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Angela Smith and Moral Praise

Every day of our lives, we make assessments of other people’s actions and characters, often without being aware that we are doing so. Some of these assessments are superficial, such as, “I like his shoes” or “She is a such great speaker,” whereas some are a little bit deeper: “The way he handled that breakup was inconsiderate” or “He is such a loyal friend.” When, how, and why do we hold others responsible for these qualities or actions that we are appraising? Angela Smith’s account of moral responsibility, detailed in two essays, seeks to answer some of these questions.[[1]](#endnote-1) Her account is largely concerned with moral responsibility in a negative sense, meaning situations in which we blame someone for a moral wrong. However, in the moral sphere of human interactions we do not only blame each other but also praise the actions and character of others.

In this essay I argue that Angela Smith’s account of moral responsibility accurately captures the way in which we morally praise each other. I will first summarize what exactly Smith’s account of responsibility is using three sections from two different essays. Smith’s idea of “evaluative judgments” characterizes the way that she sees responsibility as not just stemming from conscious choices, but also from attitudes that we knowingly *and* unknowingly hold. This concept of moral responsibility is associated with moral demands we can and do make of others. Smith contends that we often make these demands of others in situations involving “spontaneous attitudes,” such as our involuntary reactions or what we do and do not notice in social settings. After framing Smith’s argument, I describe how we praise each other morally and evaluate how well Smith’s account of moral responsibility fits this description. Throughout this paper I use examples drawn from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

Smith’s concept of “evaluative judgements” forms the framework within which we morally assess others. She writes, “the judgments I am concerned with are not necessarily consciously held propositional beliefs, but rather tendencies to regard certain things as having evaluative significance.”[[2]](#endnote-2) These evaluative judgments are expressed not only in actions and behaviors but also in thoughts, attitudes, and reactions. Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of *A Christmas Carol*, places a high value on money and a low value on human relationships. As a result, he only gives his clerk one day off a year and refuses his cousin’s invitation to a Christmas dinner.[[3]](#endnote-3) Scrooge’s evaluative judgements form the way in which he interprets the world around him and responds to the actions of others.

For Smith there is a rational connection between evaluative judgements and our mental states. If we truly hold something to be important, then it would rationally affect our “unreflective patterns of thought and feeling concerning the thing in question.”[[4]](#endnote-4) An essential part of Smith’s view is that these evaluative judgements are subject to change – our character is not fixed. For Smith, an attitude that we are responsible for is “open, in principle, to revision or modification through that creature’s own process of rational reflection.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Through his experiences with three ghostly visits, Scrooge recognizes the err of his selfish nature and undergoes a character change. His actions change correspondingly with his judgements – he raises the pay of his clerk, provides food for the hungry, and accepts his cousin’s Christmas invitation.[[6]](#endnote-6) As a human being, Scrooge has the ability to “reflect on and revise” his evaluative judgements, leading him to respond to others differently than he did in the past.

A second important aspect of Smith’s account is her idea of a moral demand that attached to a moral appraisal. This demand is one for justification; when we are morally wronged we call “upon the agent to explain or justify her rational activity in some area, and to acknowledge fault if such a justification cannot be provided.”[[7]](#endnote-7) This demand does not only arise in situations in which we perceive the agent to have some form of choice, but rather in *any* situation in which we feel the action, attitude, behavior, etc., was connected to their evaluative judgements. Smith is not trying to say here that we should or should not hold people responsible in the absence of agential choice, but that in actuality we *do*, and therefore it must be included in an account of moral responsibility. Several examples of these situations are included in Smith’s analysis of “spontaneous attitudes.”

Smith argues that we hold others morally responsible in scenarios that are “outside the scope of our immediate voluntary control,” and gives several strong examples.[[8]](#endnote-8) What we notice and fail to notice in social situations can be highly indicative of the things we hold to be important. This stems from the concept of evaluative judgements: if we judge something, consciously or unconsciously, to be important to us, we should rationally “notice factors which pertain to the existence, welfare, or flourishing of that thing or person.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Money is the most important thing to Scrooge, and it shows in an interaction with his joyful cousin on Christmas Eve: “What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You’re poor enough,” Scrooge says to his cousin.[[10]](#endnote-10) Scrooge cannot understand that his cousin’s joy, which might arise from a love of family and of the Christmas season, can coexist with his cousin’s poverty. Smith also points out that we do not choose what we notice and do not notice, just as we do not always choose the way we instinctively react to events that occur in our lives. Smith asserts that we hold each other morally responsible for these non-voluntary reactions because they are not separate from who we are as moral agents.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Here I will briefly describe how and why we praise each other morally. When we praise someone on moral grounds, we believe that they have exceeded moral norms – maybe they were altruistic, honest in a difficult situation, consistently trustworthy or loyal, etc. We praise not only in situations in which we perceive the agent to have some degree of choice, but also in “spontaneous” situations. I consider these spontaneous acts of moral goodness akin to doing good when no one is looking, and they indicate that the agent’s evaluative judgements are worthy of praise.

Although Smith focuses largely on negative moral responsibility, her ideas also apply to positive responsibility. If we praise morally for an act or attitude, I believe that we typically connect the act to some sort of evaluative judgement. Even if an individual does not display a pattern of altruism, we will regard a single generous act performed by that individual as an indication that they do possess some degree of altruistic character. When Scrooge raises the salary of his clerk, he would not only be rightfully praised for the act but also for the generous character that it indicates.

Smith’s idea of a moral demand that is attached to a moral appraisal looks slightly different in the arena of moral praise. We do not typically demand a justification from one who we are morally praising, although in theory we could. The difference between complementing one for their good looks and complementing them for their generosity is that generosity is the type of thing that is “open, in principle, to revision or modification through that creature’s own process of rational reflection.”[[12]](#endnote-12) *Because* an attitude is subject to this kind of change, it is part of our moral fabric. If one had asked Scrooge what inspired him to raise the salary of his clerk, he might have answered that he had a change of morals inspired by his ghostly visits – in Smith’s language, he had a change in evaluative judgements.

One of the highest moral praises that we can give someone they do good “when no one is watching.” This is a situation of a spontaneous attitude; if we do good without factoring in practical considerations then this moral good is deeply connected to who we are as rational agents. It would be contrary to actual human behavior to not hold someone responsible for spontaneous good actions because that action was not attached to a conscious choice. Smith’s account accurately captures this subtlety in a way that other views on moral responsibility do not.

In this essay I have tried to show that our actual behavior regarding moral praise matches up with Smith’s views on moral responsibility. Her core idea is that when we morally asses another person, we are engaging with their evaluative judgements. In most cases we expect there to be a rational connection between these judgements and the voluntary and non-voluntary actions of others. Thus when we sincerely praise someone morally, we do not do so in a vacuum – we understand that the morally good act was performed *because* of a morally good character. In this short paper I did not consider objections to Smith’s view, and that certainly does not mean that objections do not exist. However, Smith’s perspective on responsibility powerfully captures many of our intuitions about and behaviors in the shared moral world that we engage with daily. I believe her perspective is a hopeful one – like Ebenezer Scrooge, we can, through moral praise and blame and self-reflection, change for the better.

1. Smith, Angela M. “Control, Responsibility, and Moral Assessment.” Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition, vol. 138, no. 3, 1 Apr. 2008, pp. 367–392., and

   Smith, Angela M. “Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life.” Ethics, vol. 115, no. 2, Jan. 2005, pp. 236–271., doi:10.1086/426957. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Smith, “Control,” 251 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dickens, Charles. A Christmas Carol. Elegant Books, 1843., 8-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Smith, “Control,” 255 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Smith, “Control,” 256 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dickens, 85-90 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Smith, “Responsibility,” 381 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Smith, “Control,” 241 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Smith, “Control,” 244 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Dickens, 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Smith, “Control,” 246-250 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Smith, “Control,” 256 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)