basis of irrelevant considerations. And last but not least, self-belittling praise, which places the praisee below the praiser on the basis of irrelevant considerations.

This theory of patronizing praise can help people who are made to feel uncomfortable and disrespected by another’s praise see that their feelings may be justified, and articulate why that is. Our account also offers an opportunity for disrespectful praisers to recognize their praise for what it is, and to (begin to) adjust their behavior accordingly. Patronizing praise often flows from the more powerful and privileged to the less so, meaning that exploring this topic also contributes to the literature on discrimination and oppression (see also Holroyd 2021). Furthermore, even though conditions for praise and blame aren’t strictly symmetrical, an analysis of patronizing praise can shed further light on the ways in which blame might be inappropriate.

Note that we will not provide strict necessary and sufficient conditions for patronizing praise in this paper. Fairly similar instances of praise might be fine or problematic depending on the details of the case. We will, instead, describe different types of patronizing praise by means of realistic and paradigmatic examples, and describe the particular way in which each of these types of praise can fail to respect the equality of persons.

2 Hypocritical Blame and Praise

It is widely accepted that a person sometimes lacks the standing to blame a wrongdoer, even though the latter really is blameworthy. In the literature on standing to blame, non-hypocrisy is often held up as one of the main conditions, or even the main condition (e.g., Todd 2019). The thesis that hypocrisy undermines one’s standing to blame is not uncontroversial (see Dover 2019 and Bell 2013 for critique), but we will assume that the standard view is right; hypocrisy really does undermine one’s standing to blame. We will further assume, without a detailed defense of their views, that Wallace (2010) and Fritz and Miller (2018) are right that hypocrisy mainly undermines standing to blame because it expresses a failure to respect the equality of persons, by applying a more demanding moral standard to others than to oneself.

Let us return to cheating Robert from Sect. 1: Robert and Annie have agreed to be in a monogamous marriage with each other, and Robert’s sister Sally has the same agreement with her husband Rick. Robert still cheats on Annie, without feeling remorse or blaming himself – but when he learns that Sally likewise cheated on Rick, he blames her. This seems inappropriate, because Robert lacks standing to blame his sister in this situation. But why is that, precisely?

We call people like Robert “hypocrites”, but this is more of a label than an explanation. If Sally really is blameworthy for cheating on Rick, it is not obvious how to
explain why Robert does wrong in blaming her. Of course, Robert did wrong when cheating on Annie, but why would blaming Sally constitute an additional wrong on his part (Dover 2019; Bell 2013)?

Wallace (2010) and Fritz and Miller (2018) argue that when Robert blames Sally for something he is not disposed to blame himself for, he fails to respect her as his equal. By using a permissive moral standard for himself and a strict one for Sally, by demanding that she makes sacrifices for her marriage that he has no intention of making himself, he suggests that he is more important than her, and that his self-interest carries more weight than hers does. Perhaps he tries to justify these different standards by saying something like “men have stronger sexual urges than women; it’s unreasonable to demand of a man that he never ever cheats, but for a woman to cheat on her husband, she must have no regard for him at all”. However, we might (for good reasons) suspect that this is a mere rationalization, not an empirically based belief that he arrived at for independent reasons (see Arpaly 2002: 9–14 for a fuller discussion). In any case, regardless of the inner workings of Robert’s psychology, his hypocritical blame expresses disrespect towards Sally.

If Robert has taken responsibility for his former cheating ways and has come to regret them, he might have standing to blame Sally for cheating on her husband — perhaps he is even in a particularly good position to do so, since he knows what might tempt someone to cheat, how difficult it was to admit it to his wife and repair the damage he caused to their relationship, and so on. But in this version, he applies the same moral standards to himself as to Sally, so there is no disrespect (Fritz and Miller 2018: 121). We might quibble over the details — how much remorse and responsibility-taking for your own wrongdoing is required before you have the standing to blame others who do the same thing? — and different people likely have different intuitions about grey-area cases. Nevertheless, you can respect others as your equal when blaming someone for something you have done yourself, as long as you apply the same standards to the both of you, whereas demanding that others adhere to certain norms while you make all kinds of allowances for yourself expresses a failure to respect the equality of persons.

Wallace further elaborates that this is because the hypocrite’s (or at least the kind of hypocrite under discussion here) behaviour suggests that they assign their own self-interest more weight than the self-interest of other people. Robert the remorseless cheater sees some value in fidelity, but his self-interest in satisfying his sexual appetite while away on a conference (let us say) is given more weight. Sally’s self-interest, on the other hand, supposedly cannot provide her with any substantial reason to cheat on her husband. If Robert’s self-interest can ground weighty reasons and Sally’s only weak ones, this suggests that Robert is more important than Sally. Once again, we do not want to dig too deeply into Robert’s psychology in order to establish this. We normally do not think that we need to know everything that goes on inside a person’s mind to rightfully label them a hypocrite (cf. Manne 2017 on how to define “misogyny” in a way that does not rely on inaccessible psychological facts). His blaming of Sally is hypocritical and wrong because of what it expresses.¹

¹ Todd (2019) considers it a weakness of Wallace’s and Fritz and Miller’s accounts that they have trouble explaining what is wrong with private hypocritical blame, never expressed. In this paper, we will focus on
Fritz and Miller (2018) use the term *differential blaming disposition* in their discussion of hypocrisy; the hypocrite is disposed to blame others, but not himself. They further argue that it is not just wrong to cut yourself a lot of slack while holding others to strict demands, it is also wrong to differentiate between other people, and angrily blame person A for doing something wrong while letting that same action slide when person B does it. Fritz and Miller use the example of a parent who blames one child for minor wrongs, but does not blame their favorite child for doing the same thing, or a woman who blames most of her friends for behaviour that she suddenly sees nothing wrong with when it is done by the girl she has a crush on. These people lack standing to blame because they fail to respect the equality of persons when blaming, lifting up a favorite child or a crush as exceptions to whom the regular moral norms do not apply equally. (In passing, they also mention that a differential praising disposition can be morally problematic for similar reasons, (Fritz and Miller 2018: 123). See also Telech forthcoming for unfair, differential praise.) Todd (2019), on the other hand, believes that differential blaming dispositions of this kind are common, and that Fritz and Miller’s account therefore places unreasonably high demands on what it takes to have standing to blame.

We believe that both sides have a point; perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle, and one’s standing to blame might be undermined if the difference between the standards one applies to A and to B becomes sufficiently large or is applied on a sufficiently large number of occasions (See Holroyd 2021; Rini 2018; and Ciurria 2020 for examples). However, for the sake of this paper, we will remain neutral on this issue. We will focus on the more commonly discussed and less controversial cases when someone lacks standing to blame because they apply different standards to themself and others. In this paper, we ask whether forms of praise can be problematic for this same reason. Can a person praise in ways that fail to respect the equality of persons by suggesting that others are subject to norms or should be held to standards that do not apply to the praiser, when in fact they should? We answer in the affirmative.

Praise can be hypocritical in at least two ways. First, one person might praise another for adhering to norms that the praiser does not care about following. This is the praise counterpart to standard hypocritical blame, in which one person blames another for violating norms that the blamer themself does not follow. Second, praise can be hypocritical when it comes from someone who obstructs – or would obstruct if given the chance – the possibility of doing the praised-for action(s). This second variation corresponds, albeit somewhat more loosely, to cases of blaming where the blamer was complicit in the wrongdoing. Many scholars list non-complicity as a separate condition for standing to blame, whereas Todd (2019) sees complicity as problematic only when it is a version of hypocrisy (i.e., the complicit person has not, later on, changed their ways and committed themself to the relevant norms). We expressed praise, under the assumption that Wallace and Fritz and Miller have pointed out one important reason why hypocritical blame is wrong, which can be employed to analyze problematic praise too. However, we leave it open that there might be additional reasons for the wrongness, and that such reasons might be needed to explain the wrongness of private hypocritical blame, and perhaps point out moral problems with some kinds of private praise too.
believe that Todd is right about hypocritical and complicit blame, but will treat the corresponding kinds of hypocritical praise separately.

3 Two Kinds of Hypocritical Praise

In the following discussion, we will use rather loose and therefore hopefully not too controversial notions of praise and praiseworthiness. Most instances of complying with the relevant norms are not considered praiseworthy, but become so if compliance was difficult, costly, risky, or if the stakes were unusually high. Stout (2020: 216–217) mentions that it is praiseworthy to save a small child from drowning in a shallow pool, even if doing so was both easy and safe for the rescuer, due to the enormous stakes. We do not normally praise people for not shop-lifting, but a struggling kleptomaniac might be praiseworthy for abstaining, and similarly for a teenager in a gang exerting serious peer pressure on her to steal something along with everyone else. In these cases, abstention from theft becomes praiseworthy due to the effort involved, or the social cost of being mocked and derided by one’s (former) friends. Supererogatory acts, going above and beyond the demands of duty, are also standardly considered praiseworthy.

Philosophers have analyzed praise in terms of emotions, attitudes, judgments, or actions; there are combination views and pluralist views as well (see Telech forthcoming for an overview). We will remain neutral with regards to these theories, but focus on instances of communicated praise. This can take a number of forms, from a stated judgment of praiseworthiness to body language and facial expressions that display enthusiasm and admiration (Vargas 2013: 5; Telech forthcoming). Our discussions center on spoken or written praise, but some problems we discuss might come up with clearly expressed but non-verbal praise too.

3.1 Standard Hypocritical Praise

Lippert-Rasmussen (2021) argues that self-praise can be hypocritical, when someone praises themself for actions that they do not deem praiseworthy in other people. He writes, though, that it would seem paradoxical to praise someone else for living up to a norm one does not care to follow oneself. The implicit assumption here is that the norms apply to both praiser and praisee in the first place. If the praiser is childless, parental moral norms do not apply to them, so when they praise other people for being good parents, there is nothing hypocritical or otherwise strange about it. There might be other legitimate reasons for praising someone for living up to norms that the praiser makes no attempt to live up to as well.

We do not take issue with Lippert-Rasmussen’s analysis of hypocritical self-praise. However, we will argue that people who hypocritically praise others is a real-world issue.
phenomenon, and that in doing so, these praisers frequently suggest that others are less important than them.

Suppose that Olga the omnivore praises Victor the vegetarian for his dietary choices. Actually, let us not stop there: Olga is a frequent flyer, drives a big gas-guzzling car, and throws all her garbage in the same trash can, but she praises Victor for not owning a car, traveling longer distances by train, and conscientiously recycling. Victor does all this to meet certain moral requirements; he (reasonably) believes that we are morally required to oppose, or at the very least not actively support, the animal suffering of the meat industry, and to do whatever we can to boycott large greenhouse gas emitters and overall ease the stress on the environment that our modern, western lifestyle causes. Whereas Robert the philanderer was hypocritical when blaming Sally for something that he did himself, Olga the omnivore hypocritically praises Victor for something she does not do herself – but under this surface asymmetry, there is a deeper similarity.

Before going into that, however, the case needs some more description. One way that Victor might find Olga’s praise problematic, perhaps downright offensive, is if she makes clear that she sees all his actions as supererogatory, and her own lifestyle as perfectly permissible for people in general.\(^3\) He might be upset that she fails to see how serious animal suffering, the climate crisis, and other environmental problems are, and what our duties are to mitigate them as best we can. However, although insisting that something which is obligatory is supererogatory, and by implication that something which is morally wrong is actually permissible, is problematic, it is a different problem than hypocrisy, and we will therefore set it aside.\(^4\)

We might also think of a version where Olga feels bad about her destructive lifestyle; while praising Victor for doing what she does not, she welcomes any suggestions on how to make lasting lifestyle changes and stick to them. In this version, Olga is no hypocrite, and does nothing wrong in praising Victor. But the scenario we will focus on is one in which Olga praises Victor, and does express the view that it is important that many people do what Victor does, but makes an exception of herself. This might be implicit, but it might also come out explicitly. Olga might say:

It’s great that you’re a vegetarian, go by train, recycle and all that. The planet is in a crisis, I know, everyone must do all they can. And I love animals, it’s terrible how they’re treated! I really admire you for everything you do, Victor. I can’t do it myself, of course, because I love meat, and I’m just not fond of vegetarian food. Also, I’m a busy woman, going by train just takes too long, and it’s uncomfortable to sit down for many hours. You can’t go everywhere by train either, and I need my regular vacation trips to sunnier latitudes. I really can’t find the time or motivation to recycle, I’m always so busy. Going by car is more convenient than going by public transport, there’s no getting around that,

\(^3\) For an example of appropriate supererogatory praise, imagine if Olga were a medical doctor working at a regular hospital in her home country, whereas her colleague Victor risks his life working in a dangerous war zone with the Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders. In this situation, it is not a problem if Olga praises Victor for doing what she has no intention of doing herself.

\(^4\) We will also leave aside the philosophical debate about whether it is possible to genuinely praise someone else for living up to their moral principles, despite the praiser believing these principles to be wrong.
and managing a healthy work-life balance is hard enough as it is. But it’s great that you do what you do! We really need more people like you.

Just like Robert the hypocritical blamer, Olga implicitly assigns a lot of weight to her self-interest; so much weight that it supposedly overrides any reason she has to do anything for animals and the environment. At the same time, she expresses that Victor’s self-interest is far less important. Let us assume that Victor also has a job (or, alternatively, struggles to find one) – he is not some independently wealthy heir with all the time in the world on his hands. Olga must know that being busy, finding short plane rides more comfortable than long train rides, preferring meat to vegetarian meals, having difficulty finding a healthy work-life balance, and so on, apply to many, many people besides her, and that at least some of this likely applies to Victor too. She might not think to herself “I am more important than Victor”, just like Robert the hypocritical cheater might not think to himself “I am more important than my sister Sally”. She might believe her own rationalizations, and think to herself that she is simply nice and encouraging towards Victor. Nevertheless, her praise expresses a failure to respect Victor as her equal.

We believe that it is important to analyze this kind of hypocritical praise, in part because it is important for people on the receiving end to be able to explain where their discomfort stems from. People might unquestioningly assume that praise always expresses admiration, and that if Olga praises Victor for doing what she does not do herself, this implies that she looks up to him. If Victor feels uncomfortable and disrespected by her praise, he might therefore have trouble understanding his own feelings and what prompts them. We believe that applying Wallace’s and Fritz and Miller’s analysis of hypocritical blame to this kind of praise provides a good explanation of his discomfort, and shows that his feelings might be perfectly justified. Other contexts where people might encounter hypocritical praise of this kind – the praiser has no intention of following the norms that he praises others for following or superseding, and his praise makes the praisee uncomfortable – might be in the workplace, where someone lacking this virtue praises someone else for being so “professional”, someone who talks over everyone else praises someone else for being “a good listener”, someone who heaps all the responsibility for their children on their spouse praises said spouse or others for being “good parents”, and so on.

### 3.2 Obstructionist Praise

In the literature on standing to blame, a textbook example of lack of standing is the blamer who was complicit in the condemned action. As with hypocrisy, praise and blame are asymmetrical on the surface with regards to complicity; we need to look deeper to uncover interesting similarities. If Alice and Joe together do charitable work, there is nothing problematic about them praising each other for their good deeds. In doing so, they hold each other to the same moral standards, and see each other as praiseworthy for spending time and effort in living up to those. The praise counterpart to complicit blame is therefore not complicit, but obstructionist, praise. The praiser obstructs, tries to obstruct, or would obstruct if given the chance, the
possibility of meeting or superseding the same standards that they praise others for meeting or superseding.

Whereas blame is often called “hypocritical”, not just in philosophical debates but also by laypeople, the term “obstructionist praise” is something we coined for this paper. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for people to accuse others of being obstructionist praisers, albeit not in these exact words. One context in which such accusations are common is political debates.

Think of the following example: Regina is a conservative politician representing a party that wants to decrease taxes, cut down on public spending, and have a tight immigration policy, whereas Lena is a social democrat supporting the opposite agenda. In a speech, Regina talks about the value of hard work and grit. In doing so, she heaps praise on Bassam, the owner of a successful business who recently appeared in media with his rags-to-riches story; he comes from a low-income immigrant family. Lena retorts that if Regina’s proposed limits on immigration and the proposed cuts on integration support had been in place when Bassam’s family first came to the country, Bassam would not be here, let alone have gotten the support he needed to be where he is now. This is an accusation of obstructionist praise. A common response for Regina is to throw the accusation of obstructionism back at Lena, by saying that with Lena’s favored business regulations and taxes on business owners, Bassam would have failed in his enterprise. The accusation of obstruction can, in other contexts, come from the very person praised – imagine that Regina praises Bassam to his face, but Bassam rather agrees with Lena politically. He could tell Regina “Who are you to praise me? You don’t want people like me to come here in the first place!” lobbing the same objections at her that Lena did in the above example.

However, as previously stated, we are not concerned with all kinds of problematic praise in this paper, but specifically with patronizing praise, in which the praiser fails to accord the praisee the respect they are due, by means of superficially nice comments. Thus, we will lay aside the following type of scenario: Regina is a horribly racist politician whose goal is to prevent any immigration of non-white people whatsoever, to kick out any non-white immigrants already in the country, and if that turns out to be impossible, she wishes for any remaining to be as poor and miserable as possible. However, she believes that she and her racist party must gain more power before they can reveal their true colours. At the moment, they only argue for tightening immigration up and cutting down on support. She publicly praises successful non-white immigrants as Bassam, because she believes that right now, doing so is the optimal strategy for increasing their voter base.

In this situation, Regina thus praises Bassam for accomplishing what she simultaneously tries to obstruct, and she does not respect his equal worth as a person. Nevertheless, her wrongful behaviour in this scenario is not very philosophically interesting; she lies and pretends to admire someone she despises in order to increase

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5 One might object that Regina praised the value of hard work and grit, and she has not done anything to prevent people from working hard and showing all the grit they have. However, it is reasonable to interpret her as implicitly praising hard work and grit that leads to success. This is why she points to Bassam as a stellar example, rather than any of the many poor and unfortunate people who work terribly hard, year after year, without ever getting any less poor.

6 Or themself, in the case of self-degrading praise, which we discuss later in the paper.
her popularity. Instead, we will turn our attention to more subtle cases, which are closer to the Olga-Victor case discussed in the previous sub-section. The praise expressions are genuine to the extent that they aren’t lies or forms of deception, yet they remain problematic.

Olga applied a higher moral standard to other people than to herself, when it came to doing something about problems that were, so to speak, already out there in the world. As much as she flies, drives, and eats meat, she did not play any substantial part in creating the rampant climate crisis or enormous meat industry. To praise someone else for how well they do despite the burdens that you placed squarely on their shoulders takes the hypocrisy one step further.

Suppose that Regina and her party are in power. When she praises Bassam for his success, she does not consciously lie or deceive. She looks at how he managed to rise from rags to riches, and his journey does fill her with admiration. Nevertheless, she and her party have made things difficult for recent immigrants, first by tightening up their immigration policy until getting a residence permit in the first place is incredibly hard, and second by cutting down all support for those who still pass through the eye of the needle. They did all this in the name of necessary budget cuts – but Regina and her party refuse to do anything that would strengthen the budget at the expense of their own interests.

The latter is key here. Now, obstructionist praise can be problematic in various ways even if you simultaneously obstruct yourself and others. Suppose, for instance, that a bunch of friends go on a road trip together in a shared car, to a wedding they are all invited to. The person in charge of map reading and planning the trip chooses an unnecessarily long route on smaller roads because it is more “scenic”, making it difficult for them all to get to their destination in time. The map reader then praises everyone, including themself, for making good time anyway, by driving long stretches without breaks and managing a higher-than-expected speed when the road is narrow and winding. The other friends might object to the praise and say something like “if you had taken us along the highway instead of this stupid hard route, we wouldn’t have to drive like this!”. Perhaps the map reader did not just do prudentially wrong, but morally wrong as well in choosing this route, insofar as people will feel hurt and betrayed if the friends do not arrive at the wedding in time. Their obstructionist praise might seem to exacerbate the wrong done, if it sounds like they praise and encourage everyone instead of admitting that they made a terrible decision. Still, the map reader does not seem to be patronizing, exactly, even if they wronged the others.

However, when you place heavy burdens on the shoulders of other people while you refuse to carry those same burdens yourself, and then praise those others for how well they carry them, the praise itself plays an important part in expressing a failure to respect them as your equal. As with standard hypocritical praise, the praiser signals that the praisee’s interests and the praisee themself are of less importance; it is fine and something to encourage that the praisee carries heavier burdens than the praiser. However, by actively making things difficult for the praisee, the obstructionist praiser’s failure of respect is arguably even worse than the standard-hypocritical one’s.

It is possible to express something similar even if you merely would place all those burdens that you are unwilling to shoulder yourself on someone else if given the chance. Suppose Regina is not in power, and praises Bassam for his success while
planning to drastically cut down on immigration and subsequent support if given the chance, thinking that sufficiently good and industrious immigrants will find a way to succeed anyway. If she is not prepared to make budget decisions that would make her own life even slightly more difficult, but expects immigrants to power through anything that she throws at them, this once again expresses the view that she and her interests are more important than theirs.

This is also one of several (non-exclusionary) ways in which non-disabled people’s praise of disabled people for being “inspirational” and managing to do things “despite their disabilities” can be patronizing and problematic.

Let us assume that Celia is a middle-aged woman who uses a wheelchair for mobility and has somewhat stiff hands with occasional muscle spasms. She lives in a nice apartment by herself and holds down a prestigious job. In previous years, Celia employed a number of taxpayer-funded assistants, something she was entitled to do according to her country’s extensive welfare legislation, and from morning to evening at least one of them was always with her. Someone would assist her in the morning with getting out of bed and into her wheelchair, with her breakfast and morning hygiene, and with getting to work. Throughout the workday, someone would assist her with various small physical tasks, with getting around the office and having lunch. During late afternoons and evening, she once again had an assistant helping out with various things she wished to do in her spare time, with making dinner and eventually going to bed. However, more and more budget cuts have been made in areas like personal assistance, while money was moved to areas that benefit already privileged middle-class people. Nowadays, Celia is provided with so little assistance that just living an ordinary life and keeping her job has become a huge struggle. She alternately manages to get additional assistance from friends and family, and doing things herself even when this requires pushing herself to the point of exhaustion, but her life has become hard.

Celia often meets non-disabled people who praise her and tell her how amazing she is for managing to live on her own and working such a prestigious job despite her disability. Now, there are many ways in which praise from non-disabled to disabled people can come off as problematic and patronizing – for instance, praise for doing completely unremarkable and mundane tasks (Holroyd 2021) (see Sect. 4 for further discussion of this issue). However, in this case, Celia is praised for things that truly are difficult for her. The reason (or one of the reasons) that she feels offended by this kind of praise is that her living on her own and having a job has been made difficult through political decisions in which many or even most non-disabled people are complicit. After all, if most of the voter base had been staunchly against the shift from an extensive welfare state to privileging the already privileged more and more, the shift would presumably not have happened. Most non-disabled people, Celia thinks, have supported this shift, consciously or through willful ignorance, including those people who are now praising her for holding down a job. By praising her achievements whilst being complicit in what has been done to her, they express the idea that Celia is not entitled, in virtue of personhood, to easily get out of bed, eat breakfast, go to work, and so on – she must fight and struggle for every little thing throughout her day. They express both that she deserves praise for her valiant efforts, and – given
their obstructionism – that she is not entitled to the same comparatively easy life that non-disabled people have.

4 Inaccurate Appraisal and Respect for Equality

In the last section, we have drawn parallels between hypocritical and complicit blame, already much discussed in the moral-philosophical literature, and the previously unrecognized problems of hypocritical and obstructionist praise. As previously noted, there are several asymmetries between praise and blame, one being that doing wrong is a prima facie ground for blameworthiness, whereas doing right is generally not even a prima facie ground for praiseworthiness; for someone to be praiseworthy, they must do something supererogatory, or their obligatory act must have had high stakes, have been costly, risky, effortful, or have otherwise required the praisee to overcome a substantial difficulty. Therefore, people can imply, via their manner of praising, something about how skilled, accomplished or experienced they take the praisee to be in relation to a particular standard and/or in relation to others. In this section, we look at a number of ways in which praising can inaccurately represent what a person merits. Such praise, we will argue, often also fails to respect the equality of persons.

The blame literature largely lacks an analogy to this discussion (though see Ciurria 2022). We suspect that there are two reasons for this. First, as already mentioned, it is easier to implicitly suggest things about, e.g., the praisee’s skill level via praising than blaming. Second, insofar as we can think of blame counterparts to the problematic kinds of praise we are about to discuss, those would come off as more obviously rude and thus be easier to call out, whereas praising in these particular manners provides a more subtle and insidious way to put someone down. Nevertheless, it is possible that our analysis could provide input to new directions in the ethics of blame in the future.

We first discuss how inaccurate praise can fail to respect equality, and then discuss three particular ways in which this can happen: belittling praise, self-aggrandizing praise, and self-degrading praise.

4.1 Two Kinds of Respect

Stephen Darwall distinguishes two different ways in which a person may be the object of respect. Recognition respect is something that everyone is entitled to just in virtue of being a person. Appraisal respect, in contrast, is an attitude of positive appraisal (like esteem or regard) of a particular person (their being or actions) because the person is perceived to manifest characteristics that render them deserving of such respect. Holroyd observes that it is appropriate to think of these appraisals as continuous with praise, because praise also tracks (perceived) virtues or excellences (2021: 3).

But the positive appraisal of a person’s skill, achievement, or virtue, can go wrong. Now sometimes this is due to an epistemic obstacle or mistake. For example, a person who is unfamiliar with children may misjudge a child’s age and for that reason take it that their achievements are a lot more impressive than they in fact are. But
appraisals can also go wrong for more morally dubious reasons. They can amount to forms of discrimination that fail to recognize the equal value or worth of persons.

In his book on discrimination and respect, Benjamin Eidelson writes “…respect for a person’s equal value is best understood as grounding a defeasible presumption of equal consideration. This presumption can be overridden, without disrespect, by genuinely relevant differences between persons’ claims to one’s consideration.” (Eidelson 2015: 95) These genuinely relevant differences can provide grounds for accurate appraisal respect and praise. However, when irrelevant differences between persons – such as gender, race, or disability – motivate your appraisal of them, the praise manifests a failure to recognize the equal value or worth of persons.

In terms of Darwall’s two types of respect, we may say that a failure to give everyone the recognition respect they are due can result in skewed and unfair expressions of appraisal respect. We discuss three different ways in which that might happen.

4.2 Belittling Praise

We draw on a discussion in Holroyd’s paper on oppressive praise (2021) to conceptualize belittling praise as a form of inaccurate and disrespectful appraisal. Her paper mainly focuses on unequal distributions of praise where privileged persons receive more praise for the same achievements than members of less privileged groups. But in discussing this, she also notes – citing numerous empirical studies – that disabled people, women in male-dominated spaces, and various minorities, are sometimes praised more extensively than their able-bodied, male, or majority counterparts (Biernat and Manis 1994; Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1997; Biernat and Vescio 2002; Biernat et al. 2009; Kobrynowicz and Biernat 1997).

Superficially, it might seem like a good thing that women and minorities occasionally get the most praise. But empirical research suggests that this does not lead to disabled people/women/minorities being awarded any concrete advantages, such as higher salaries or promotions at work, whereas in situations where privileged people are the ones getting the most praise, this is followed by recommendations for tangible benefits (Heilman and Chen 2005). This is puzzling, but Holroyd presents a reason as to why that is: this type of praise expresses that the praisers did not expect much from the praisees. The praisers assumed that disabled people/women/minorities would perform worse than average, and praised them in surprise when that was not the case. Of course, people do not get promotions or high salaries for not performing below average. Holroyd questions whether the praisee is, in these cases, really receiving the goods of praise: actual esteem and admiration.

We here add that, even though someone may be genuinely impressed by, say, a person in a wheelchair getting an average score on a general exam, the praise remains patronizing because it places a person lower in a skill-based hierarchy for reasons that have nothing to do with her actual skills. Instead, the person is considered unequal to others on the basis of irrelevant features (being a woman, being disabled etc.). A belittling praiser may very well admire someone partly because of discriminatory background assumptions or implicit biases. This is why belittling praise can be so puzzling to the praisee and difficult to call out; it can simultaneously express genuine admiration or good will and a failure to recognize them as a person of equal worth. If
the person were recognized as an equal by the praisee, her achievement would have been seen for the average performance that it was.

To complement the belittling praise type, we discuss two other manifestations of disrespectful inaccurate appraisals: ‘self-aggrandizing praise’ and ‘self-degrading praise’. Both phenomena focus on particular ways in which people can praise each other, and how these ways can express a failure to respect the equality of persons by means of inaccurate appraisal respect.

4.3 Self-aggrandizing Praise

There are ways to praise others which suggests that the praiser is much better than the praisee at the task at hand. The praise that teachers and mentors give their pupils and apprentices typically sounds different than praise between peers for a job well done, e.g., from teacher to teacher or pupil to pupil.

There are, of course, perfectly legitimate relationships of this kind, both formalized, as when someone pays someone else to teach them a skill, and informal, as when one friend teaches another how to do something. When the relationship is legitimate, there is nothing wrong with the teacher praising their pupil in the way teachers typically do. A driver instructor might tell their pupil during a lesson: “you handled the clutch well there, before the turn in the road just now… that’s good… and it’s good that you checked the bicycle lane there…”. This type of praise pragmatically implies that the praisee managed despite difficulty, while the instructor, being much more skilled, is well situated to judge how well they managed. When all of this is uncontroversially true, as in the case with the driver instructor and their pupil, the praise is not condescending, but it can be, if the praiser suggests that they are superior when they are not.

In practice, we believe people may be especially likely to (maybe unwittingly) engage in self-aggrandizing praise when they feel the need to affirm their (unduly) privileged social status. Additionally, we suspect that self-aggrandizing praise is more likely to be directed towards members of underprivileged groups to the extent that their stereotype does not align with the actual positions of power and standing at stake.

Think for example of practices where a man aims to put women “in their place” (Manne 2017). Praise can be a means for doing just that. To see how, imagine the following example. Aspiring journalist Donald attends a master class in public writing by prize-winning journalist Mimi. Donald asks to read the current draft of her interview with former child soldiers, because it might be useful for him when planning his own investigative work into child labor in East Asia. After receiving the draft from Mimi, Donald sends it back to her with extensive unsolicited feedback. The feedback includes sentences like “you need to proofread this bit” and then towards the end: “this is coming along very nicely”; ‘good job! :-) “. Here, Donald praises Mimi in a way that implies that he is a sufficiently good writer already to help her out like a teacher or mentor would. He lifts himself up by praising her, attempting to place himself squarely above her in the social hierarchy of writers.

The fact that Donald’s praise was wholly unsolicited makes it particularly self-aggrandizing; he implicitly expresses the assumption that his opinions are important.
and useful to people whether they have asked for them or not. However, the way he praises Mimi would be inappropriate even if she had asked for input. For instance, she might ask a number of people, Donald included, to beta-read an article she works on and send back their spontaneous impressions of the text. In this situation, it is appropriate for Donald and the other beta-readers to both praise and critique the text with comments like “this was super interesting!”, “this part was honestly a bit boring, is it necessary?” or “I didn’t quite follow this part, is there some background I’m missing?”, but still inappropriate to praise Mimi as if she was an apprentice who could learn from Donald.

Someone who respects the equality of persons will, provided that they also possess the necessary knowledge of a field to judge accomplishments therein, recognize who is more skilled and who is less so, and only deal out teacher-style praise when appropriate. Someone who respects the equality of persons will also extend to others the same courtesies they expect for their own part. If Donald were a more accomplished writer than another person, he would probably be peeved if they treated him like an apprentice. He fails to accord Mimi the respect he would expect for himself and would accord to others, on the basis of irrelevant considerations, and thereby fails to respect her as a person. Self-aggrandizing praise can, in addition to being patronizing, also assert and perpetuate problematic social hierarchies because it tends to be informed by problematic social stereotypes.

Praise is an especially subtle and efficient tool for asserting standing or hierarchy, because praise is considered nice and unproblematic. The praise can easily be construed as well-intended. Furthermore, it may be construed as being due to more innocent epistemic mistakes which would render it less offensive. Sometimes, for example, a student might praise a teacher in the manner of a direct colleague would, because these are the sorts of feedback-exchanges she has witnessed and therefore aims to emulate in commenting on a paper. All other things being equal it is a virtue to be charitable, so people may be inclined to provide similar possible explanations for Donald’s behaviour. It should also be noted that it is sometimes unclear who may take on the role of a mentor and when. Norms surrounding these relationships may differ across contexts and cultures. Therefore, Donald is more likely to “get away” with putting Mimi in her place by means of self-aggrandizing praise, than if he were to bluntly tell her “I think you can learn a lot from me in terms of writing”, or otherwise state that he does not consider her deserving of her role and status. The latter would come off as so obviously rude, that most people who hear it are bound to react negatively to Donald’s condescension.

Donald might similarly find it more difficult to get away with an analogous type of blame – imagine him blaming Mimi for any mistakes in her text, in the manner of stern teacher or mentor. He will likely not even try this, because such behaviour might elicit immediate negative responses from both Mimi and others. We believe this also explains why the analogous type of blame is not discussed in the blame literature; it is not a problem one tends to encounter much in real life. Self-aggrandizing praise is a more insidious way of getting across the message that Mimi is inferior to

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7 The same goes for belittling praise which can be construed as excessive praise based on innocent epistemic mistakes.
Donald, since on a superficial level, Donald merely tells Mimi that she did well, and encourages her.

The driver and writer examples were both about non-moral praise. However, as Holroyd (2021: 3) notes, moral and non-moral praise seems to exist on a continuum, rather than being sharply separated. A deeper analysis of praise that looks non-moral often uncovers moral elements. Holroyd gives the example of praising someone for solving a difficult math problem; the praise might not merely be for solving the problem, but for displaying certain virtues and excellences while doing so, and those might in turn have moral aspects (see also Matheson and Milam 2021 for a similar point about blame). And, to the extent that moral praise is about a person’s socio-moral skills, it can similarly express a failure to recognize a person as your equal.

4.4 Self-degrading Praise

Self-aggrandizing praise presents the praiser as superior in skill or merit to the praisee due to a failure to respect them as their equal in the personhood sense. Self-degrading praise does the opposite; the praiser presents themself as less skilled and accomplished than they really are, and thereby fail to properly respect themself. Self-degrading praise puts down the praiser, but may also make the praisee feel uncomfortable and awkward. Whereas someone praises in a self-aggrandizing way when they praise like a teacher or mentor would, it is self-degrading when someone praises another person like a fan would praise their idol, despite the praiser being as accomplished as the praisee. The way in which this praiser applies different standards to themself and to others, holding up the same accomplishment as laudable in others but worth little when they did it themself, implies that they are less worthy of praise and admiration than other people are. This, in turn, suggests that they are a lesser person in comparison, and they thereby degrade themselves.

To illustrate: Suppose that Miriam and Bert are both philosophers, and in fact equally accomplished. But because Miriam suffers from low self-esteem, her praise of Bert’s latest published paper is excessively humble, and directed ‘upwards’ in a way that is not actually warranted. “You’re so amazing”, Miriam says, wide-eyed. “Your arguments are so clever and original; I could never think of anything as original and smart as what you’ve written… You’ve had two papers published in Journal X by now! I could only dream of that.” Because Bert and Miriam are, in fact, roughly equally accomplished – Miriam’s papers are very good and she has published in Journal Y, as well-regarded among people in the field as Journal X – she degrades herself by praising Bert in this way. Although Miriam primarily wrongs herself, Bert might also feel awkward when praised like that; insofar as he values equality, the praise she gives him might be frustrating and not exactly pleasant to receive.⁸

⁸ There may be an underexplored blame or critique version of this. Suppose that Bert has worked late at night finishing a draft of a new paper. He ends up including a supposed ‘deduction’ that is no deduction at all, but looked valid to him at 10 pm, right before he mails the draft to his colleague and friend Miriam asking for feedback. Upon reading the text, she immediately sees that the conclusion does not follow. If she responds with something excessively humble like “Maybe I’m just stupid, maybe I don’t realize how this deduction works, it’s just that it somehow looks to me as if there’s a flaw here, and as if the conclusion doesn’t quite follow from the premises, so maybe it’s worth taking a new look at this, sorry if it’s just me
We have written in previous sections about the importance of recognizing what is going on and why it is problematic when you find yourself on the receiving end of patronizing praise. Even though Bert is not wronged, or at least not seriously so in this scenario, he would also do well to recognize such self-degradation and protest in a manner that makes it clear to Miriam that he means what he says, and is not politely lying. He might say “You shouldn’t praise me like that; as if I’ve done something unattainable to you. Sure, you’ve not been published in Journal X, but you’ve been in Journal Y, and everyone but you realizes that your CV is as good as mine.”

Protests like this might in the long run help Miriam’s self-esteem, and possibly also help counteract harmful societal messages. Perhaps Miriam’s low self-esteem is not simply an individual short-coming, but results from internalized discrimination and oppression; Miriam might be part of one or more minority groups, severely underrepresented in philosophy. Again, the inaccurate appraisal here is not due to a simple epistemic mistake, like if Miriam mistakenly thought that Journal X was the best journal in the field. Instead, the origins of this mistake are morally dubious. If Miriam truly saw herself as a person equally worthy of basic personhood respect as Bert, she would be able to accurately evaluate their respective accomplishments, but due to her history of discrimination and oppressive remarks, which she eventually, to some extent, internalized, her self-conception as an inadequate philosopher has become resistant to evidence. Now, we do not envision Miriam consciously thinking to herself “Of course I’m a worse philosopher than Bert, because I’m a woman (black, disabled, etc.)”. Just like philosophers from dominant groups might have their judgments skewed by implicit bias despite not explicitly thinking that, e.g., minorities are bad and should not be hired at their department, Miriam’s internalized prejudice might skew her judgment regarding her and Bert’s respective accomplishments without her being consciously aware that it does.

Just like belittling praise and self-aggrandizing praise, this type of self-degrading praise is characterized by an inaccurate appraisal on the basis of irrelevant considerations, which thereby manifests a failure to recognize the equal worth of persons.

5 Conclusion

In the ethics literature, praise is far less discussed than blame. Praise is seen as inherently nice, and thus less in need of justification than blame. Philosophers have also pointed out that there are several asymmetries between praise and blame: for instance, there is – allegedly – no non-hypocrisy condition for proper praise.

We have argued both that praise can be morally problematic, and that it can be so for similar reasons as blame. At least one way in which blame can be problematic or wrongful is when it expresses a lack of respect for the equality of persons. Praise can similarly express this. A hypocritical praiser, praising others for living up to or superseding moral norms that the praiser have no intention of following themself, can express that the praiser is more important than the praisee, so important that

who doesn’t follow your logic”, this kind of “self-degrading criticism’ might be somewhat analogous to the self-degrading praise described above.
the praiser’s self-interest can outweigh their moral reasons, while the praisee’s self-interest and subsequently the praisee as a person matter far less. An obstructionist praiser does not care if their actions make it hard or impossible for the praisee to live up to the very same norms that the praiser encourages.

There is also another variety of praise appraisals that fail to respect the equality of persons, which until recently lacked clear analogies in the blame literature (Ciurria 2022 rectified this). Praise appraisals can be inaccurate in ways that are not based on innocent epistemic mistakes, but are instead based on irrelevant considerations. When they are, they manifest a failure to respect the equality of persons. There are at least three types of such inaccurate praise appraisals. Belittling praise, which is excessive praise that is based on irrelevant considerations (e.g. the person being disabled). Self-aggrandizing praise, which is ‘teacher-like’ praise based on irrelevant considerations (e.g., you are a man praising a woman). And self-degrading praise, which is ‘fan-like’ praise that is based on irrelevant considerations (e.g., you are a minority member praising a cis white academic). The people who praise in these ways might tell themselves that they are nice and encouraging (just as hypocritical blamers might rationalize their behaviour) or may even be genuinely admiring, but nevertheless express disrespect for someone’s equal worth or value as a person. As such they are all varieties of patronizing praise.

We hope and believe that this paper might inspire future research on both the ethics of blame and praise, and that it is important in its own right. Precisely because people tend to regard praise as nice and unproblematic, it is more difficult for people on the receiving end of problematic praise to pin down why they feel uncomfortable or even offended by it. Our account of patronizing praise explains why that is, and in turn makes it easier for them to protest.

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