

Moral Criticism and Structural Injustice

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Moral agency is limited, imperfect, and structurally constrained. This is evident in the many ways we all unwittingly participate in widespread injustice through our everyday actions, which I call ‘structural wrongs’. To do justice to these facts, I argue that we should distinguish between summative and formative moral criticism. While summative criticism functions to conclusively assess an agent’s performance relative to some benchmark, formative criticism aims only to improve performance in an ongoing way. I show that the negative sanctions associated with summative responses are only justifiably imposed under certain conditions when persons exercise their agency wrongly — conditions that do not always hold for structural wrongs. Yet even in such cases we can still use formative responses, which are warranted whenever agents fall short of moral ideals. Expanding our repertoire of moral criticism to include both summative and formative responses enables us to better appreciate both the powers and limitations of our agency, and the complexity of moral life.

1. Introduction

We are dual-faceted creatures. On the one hand, each of us has the power of individual agency: we experience our choices as up to us, to do with as we will. On the other hand, we confront a world that prevents us from doing as we would choose: we are finite beings subject to limitations of time, space, and energy, and we are inexorably caught up in wider sociohistorical processes. This double nature has implications for our interpersonal practices of *moral criticism*, that is, our evaluative responses to other agents’ actions and attitudes. While extant theorizing is dominated by a focus on reactive attitudes like blame and resentment, many have noted that these alone seem inadequate to the task of responding fully to the variety and complexity of problems we encounter in moral life.

One of these is the problem of living ethically in a highly unjust world. It has become impossible to ignore the moral implications of everyday actions that contribute to globalized systems of exploitation and oppression: eating foods whose production contributes to the devastation of the planet, wearing clothing stitched by maltreated workers, or indulging in middle-class enjoyments while others are

sick, starving, imprisoned, and impoverished. I will refer to such forms of quotidian participation in injustice as ‘structural wrongs’. Structural wrongs raise challenges for moral theory. For instance, how should we account for them in our practices of moral criticism? When the world’s most pressing moral problems result from complex forces wholly outside individual control, blaming people for structural wrongs can seem injudicious. And yet, moral critique feels absolutely necessary.

The aim of this article is twofold. In the first half of the paper (§§2–3), I argue that we should distinguish between what I call *summative* and *formative* moral criticism, in order to respond properly to two distinct modes of morality: the *imperative* and the *aspirational*. Whereas summative critical responses like blame are justified when exercises of agency violate clear moral standards, the justification for formative responses — whose purpose is to improve rather than assess agency — lies in the fact that we all deserve feedback whenever our limited, imperfect, and structurally constrained agency falls short of moral ideals. I contend that philosophers should be much more attuned to practices of formative moral criticism because these may be warranted (or efficacious) in cases where summative criticism is not.

To demonstrate this, I examine the problem of how we should criticize structural wrongdoing, which highlights our agential limits in a particularly vivid way. While moral theory has long acknowledged our physical and mental limits as finite beings, I focus on a distinct kind of limitation on our agency, namely, the structural constraints we face as social beings. Thus, in the second half of the paper (§§4–5), I argue that formative moral criticism is particularly — but not exclusively — well-suited for responding to a range of structural wrongs. My overall goal is to show that fully appreciating our embeddedness in the material and social world should prompt us to expand our moral repertoire of critical responses to include both summative and formative criticism of individual shortcomings.

2. Morality, in two keys

In this section I elucidate the difference between what I call the ‘imperative’ and the ‘aspirational’ modes of morality by appeal to some elements of our moral phenomenology, and I argue that this difference is not adequately captured by our current understandings of moral criticism.

2.1 The difference between oughts and ideals

Here are two essential truths about our moral agency. The first is that, *qua* agents, we have the power to choose some actions over others, that is, to exercise our agency as we will. Against this background of agentic freedom,¹ we experience morality as delimiting our choices — it is in this vein that we speak of the ‘demands’ or ‘dictates’ of morality. We simply ought not to consider certain acts to be live options, however tempting. By setting standards that serve as hard constraints on moral behaviour, morality commands us to make certain choices, and it is in our hands whether we heed them or not. This is morality in the *imperative mode*.

The other truth, however, is that our agency is inherently very limited. We are finite creatures who survive in time and space, are dependent on material and social support, and lack many kinds of information, resources, and abilities that would enable us to act better morally. In a world where individuals’ allotments of happiness vary (sometimes greatly) and their moral value is (sometimes flagrantly) disregarded, we sometimes perceive the pull of morality in a different way. Here, in the cases that interest me, we do *not* experience things as fully up to us, but we feel called upon to do something. We recognize that even though it is not specifically our job to alleviate others’ homelessness or hunger, neither can we simply mind our own business without further thought. So although morality (according to all but the most stringent views) permits us sometimes to walk away from others in need, it retains a normative grip on us, such that if we walk away, we know we are still morally bound to work in other ways towards ameliorating their plight. This is morality in the *aspirational mode*, which draws us to certain ideals even if we cannot actually realize them: being a good Samaritan, say, or bringing about the kingdom of ends, the just society.

In response to this moral experience, philosophers since at least Kant onwards have tried to capture the felt difference between these two kinds of moral claims: by distinguishing ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ duties or ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ duties, ‘duties of justice’ and ‘duties of virtue’, or ‘moral rules’ and ‘moral ideals’ (for example, [Gert 2004](#)). More broadly, we speak of the Good versus the Right, where the former is variously characterized as ‘axiological’, ‘evaluative’, or pertaining to *values*, while the latter is ‘deontic’, ‘normative’, or based on

¹ Here I only mean ‘free’ in an ordinary compatibilist sense. The sceptic may insist that moral criticism cannot be justified without full-blooded free will, but I will not enter into that debate here.

duties (for an overview, see [Tappolet 2013](#)). Whatever we make of any one of these distinctions, taken together they adumbrate a fundamental duality in the nature of morality.

This duality, however, has not been fully appreciated in most theories of moral criticism, which rely on a model derived from systems of legal punishment (cf. [Young 2011](#); [Westlund 2018](#); [Dover 2019](#)). Just as breaking the law licenses the imposition of penalty or punishment, moral criticism on this view operates according to a logic of sanctions, in which:

- (A) an agent's violation of moral standards
- (B) licenses the imposition of negative sanctions against her, under certain conditions.

I call this the 'juridical model' of moral criticism. The requisite conditions are encapsulated in *judgments of blameworthiness*, which establish two things: (1) that the agent acted wrongly, and (2) that she was fully responsible² for doing so. According to the juridical model, when these conditions hold, we can correctly infer that there is something faulty in the quality of the agent's character (for example, a vice) or attitudes towards us (for example, ill will). Judgments of blameworthiness thus provide justification for sanctions like withdrawing from or ostracizing the blameworthy agent ([Bennett 2002](#)), targeting her with reactive attitudes that evince anger or hostility ([Wallace 1994](#); [Wolf 2011](#); [Pickard 2011](#)), or modifying one's relationship with her ([Scanlon 2008](#)).³

The juridical model, however, implicitly presumes that morality is essentially imperativel. Establishing (1) the wrongness of an act is easiest where there exist well-defined, well-understood moral standards, for example, prohibitions against lying or cheating. But there are no clear-cut standards delineating just how much striving towards an aspirational moral ideal is enough, notwithstanding obvious cases on either side. Establishing (2) responsibility for some act requires that it fall within the agent's capacity (in the relevant sense) to do. But by

² That is, she possesses the relevant moral capacities, and furthermore lacks any excuse or justification for her action.

³ It is important to note that many theorists, including [Scanlon \(2008\)](#), do not conceptualize critical moral responses in terms of punitive sanctions. (For discussion, see [Hieronymi 2004](#).) Nevertheless, they typically rely on the same framework of justification (connecting wrongness, responsibility, blameworthiness, and criticism) offered by the juridical model. I am grateful to Angela Smith for discussion of this point.

their very nature, ideals are in some sense *unrealizable*.⁴ They can never be fully achieved; otherwise, they would be mere goals. Since the concept of moral ideals remains undertheorized (Coady 2008), let me say a bit more about them before moving on.

Moral imperatives specify particular acts or omissions in given situations, at which time we can stop and evaluate; and it is a binary matter whether agents conform or not. But a genuine ideal, which remains continually out of reach, can only be pursued by making efforts on repeated occasions *across* time: what must be evaluated is not so much a particular act, but ongoing *activity*.⁵ In other words, ‘Ought-implies-can’ becomes ‘Ought-implies-can-strive-towards’. This aspect of morality requires us to orient ourselves towards ideals by adopting what Kimberly Brownlee (2010, p. 243) calls an ‘aspiration’, that is, ‘an attitude of steadfast commitment to, striving for, or deep desire and longing for an ideal as a model of excellence presently beyond those who strive for it’.

Aspirational morality is populated by various ideals of different shapes and sizes. Some ideals represent morally perfect worlds (for example, the kingdom of ends), while others represent morally perfect agents (for example, the virtuous person). Some are optional and personally chosen by individuals (for example, being a good professor), while others are mandatory (for example, eliminating injustice). I am not committed to any particular substantive conception of moral perfection here. I will simply take it that to exercise *morally ideal agency* would be for an agent to act, without fail, on every available opportunity to bring herself or the world closer to some state of moral perfection.⁶ For instance, the moral ideal of being a good professor conceivably requires something like tutoring every student individually, re-tailoring the syllabus to every new classroom, accepting every invitation to guest lecture, serve on committees, and so on. Eliminating injustice might involve giving aid to every needy person one meets, intervening in every oppressive interaction one witnesses, participating in every nearby political demonstration, totally eliminating consumption of exploitatively produced goods, and so on.

⁴ See Coady (2008, pp. 53–58) and Brownlee (2010, pp. 245–6) for discussion of stronger and weaker forms of unrealizability that may be ‘capacity-relative’, ‘circumstance-relative’, or ‘absolute’.

⁵ I am indebted to Sarah Buss for this way of putting the point.

⁶ For a similar account, see Hale (1991). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify these points.

Of course, none of this is actually possible for imperfect moral agents such as us — and certainly not all at once. Short of the ideal agency exercisable by angels and the like, then, we should further distinguish agency operating at ‘full capacity’, by which I mean the outer limits of human potential attained by actual moral saints, like Nobel Prize-winning humanitarians or revolutionary leaders. But agency at full capacity is still unreasonable to require of most ordinary moral agents. What *is* reasonable to expect is that the rest of us adopt moral aspirations — that is, that we strive to regularly take up at least *some* opportunities to help others, contribute to social change, and so on.

2.2 *Beyond the juridical model*

It might be assumed that this is really just a problem with first-order ethics. Once we know precisely how much morality requires us to devote to our ideals, we can apply the juridical model as usual. Indeed, an extensive literature attempts to do exactly this: convert aspirations towards moral ideals (for example, a world without poverty) into clear imperatival requirements (for example, a duty specifying how much we are obligated to donate to charity). But this is notoriously difficult, for, as Allen Buchanan puts it: ‘No amount of ethical reasoning will discover a determinate obligation for the simple reason that there is no determinate moral obligation to be discovered’ (Buchanan 1996, p. 29). Thus, efforts to turn ideals into oughts — two of which I consider below — are in general⁷ unsatisfying for the purposes of moral criticism, because there can be a criticisable ‘remainder’ that lingers in our actions even when we successfully conform to moral imperatives.

One standard approach to conceptualizing the relationship between imperatival and aspirational morality relies on the distinction between obligatory and supererogatory acts. But the very existence of the supererogatory is contested — for instance, by many consequentialists.⁸ Moreover, it does not by itself explain our practices of moral criticism.

⁷ But see the discussion in §5.1 on how this may be accomplished by collective action.

⁸ However, consequentialists too must grapple with both faces of morality. One can view the demandingness objection to (maximizing) consequentialism as a charge that they fail to make room for morality’s aspirational dimensions. A (satisficing) consequentialist who appeals to the notion of meeting as opposed to surpassing a minimum threshold may thereby still acknowledge the difference between imperatival and aspirational morality. Alternatively, (scalar) consequentialists who deny that rightness/wrongness are all-or-nothing properties still typically recognize some role, if only practical or derivative, for imperatival concepts that strictly forbid or require (Norcross 2006; McElwee 2010). I am grateful to Shen-yi Liao for discussion of this point.

Since supererogatory acts are good to do but not wrong *not* to do, failing to perform them is not blameworthy. Yet as Gregory Trianosky points out, when people are confronted with opportunities to pursue moral ideals, they typically offer *excuses* if they refuse. He writes: ‘We seem often to feel uncomfortable or even ashamed that we are unwilling to do more than is required of us, to “go the extra mile”’ (Trianosky 1986, pp. 27–28). This suggests that — even though they are not blameworthy — agents are deflecting some kind of moral criticism⁹ that would otherwise be warranted for failing to perform supererogatory acts.

Another approach distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties, where the hallmark of the latter is that agents have latitude in determining when and how to act on them; perfect duties have the logical form ‘Always (or never) do x’, while imperfect duties take the form ‘Sometimes, to some extent, one ought to x’ (Hill 1971, p. 62). Thus, *never* taking up an opportunity to act in accordance with imperfect duty (or exhibiting a long-standing pattern that amounts to such) is blameworthy; but otherwise, token failures to do so on any particular occasion are not.

This raises a question that appears to have been wholly overlooked in the literature: can we still appropriately criticize *token* failures? Intuitively, it seems that we should. After all, token failures seem to be precisely where some kind of moral criticism is most called for. Why wait until agents have exhibited fully blameworthy patterns of conduct, rather than intervening to prevent them from getting there? Moreover, as Trianosky notes, people instinctively head off criticism even when they clearly *are* meeting the minimum threshold set by an imperfect duty: “I gave last week” or “I’m too tired” or even “I’ve already done all I’m required to do” still may seem inadequate and infelicitous as replies. One may still feel embarrassed to use them’ (Trianosky 1986, p. 28).

The trouble is that neither appeals to the supererogatory nor appeals to a ‘weak’ sense of imperfect duty can capture morality’s aspirational face: the fact that it calls on us to pursue ideals which are in fact unrealizable. Imperfect duties (understood weakly) indicate some indeterminate minimum threshold of effort, below which an agent counts as blameworthy and above which an action is supererogatory. But they cannot tell the whole story, because aspirational morality requires us to continue doing as much as we can even if we are well above this

⁹ For Trianosky, these agents are trying to prevent others from judging that they have vicious motives, apart from any wrongdoing: ‘[W]e do not want to appear to be acting frivolously, insensitively, or callously’ (Trianosky 1986, p. 30). But I suspect that the impulse to reach for excuses remains even when others (and we ourselves) know that these vices are not present.

threshold. For this reason, some theorists advocate ‘strong’ conceptions of imperfect duty according to which they serve as ‘ideals of virtue towards which the best of moral agents strive but which even they never fully attain’ (Hale 1991, p. 278), and are ‘incompatible with... seeing morality the way one might see mowing the lawn (or as a child might see doing his homework or performing his boyscout deeds): as something to get out of the way’ (Baron 1987, p. 250). An imperfect duty in the strong sense is a moral aspiration.

To summarize, then: we must not conflate these irreducibly distinct orientations towards morality. The juridical model of criticism is appropriate for morality in the imperatival mode, where persons exercise their agency in deciding whether to comply with a well-defined moral demand. Here, judgments of blameworthiness justify critical responses such as negative sanctions, which serve to recognize that power of choice and condemn its abuse. But morality works differently in the aspirational mode: it always asks more of us, even when we have tried our hardest and done our best. We thus need other forms of criticism sensitive to the ways in which our agency is finite and limited — in other words, responses precisely to the fact that we are *not* free to do whatever we will.

Of course, there is no bright line between the imperatival and the aspirational. We find hard cases when circumstances render it so difficult to heed imperatives that doing so becomes aspirational (for example, avoiding theft or deception when one is without livelihood), and sometimes pursuing ideals is rendered obligatory (see §5.1). But rather than try to pigeonhole all moral claims into the imperatival mould as required by the juridical model, we should re-examine our theories of moral criticism.

3. Formative responses to non-ideal agency

In this section I introduce a distinction between *summative* and *formative* moral criticism, which helps us do justice to both the powers and the limitations of our agency. To bring out the contrast between these two kinds of critical response, I develop an analogy with criticism in educational contexts,¹⁰ where their distinct aims,

¹⁰ I am not claiming, however, that moral criticism is best modelled as a form of pedagogy; the analogy has clear limitations (see §5.4). Although I rely heavily on the insights of philosophers like McKenna (2012), Springer (2013), and Dover (2019) who conceive of moral criticism as a dialogical form of communication, my arguments are intended to apply more broadly.

justifications, and methods¹¹ have been explicitly theorized, and I illustrate how, similarly, formative responses in the moral context function essentially to improve agency.

3.1 From pedagogical evaluation. . .

The ‘summative/formative’ distinction, first introduced by [Scriven \(1967\)](#) and [Bloom, Hastings, and Madau \(1971\)](#), has been widely discussed in pedagogical theory. It is generally agreed that summative evaluations are made to serve the purposes of certification, future placement, or sanctions (for example, prizes or expulsion), in which it is necessary to determine the degree to which students have successfully met certain standards. Quintessential examples include exams, papers, and final course grades. By contrast, the purpose of formative assessment is the provision of *feedback*, that is, information elicited specifically for the purpose of improving performance — and hence not merely for recording purposes or use by a third party ([Sadler 1989](#)). A driver’s license examiner produces a summative evaluation; by contrast, the driving instructor engages only in formative assessment — pointing out mistakes, making suggestions, and so on — not used for determining whether to grant a license.¹²

The distinction is not absolute.¹³ However, it has long been recognized that summative and formative aims are often in tension, for example, when students’ fixation on their letter grade prevents them from absorbing the substantive comments intended to spur learning ([Bloom et al. 1971](#); [Sadler 1989](#)). [Sadler \(1989, p. 119\)](#) thus concludes that ‘many of the principles appropriate to summative assessment are not necessarily transferable to formative assessment; the latter requires a distinctive conceptualization and technology’. For instance, the adequacy of a summative assessment is a function of its ‘validity’ — how accurately it measures the outcome of interest — and ‘reliability’ — consistency across different classrooms — for only then can it be used fairly for certification and so on ([Wiliam and Black 1996](#)). Because of the high stakes involved, summative assessments must evaluate students’ learning as fairly and accurately as possible.

¹¹ I am indebted to the Editors for this way of framing these differences.

¹² I owe this example to Sarah Buss.

¹³ Insofar as formative feedback identifies a gap between actual and desired performance, it already contains implicit summative evaluation ([Taras 2005](#)). But this information may be used for *purposes* which range from exclusively summative to primarily formative ([Wiliam and Black 1996](#)).

By contrast, the bar is significantly lower for formative assessment. Reliability is relatively unimportant because what matters is an individual's own development and not how she compares to a threshold or to others (Sadler 1989). Similarly, we require validity/accuracy only to the extent of indicating the right direction in which to move. Mere feedback does not stratify students into different grades of achievement; rather, it scaffolds learning at whatever level the student happens to find herself. In short, formative responses are fundamentally aimed at improving learning and performance. They thus play a central role in cultivating the attitudes and dispositions essential to inquiry, like curiosity and intellectual tenaciousness; indeed, instructors often regard the cultivation of these virtues as more important than the transmission of actual content knowledge.¹⁴

3.2 . . .to moral criticism

We can now translate this from pedagogy to morality. As it turns out, the *summative* aims of moral criticism are well captured by the juridical model. Just as there are minimally required skills and knowledge of traffic rules that we expect all drivers to possess, so there is a set of moral demands with which we expect all agents to comply. If a person violates a traffic regulation or moral standard, then, she is justifiably subject to negative sanctions (under the right conditions). Following the analogy, summative moral criticism is therefore only justifiable when we have confidence in the fairness and accuracy of our judgments of blameworthiness.

But these, I argued in §2, are precisely what is missing when we try to evaluate failures of aspirational morality. Much less attention has been paid to the possibility of essentially *formative* moral criticism aimed at improving agency.¹⁵ In other words, rather than following a logic of sanctions, such criticism would exhibit a logic of feedback, wherein:

¹⁴ A survey of professional philosophers, for instance, found that the aspects of philosophy seen as least valuable for general education students were those tied to content knowledge: theories and texts. The aspects deemed most valuable, by a wide margin, were the intellectual virtues, for example, openness to criticism, epistemic humility, and commitment to truth (Mills 2018).

¹⁵ Important exceptions include Calhoun (2016) and Springer (2013). Recent 'agency cultivation models' have also highlighted the role of responsibility practices in improving moral agency (Vargas 2013; McGeer and Pettit 2015), but they remain focused on ascriptions of blameworthiness, as do other theorists who emphasize the educational function of blame (for example, Calhoun 1989).

- a discrepancy between actual and ideal performance
- licenses the provision of information about the relevant ideal, perhaps with suggestions for improvement.

Note that the difference here lies in the logical structure rather than the outward forms of these responses. For this reason, very little hinges on whether a particular response counts as ‘blame’ or not. Whether the distinction serves to differentiate blame from its alternative, or merely various species of blame, matters less than recognizing that there is an important contrast here.

Moral criticism conceived of as *feedback* in this way is well suited to the requirements of aspirational morality. Others can provide feedback even when it is beyond an agent’s ability to follow or when she is already operating at full capacity, as when a rock climber is shown how she *would* need to move to reach the top, even though she is physically unable to do so. My point is that since aspirational morality calls on us to do more than we are actually able, moral criticism involves more than mere action guidance.¹⁶ Beyond just telling us what to do, which may be unalterable, criticism helps us to learn, feel, and be motivated in the right ways — that is to say, it enhances our moral aspirations. It is all too easy for imperfect creatures like us to be ignorant of relevant moral facts, to become complacent or self-righteous, to give in to despair or otherwise cease striving. When others train our attention on how far away we are from our ideals, they shore up our agency by prompting us to re-commit to our aspirations, whether by acting better or by cultivating the virtues (for example, altruism, love of justice, public-spiritedness, dignity and self-preservation)¹⁷ necessary for sustaining those aspirations through long-term patterns of moral action.

In brief, summative moral criticism can be justifiably used as a negative sanction against agents who wrongly exercise their agency in ways that violate moral standards. Formative moral criticism, by contrast, is feedback that identifies behaviour falling short of moral

¹⁶ This parallels [Tessman’s \(2015\)](#) claim that moral theory must involve more than action guidance if it is to accommodate certain facts about our experience of moral reality, for example, the impossibility of satisfying some moral demands.

¹⁷ Strengthening one’s inner life is particularly important for those agents whose actions are most severely constrained, that is, dictated by what is required to just survive. For the oppressed, as [Audre Lorde \(1988/2017, p. 130\)](#) famously writes, mere self-preservation is ‘an act of political warfare’. See [Tessman \(2005\)](#) for a lucid account of the virtues occasioned by oppression and resistance.

ideals, in order to motivate, inform, and reinforce our efforts to improve. Formative responses to our actions are thus warranted wherever summative responses are, and even where the latter are not.

3.3 Identifying formative moral responses

What does formative moral criticism actually look like? I suggest that it is present in much of everyday moral criticism, which is animated not so much by an interest in assessing the quality of agents — something treated as foundational or definitional in many philosophical discussions of praise and blame — as by a concern to redirect attention towards the problem at hand (Springer 2013). This kind of ‘course correction’, performed without any investigation into blame-worthiness, is so ubiquitous that it might sometimes not even be best understood as a separate ‘genre of action—like eating or promising or purchasing—but as a *dimension* of our activity’ (Springer 2013, p. 44, emphasis in original). It can be quite subtle, discernible only in a mere tone of voice, raised eyebrow, well-timed question, or a pointed ‘Next time, then!’

For a more fleshed out example (though the reader may substitute her own), consider this exchange excerpted from August Wilson’s play *Fences*, in which best-friends-cum-neighbours Troy and Bono discuss Troy’s marital infidelity to his wife Rose:

Bono: Rose a good woman, Troy.

Troy: Hell, n[—], I know she a good woman. I been married to her for eighteen years. What you got on your mind, Bono?

Bono: I just say she a good woman. Just like I say anything. I ain’t got to have nothing on my mind.

Troy: You just gonna say she a good woman and leave it hanging out there like that? Why you telling me she a good woman?

Bono: She loves you, Troy. Rose loves you.

Troy: You saying I don’t measure up. That’s what you trying to say. I don’t measure up ’cause I’m seeing this other gal. I know what you trying to say.

Bono: I know what Rose means to you, Troy. I’m just trying to say I don’t want to see you mess up.

Troy: Yeah, I appreciate that, Bono. If you was messing around on Lucille I’d be telling you the same thing.

Bono: Well, that's all I got to say. I just say that because I love you both. (Wilson 1986, pp. 62–63)

Here, I read Bono as deploying formative rather than summative moral criticism. He refuses to say that Troy does not 'measure up', that is, to make a judgment of blameworthiness.¹⁸ He does not evince angry or hostile feelings, nor does he seem to be ostracizing, withdrawing from, or modifying his relationship with Troy. Bono does not infer that Troy has ill will towards Rose ('I know what Rose means to you'). It is just that the obvious discrepancy between Troy's affair and ideals of marital love have led him to point it out, and exhort Troy not to 'mess up'. Notably, Bono does not extract promises of changed behaviour. It is enough for him that Troy has adjusted his attitude: no longer defensive, Troy re-affirms the importance of loving Rose and acknowledges that 'messing around on' her is a *problem*. Bono demonstrates that we can magnanimously (or strategically) deploy formative responses even towards actions that actually warrant summative moral criticism, since he would certainly be justified in blaming Troy for the standard-violating offences of deception and promise-breaking. He simply chooses not to.

By declining to summatively evaluate others in acts of moral accommodation (cf. Harman 2016), we lubricate social exchanges in morally charged situations involving strangers as well as our intimates. As Jean Harvey has emphasized: 'Good people are not morally perfect, and supporting each other in the moral life is a nonstarter if we cannot "accept" morally imperfect people' (Harvey 2015, p. 74). Yet she is quick to emphasize that 'accepting' agents into the moral community is compatible with 'calling on them to move forward in their perceptions, thinking and actions' (Harvey 2015, p. 79). If we think back to Trianosky's puzzling cases, as related in §2.2, it should now be evident why and how we can formatively criticize agents' token failures to pursue ideals or perform the supererogatory — that is, how we should call on people to 'move forward'. I will offer some brief sketches of how this might go, by examining three cases of

¹⁸ One might argue that Bono *does* make this judgment but refuses to express it, and this is surely one possible interpretation. But my claim is that Bono *need not* be doing so, for any number of reasons: he may be suspending judgment because he lacks full details, because he does not believe extramarital affairs are necessarily wrong, or because he just cannot square it with his faith in Troy's decency. Later, we hear poignantly in Troy's own words how the affair allowed him to 'be a different man...a part of [him]self' cut off by the 'pressures and problems' of life as a working-class Black man — a revelation which, of course, cannot salve the terrible pain he has caused Rose (Wilson 1986, p. 69).

falling short in our aspirations: of agents who 1) have likely fallen below the threshold of imperfect duty, 2) are at the cusp, but fail to do the supererogatory, and 3) are already operating at full capacity. Drawing together the disparate suggestions of philosophers who have lately championed deviations from juridical models of blame and resentment, I use the framework of aspirational morality to present a more unified picture of the different species of formative response that might apply in morally diverse circumstances.

Beginning with the first case: even when there are genuine grounds for inferring that an agent is blameworthy for failing to meet her imperfect duties, we may still choose to avoid summative criticism. Hannah Pickard (2011), followed by Andrea Westlund (2018),¹⁹ has argued that blame inflicts a characteristic ‘sting’, which arises from blamers’ feelings of *entitlement* to punish. However well-deserved, they claim, such punishment can be threatening and counterproductive because it shuts down moral dialogue (cf. also Pettigrove 2012, pp. 367–68). This is especially relevant for token failures of imperfect duty, since agents have recourse to claiming (correctly) that no one has a right to their aid and hence withholding it is not wrong. Defensive agents may even turn it around, complaining that blamers (‘those do-gooders!’) are overstepping boundaries by meddling in their affairs and trying to tell them what to do. Pickard and Westlund thus advocate ‘detached blame’ and ‘holding answerable’ as ways of judging others blameworthy while avoiding the sting of blame.²⁰ On my view, however, we need not conduct any investigation of blameworthiness whatsoever. To engage in *formative* moral criticism, all we need to know is that an agent could aspire to do better. Since we should all ‘acknowledge that “could do better” will be our own ethical epitaph too’ (Fricker 2007, p. 107), this naturally keeps punishing feelings of entitlement at bay. Instead of pronouncing on agents’ wrongdoing (‘You should have helped/marched/and so on!’), then, we can follow Westlund in summoning them to dialogue that invokes the

¹⁹ Pickard (2011) focuses on therapeutic-patient relationships, but Westlund (2018) argues for broader application on the grounds that common imperfections shot through all of our agency significantly muddies the distinction between therapeutic versus non-therapeutic contexts.

²⁰ Detached blame, for Pickard, consists in a judgment of blameworthiness that may or may not be accompanied by further negative sanctions, but does not involve the expression of any punishing or ‘stinging’ affect. To hold someone answerable, for Westlund, is to demand that she provide some account of her actions while feeling certain reactive attitudes towards her, but it does not involve punitive sanctions.

relevant moral ideal ('Don't you want x to be O.K./clean water for all/and so on?'). This prompts agents to reflect self-critically on the value of moral ideals and their personal relation to them.

In the second case, agents act in ways that cannot be judged blameworthy, but still warrant criticism. Julie Tannenbaum argues in her discussion of 'mere moral failures' that we must identify a reactive attitude that recognizes when blame is unjustified but maintains that the agent is still 'on the moral hook' for her failure, because it was within her control to have acted successfully and she should make up for it (Tannenbaum 2015, p. 60). One candidate is Miranda Fricker's (2007) 'resentment of disappointment', which arises when we cannot blame agents for not acting against the grain of routine social practice, but still lament and hold them responsible for not making some exceptional leap of moral insight that was within their reach. Alternatively, Adrienne Martin describes disappointment stemming from what she calls 'normative hope', a stance in which we 'aspire on someone's behalf that they be more than ordinary' (Martin 2013, p. 130). Because it is a way of 'treating a principle as worth aspiring to, without *insisting* on compliance' (Martin 2013, p. 130, emphasis in original), we feel grateful if others live up to it, but only non-resentful disappointment²¹ when they do not. Thus, when agents blamelessly fail to cross from the obligatory into the supererogatory, we may express resentment of disappointment that they have narrowly missed a chance to go beyond the routine, perhaps by invoking examples of actual moral saints operating at full capacity²² ('You know, Greta Thunberg was fifteen when she began weekly protests by herself...'). Or, when a greater leap is required to achieve the extraordinary, we might feel only non-resentful disappointment and express our normative hopes for them, affirming our faith in their abilities ('Well, I look forward to seeing you next time'). When we point out these missed opportunities to agents with moral aspirations, we remind them of the need to work towards moral ideals. We exhort them to strive for what is challenging but still achievable, and support them in doing so.

²¹ For Martin, resentment is occasioned only when we have a normative *expectation* that others will conform to some principle: we do not feel grateful when they do as we expect, but resentment and indignation if they fail to.

²² For an illuminating account of how actual moral saints raise the moral bar for the rest of us, see Carbonell (2012).

Finally, I suggest that there is room for criticism even when agents are already acting supererogatorily at full capacity. While they are *ex hypothesi* wholly justified in forgoing further opportunities, I suspect that these agents would remain unwilling to turn them down without comment or with an excuse like (I) ‘I’ve already done enough’, as opposed to a more felicitous (II) ‘I’m sorry, but I just can’t take on anything more’. Again, I think this furnishes a clue that some kind of criticism is in principle still appropriate. Why? Because, as Elise Springer (2013) has convincingly argued, a fundamental aim of moral criticism is to *communicate moral concern* to another agent by drawing her attention to some *problem* in the world. Seen from this angle, it is evident that deflective responses like (I) constitute refusals to take up the critic’s concern. And this is not acceptable in the aspirational realm, no matter how much we have already devoted towards our ideals, because morality makes its claims on us so long as there is suffering and injustice in the world. In these cases, formative criticism may not be action-guiding (see §3.2) but would still be warranted. Excuses like (II) indicate that the concern has been acknowledged and taken up, and further criticism is not needed.

Much still remains to be worked out regarding the respective uses of summative and formative responses (see, for example, fn. 34). For the aptness of moral criticism is not purely a function of an act’s moral status; it also depends on the nature of relationships between agents and the contexts within which they act (Harvey 2015). Barrett Emerick has argued, for instance, that we are obliged *not* to disengage or ‘write off’ our loved ones even when they are blameworthy, but instead ‘to play the long game with someone, and to be with them through their moral development—just as we need others to be with us in ours’ (Emerick 2016, p. 15). All in all, moral criticism is a complicated thing, which is not adequately captured by a juridical model of negative sanctions. We face difficult choices that do not follow automatically from judging people blameworthy. Sometimes we view others as violating demands of morality that they could and should have heeded *qua* moral agents. At other times, we view them as flawed beings endowed, sadly, with only imperfect agency — like our own. While I have not provided a comprehensive account of when we should adopt one or the other perspective (or both), I hope to have shown that both are valuable, and we should recognize the distinctive forms of moral criticism, summative and formative, that attend each.

4. The problem of structural wrongdoing

I turn now to the problem of responding to ‘structural wrongs’, a case in which the limitations of individual agency are particularly salient. In this section, I explain the challenge that structural injustice poses for traditional understandings of moral criticism.

4.1 *Perpetuating and addressing structural injustice*

Because people’s choices are always made from a highly constrained set of socially structured options, *structural injustice* persists even in the absence of individual bad actions or attitudes (Lavin 2008; Young 2011; Haslanger 2015; Kaufman, 2020). We are all enmeshed in complex processes whose harmful origins and effects are obscured from view. At the most basic level of material existence, we are embodied beings who consume energy at the expense of other living organisms to stay alive (Shotwell 2016). More contingently, centuries of socio-political domination have erected global systems of exploitation and oppression in virtue of which all of us are linked to or subsist within massive expanses of misery and need. A defining feature of the modern age is that virtually no one can avoid participating (if only indirectly) in these unjust processes. Moreover, most of us are only dimly aware of exactly how we reproduce structural injustice, and do not intend our actions to do so; this marks a salient moral difference compared with ‘classic’ wrongs like murder, rape, and theft.

I thus use the term ‘unendorsed structural wrongs’ (or just ‘structural wrongs’) to refer to actions of an otherwise morally unobjectionable type that harm others by forming part of unjust social-structural processes — usually without the agent’s knowing, willing, or desiring to do so. Identifying these as ‘wrongs’ staves off any implication that these are random or free-floating harms such as those caused by bad luck or (some) natural disasters, stressing instead that those harmed are victims of real injustice.²³ They are actions we have serious reason to care about, just as we do paradigmatic wrongs. However, structural wrongs only produce harm in conjunction with the accumulated actions of others, in the context of systemic injustice. It would be possible for the same act, if performed within an alternative scheme of social arrangements, no longer to cause *unjust*

²³ One might think it an overcorrection to call these ‘wrongs’ and refer to them instead as ‘quasi-wrongs’. I have no objection to this, nor to the opposing view that they are non-paradigmatic but still genuine wrongs. The important thing is that we recognize both their moral weightiness and their distinctness from classic wrongs.

harm.²⁴ Hence, as the modifier ‘structural’ emphasizes, the primary source of their wrongness is located in the overarching *system* of domination as a whole and only very derivatively in the individual acts themselves. Unlike with most paradigmatic wrongs, there are many cases in which the world would not be appreciably improved even if a *particular* agent were to refrain from some structural wrong, for the system as a whole would still perpetuate injustice.²⁵ (It should be conceded that the distinction between paradigmatic and structural wrongs is a blurry one; however, my concern here is not to adjudicate borderline cases. I will assume that there are clear enough cases for a meaningful distinction.²⁶)

For ease of expression, I will use ‘addressing injustice’ to indicate all deliberate efforts, successful or not, to transform or offset the effects of unjust social-structural processes: boycotting goods, reducing emissions, protesting in the streets, calling out oppressive behaviour, staying informed, donating to causes, and so on. Let me be clear that I am not attempting here to establish which actions will be absolutely most effective in bringing about social change. A complete theory of addressing structural injustice must balance a variety of normative and practical considerations: who should incur losses or gains – of what kind, and how much? which strategies and tactics are most efficacious, morally justifiable, sustainable, and so on? Since it is beyond the scope of this article to settle these questions, I simply mean to include all actions that can plausibly be morally expected of individual

²⁴ The kind of contingency here is *sociopolitical*; hence, this counterfactual holds fixed certain basic facts about human biology and psychology. So long as we are embodied beings, for instance, we will need to kill other organisms to survive; there is no form of social organization that could avoid this outcome. This causes harm, but not unjustly; hence, eating living things is not itself a structural wrong. By contrast, eating foods that have been produced under exploitative labour conditions *is* a structural wrong, because they could be produced under a scheme of social arrangements wherein workers are not exploited. I am grateful to the Editors for pushing me to clarify this point.

²⁵ For example, many employers commit the structural wrong of hiring workers under exploitative conditions (for example, in sweatshops, migrant jobs, or the gig economy). Yet it is often the case that these workers would be even *worse* off — under the current system — if they were not so employed. Thus, the solution cannot simply be for employers to stop hiring.

²⁶ For similar accounts, see Pleasants (2008) on ‘institutional wrongdoing’, Lichtenberg (2010) on ‘New Harms’, Harvey (2015) on ‘civilized oppression’, Calhoun (2016) on ‘conventionalized wrongdoing’, and Aragon and Jaggard (2018) on ‘structural complicity’. These concepts do not have the same extension or intension as ‘structural wrong’ as I am defining it, though they each pick out instances of what I would call structural wrongs.

agents as part of the collective social transformation needed to eliminate injustice.

I should also stress that, in examining our practices of interpersonal moral criticism, I do not mean to imply that it is the sole or most important tool for social transformation available to us. It is, however, one tool amongst many, and moreover an omnipresent phenomenon of moral life that takes a certain shape under conditions of injustice. Again, my aim is not to present a comprehensive proposal for rectifying injustice, but to explore how we can respond to another's structural wrongdoing in ways that are consistent with that larger project.

4.2 *The limits of blameworthiness*

It is obvious that many if not most of our actions might qualify as structural wrongs, especially if we include omissions (that is, failures to address injustice). How are we to accommodate this in our practices of moral criticism? As I alluded to in §2.2, a substantial amount of theorizing has been devoted to the question of just how much personal sacrifice is morally required in response to others' needs. But the question of what *follows* when people commit structural wrongdoing or fail to address injustice, wherever the line of duty is drawn, has been surprisingly neglected. For the most part, it is taken for granted that if we have a duty to contribute such-and-such an amount or perform such-and-such actions, then anyone failing to do so may be blamed for it.²⁷

This view faces difficulties, however, which have not been carefully considered. After all, it is possible for agents to act wrongly without being blameworthy, and to judge agents blameworthy without actually blaming them. Both, as I show below, are hard to justify in many cases of structural wrongdoing.

Recall that blameworthiness comprises two elements: we must know that (1) an agent's act was wrong, and (2) she was morally responsible for it — in other words, morally competent and lacking justification or excuse. To begin with, one might resist the idea that so much of our ordinary activity could be morally wrong (cf. [Williams 1973](#); [Sinnott-Armstrong 2005](#)). Yet even if it is wrong (cf. [Wilson 1993](#)), there might be enough justification, as when structural wrongs are deeply woven into valuable forms of life, to absolve us from blame.

²⁷ Indeed, [Arneson's \(2004\)](#) solution to the problem of demandingness is precisely to drive a wedge between wrongness and blameworthiness, from which we may infer that the former is normally taken to entail the latter.

Furthermore, insofar as agents are excused for behaving in ways that do not properly manifest their agency (for example, under coercion, from non-culpable ignorance, and so on), they may likewise have excuses for unendorsed structural wrongs. Purchasing exploitative products, for instance, is unavoidable insofar as people cannot spare the effort and money needed to locate and buy ‘ethically’ sourced products. The same goes for reducing emissions, joining protests, and so on — things we cannot do every single time opportunities arise. People often make injustice-perpetuating choices regarding employment, housing, and so on that they *would* not make if they had better options; hence these actions offer a distorted picture of a person’s moral agency. The more we appreciate how (1) and (2) are called into question, the more unease we should feel about imposing negative sanctions for structural wrongdoing.

Additionally, even if we judge agents blameworthy, it might not be appropriate actually to blame or otherwise sanction them. Further conditions must be in place, two of which are particularly relevant here. First, it is widely thought that blaming is inappropriate when the blamer is hypocritically engaged in the same behaviour (but see [Dover 2019](#)). The ubiquity of injustice generates a high risk of hypocrisy: while it is easy to notice and blame others for habits we have already altered or for failing to support causes near and dear to us, we ourselves have almost certainly overlooked worthy causes and harmful habits of our own. Second, blame may be inappropriate when the epistemic soundness of the judgment of blameworthiness is in doubt ([Coates and Tognazzini 2013](#), pp. 22–23). Negative sanctions are only warranted if we are reasonably confident that we are not mistaken about an agent’s blameworthiness — just as courts can only convict with sufficient evidence, even if the accused truly is guilty. But the epistemic challenges raised by structural wrongs are not trivial. It is virtually impossible to trace how one person’s *particular* actions cause harm to another *specific* individual. This is because of how structural injustice works: harm is produced ‘indirectly, collectively, and cumulatively through the production of structural constraints on others’ possible actions’, rather than as the direct effect of a single isolated action ([Young 2011](#), p. 96). Moreover, since we lack determinate cut-offs specifying precisely how much effort is morally required, it is often difficult to be sure whether some individual has fallen below standard.

On the standard juridical model, then, it seems that moral criticism for structural wrongdoing is largely unjustified. Indeed, structural

theorists have argued that the proper response to (most) agents participating in injustice is not the usual *backward-looking* reactions like blame and resentment. It is a mistake to locate wrongness in individual actions rather than social structure (Young 2011; Haslanger 2015; Zheng 2018a, 2018b; Aragon and Jaggar 2018).

But this does not mean that we cannot be held responsible for injustice, or that no criticism is possible. As Iris Marion Young (2011) has famously argued: to hold agents responsible for structural wrongs, we should assign them the *forward-looking* burdens of joining with others to collectively transform social structures — that is, of addressing injustice. I will take up this thought in the next section.

5. Criticizing injustice

I now present an account of moral criticism for structural wrongdoing that surmounts the challenges raised in the previous section. While blame and other summative responses have a role to play, I contend that our main focus should be on formative moral criticism whose warrant lies not in blameworthiness but participation in injustice.

5.1 *Aspiring to address injustice*

On my view, moral criticism for structural wrongs should be treated primarily, though not exclusively, as a matter of aspirational morality — that is, as a response to agents falling short of an ideal rather than violating a moral standard. Let me explain. It is undeniable that, as I have been at pains to emphasize, victims of injustice have been wronged by massive breaches of moral imperatives. However, injustice does not consist in a violation committed by any single agent,²⁸ but the social-structural system as a whole. What must be ‘sanctioned’ is the *system* — and the proper sentence is to require that the system be reformed. Yet since ‘the system’ is no more than the emergent totality of all the individuals who comprise it, the task devolves upon them: they are mandated to join in collective social transformation (Young 2011; Zheng 2018a, 2018b; Aragon and Jaggar 2018). But for any *individual* (or even collective) agent to confront this task is automatically, in effect, for her to be acting in pursuit of an unrealizable ideal: it is simply not achievable under her own steam. A world of injustice imposes on us a burden to do more than we are able.

²⁸ Of course, many individual bad actors *do* violate moral standards. Still, even if they did not, structural injustice would continue to sustain itself (Haslanger 2015).

This is consistent with acknowledging that a key strategy for dealing with injustice is precisely to break it down into individually realizable obligations, through collective action. Buchanan (1996) maintains that agents are charged with the task of ‘perfecting’ imperfect duties by specifying precisely what agents are to do, when, and to whom, and by making arrangements to ensure compliance.²⁹ He thus contends that ‘when businesses fail to act collectively to create an effective system of concrete duties to respond to an urgent social problem, government may wrest from them the capacity to determine for themselves how they will contribute to the solution’ (Buchanan 1996, p. 34). Similarly, Judith Lichtenberg (2010) argues that the onerousness of our negative duties of non-maleficence can be relieved through collective policies like plastic bag bans. And outside the state, civil society and social movements can collectively prescribe specific actions (for example, that union members go on strike, or that consumers boycott some company); Avery Kolers (2016) argues that our duty to heed these calls for solidarity is a perfect one, because we must always refrain from treating others inequitably. Since conforming to one’s share of a collectively determined obligation is doable, committing a specific structural wrong or failing to address injustice on a specific occasion can indeed license blame and other summative criticism.

Nevertheless, we quickly run into a problem of demandingness characteristic of aspirational morality. Even if we confine ourselves to occasions in which collective action has drawn bright imperatival lines in the sand,³⁰ very few of us can go through life without crossing one or more of them. As Kolers (2016, p. 148) notes, each particular victim of injustice is thoroughly justified in making a claim for redress, but taken as an aggregate the whole demand becomes excessive for any one respondent to answer; thus, we are only obligated to respond to as many demands as we can, without jeopardising our own flourishing and personal autonomy. But this brings us back to conceiving of our *overall* efforts to refrain from structural wrongs and address injustice in an aspirational way.

5.2 Formative reminders

It follows that formative moral criticism will be appropriate for structural wrongs. At the end of §4 I described how structural theorists

²⁹ Perfecting imperfect duties, Buchanan shows, protects against moral laxity (that is, individuals falling below the minimum threshold of duty) while increasing efficiency by clearing away gaps and redundancies through coordination.

³⁰ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this stylish turn of phrase.

conceive of holding non-blameworthy agents responsible for injustice by assigning them the burdens of joining in collective social transformation. This means that we can think of practices of formative moral criticism for structural wrongs as a *communicative vehicle by which we remind or convey to others that they bear the burdens of addressing injustice*. In this case, the discrepancy between actual and ideal behaviour is a structural wrong or a failure to act on an opportunity to address injustice. This licenses others to critically inform us in an ongoing way of the ideals of justice towards which we must strive, that is, to remind us that we must join in efforts to bring about social change. The key thing to note here is that the difficulty of establishing blameworthiness for structural wrongs poses no problem for formative moral criticism. This is because the warrant for formative feedback lies not in blameworthiness, but in falling short of an ideal.

Moreover, once we restrict ourselves to formative responses, the threats of hypocrisy and uncertainty also lose their bite. For it is clearly possible to offer feedback for improving a person's performance even if one cannot execute it oneself (cf. [Sadler 1989](#), p. 139), as an athlete might do with a fellow teammate whose abilities exceed her own. On the structural view, there is a deep sense in which we are all in it together; we each have a hand in injustice, no matter how hard we work against it. Because formative criticism is offered in the spirit of scaffolding rather than sanctioning agency, it remains appropriate even from agents who themselves perpetuate structural wrongdoing. Likewise, there is no need to acquire surefire *evidence* of blameworthiness. However much we contribute, it is still in principle justifiable for others to critically remind us of our distance from the ideal — just as it is appropriate to send out friendly reminders even to those who are doing just as they should ([Zheng 2018a](#)).

5.3 *The bourgeois predicament: an example*

To apply this more concretely, let us consider what R. Jay [Wallace \(2013\)](#) calls the 'bourgeois predicament'. Wallace argues that, for a certain class of people, the projects and relationships that lend meaning to their lives depend on institutions and practices inextricably bound up in injustice (for example, academics in universities that were founded using slave trade profits and continue to reproduce class hierarchies). The predicament is that 'we become *implicated* in the objectionable impersonal structures that we inhabit, insofar as the sources of meaning in our lives are activities that would not be

possible in the absence of those structures' (Wallace 2013, p. 223, emphasis in original) — structures he characterizes as 'lamentable', 'regrettable', and 'unjust'. When a professor at an elite institution teaches seminars equipping her middle-class students to secure high-salaried, high-status employment (and thereby, vested interests in an unjust system), or takes a research leave made possible by the overabundance of precariously employed adjuncts willing to cover last-minute courses so as to pay their bills, her activities — however intrinsically valuable they genuinely are — constitute participation in structural injustice.³¹

What kind of critical moral response is appropriate here? If our professor exhibits behaviour that alienates students from disadvantaged groups, includes no critical perspectives on her syllabi, shows no interest in the plight of her contingently employed colleagues, and so on, then we can hold her answerable for these actions or express disappointment, as described in §3.3, to convey that she should do more to work towards structural transformation. However, such reminders of our moral concerns ('Did you hear about the adjuncts' rally yesterday?') are appropriate even if we imagine that the professor's conduct is unimpeachable on all these fronts, because we can offer them without judging her blameworthy. After all, should we really expect her to refrain from teaching or taking leave, to quit the academy, or secede from human society altogether? This case makes plain that what really needs to change is not so much the actions of any individual, but the entire ecosystem of academic labour, higher education, and the wider political economy of which they form a part. The professor cannot eliminate her implication in injustice by refusing to teach, not going on leave, or taking more drastic measures; and her doing so would not rectify injustice. Still, insofar as there is something lamentable, regrettable, and unjust about this situation,³² it deserves comment. When the occasion presents itself, then, it is appropriate for others to remind her how she should further contribute to efforts towards structural transformation (Zheng 2018b): by directing her attention to methods for improving her courses, expressing

³¹ I owe the examples in this section to two anonymous reviewers.

³² Wallace's concerns are not the same as mine: he focuses on retrospective attitudes towards one's life as it has been lived. His thesis is that these may come apart from moral considerations, i.e., that we *personally* cannot regret objectively *regrettable* circumstances insofar as they are what gave our lives value.

normative hope that she will offer substantial support to the adjuncts' cause, and so on.

In sum, I have argued that blaming and resenting others for structural wrongs is out of place because structural injustice far exceeds our individual agency. Yet our participation in injustice still manifests a wrongful quality to which others are rightfully attuned (though they do not fare any better), and which merits their critical response; refraining from criticism altogether would obscure the fact that we are each required to strive towards an ideal of justice. Insofar as blaming is unwarranted, certain kinds of formative critical response — constructive feedback, expressions of disappointment or hope, and so on — reflect the best we can do and the most we can ask of one another. Moments when structural wrongs come into view are occasions for mutual reminders of how far we remain from our ideals: indeed, our professor could even engage in a kind of pre-emptive self-criticism ('Getting leave is great, but I really regret that. . .') that communicates her own concern to others. By drawing one another into this kind of moral dialogue, we cultivate attitudes and dispositions necessary for struggling towards social transformation: clear-eyed recognition of implication in injustice, courage and resolve, humility, selflessness, and solidarity with others.

5.4 *Some objections*

One might protest that summative responses should play a more prominent role in responding to structural wrongdoing. Blaming and shaming, especially at the collective level, may be particularly effective ways to mobilize action against injustice (Javeline 2003; Jacquet 2016; but see Pettigrove 2012). Where these are directed at specific egregious acts committed by identifiable perpetrators or at unjust social structures as a whole, I agree that such criticism can be fully justified.³³ On the other hand, sometimes politically efficacious expressions of reactive attitudes may outstrip their moral warrant: for example, by denouncing entire classes of people (for

³³ In 2014, for example, protesters in Ferguson, Missouri launched a nationwide movement by marching in the streets for weeks after police officer Darren Wilson killed unarmed Black teenager Mike Brown. They chanted: 'Indict. Convict. Send that killer cop to jail/The whole damn system is guilty as hell!'. I cannot conclusively establish here that Wilson was genuinely blameworthy for Brown's death — but there are surely many cases of violence, repression, and other abuses of power traceable to blameworthy individuals, which are justly sanctioned according to the juridical model. And it is undoubtedly correct to condemn the entire criminal justice system.

example, ‘White people’), of which some members are indeed bad actors but which also include people trying, as we all do, to live ethically within structural constraints. As Cheshire Calhoun (1989) argues, in oppressive contexts the *justification* of moral criticism can cut against its *point*: in other words, if the value of our practices of moral reproach lies in their power to educate and motivate others to act better, then we may have reason to criticize agents in ways they do not deserve. However, as stated earlier, my aim is not to establish what kinds of criticism are most efficacious; I cannot offer here a full account of precisely when these forms of public condemnation and protest are warranted, all things considered.³⁴ While Calhoun emphasizes the tension between point and justification, I am more sanguine that these can go together in a good many cases, because the point of interpersonal *formative* responses — which are in principle³⁵ always justifiable — is precisely to improve agency.

One might also insist that people really are blameworthy for structural wrongdoing. Even if no one has the standing actually to blame, the reasoning goes, there remains a fact of the matter. Moreover, we routinely blame others without a second thought for the risk of hypocrisy or unmet evidentiary standards. In reply, let me say two things. First, I completely agree there are many cases in which we have good reason to judge people blameworthy for structural wrongs — especially powerful agents (McKeown 2015). Greater power weakens structural constraints, and hence increases the likelihood and degree of culpability. Second, given the enormous complexity, opacity, and ineluctability of structural injustice, I am confident there are many cases of structural wrongs in which agents, including the powerful, are genuinely *not* blameworthy. Yet this should not exempt them from criticism. If traditional theories of moral criticism fit uncomfortably with our best understandings of social reality, as has been repeatedly

³⁴ One such case, I think, occurs when acts of injustice must be re-conceptualized in such radically different ways that this is unlikely to occur without trenchant summative criticism. As Calhoun (1989) stresses, moral criticism functions conceptually to construct particular moral identities that become available for use in moral thinking. For instance, one reason that police brutality remains so rampant is that we are deeply socialized into perceiving police as ‘defenders of public safety’; hence, social movements that condemn police officers as ‘killers’ and perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence thereby starkly expose vital aspects of the situation that are easily obscured by pernicious ideologies, and which are necessary for initiating critical reflection on the carceral system as a whole. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for valuable discussion of this point.

³⁵ Of course, there may be situations, for example, of grief and mourning, in which criticism of any form is not all-things-considered appropriate.

observed (Lavin 2008; Scheffler 2009; Lichtenberg 2010; Young 2011; Haslanger 2015; Kaufman, 2020), we should try out new moral frameworks and practices that may prove more apt, illuminating, or viable.

Along similar lines, one might acknowledge the usefulness of formative moral criticism for friends and allies, but deny that it is appropriate for political enemies seeking to perpetuate injustice. This is a formidable objection. For those of us suffering at others' hands, blame and resentment might be justifiable in spite—or because—of considerations involving standing and evidence. As victims, we might have special moral standing to blame implicated agents, and occupy better epistemic standpoints to ascertain their blameworthiness. While I concede this, I also want to stress the importance of developing formative responses even where sanctions are justified. For punitive measures must still be paired with avenues for reform and rehabilitation (Lacey and Pickard 2019); as McGeer and Funk (2017, p. 539) put it: 'we human beings not only care about communicating a message of reprobation in our response to offenders, we care about...their undertaking self-transformation and reform'. It may be necessary to pass through blame and resentment to bring down injustice; but we fail to reach genuine justice if we stop there without promoting deeper transformation on all sides.³⁶ However detestable our opponents, they remain members of the world that we need to build. It may help, then, to think of them not only as perpetrators but products of centuries-old social processes who have the potential, as we all do, to act better under a more just scheme of social arrangements.

Finally, it might be thought that my view encourages a kind of 'holier-than-thou' condescension. One might worry that outside educational contexts and amongst moral equals,³⁷ formative responses are liable to come off as insulting or arrogant, because the critic presumptuously makes claim to some kind of privileged knowledge or authority (Calhoun 1989, Dover 2019). This objection highlights an important difference between educational contexts and ordinary moral life: our grasp of moral knowledge tends to be far more tenuous

³⁶ As many radical thinkers have stressed (for example, Freire 1970), true liberation requires that we reach a point where the 'oppressor versus oppressed' dichotomy is transcended altogether. Prison abolitionists such as Angela Davis (2003), moreover, have argued against the use of concepts like 'criminals' that mark out harm doers as irredeemably different or separate from the rest of us; they stress that actual victims typically need much more than the punishment of their malefactors to truly heal and feel that justice has been achieved.

³⁷ It must be emphasized that engaging in moral criticism is never an easy matter amongst people of unequal *social* status (Hutchison, Mackenzie, and Oshana 2018).

than our understanding in other domains, and (*contra* the Sophists) there can be no accredited instructors of morality. Accordingly, even though moral criticism can — especially in oppressive contexts — serve to educate, this does not happen via an asymmetrical, unidirectional transmission of knowledge.³⁸ Instead, it more closely resembles the feedback that scholars give one another when they workshop each other's projects, even when there is disagreement over the evaluation criteria; this kind of formative criticism is essentially different from the summative assessments that they make during peer review, when it must be decided whether a submission 'makes the grade'. As theorists like Springer (2013) and Dover (2019) stress, giving moral criticism can be thought of as a process of opening up critical dialogue: as the first move in a conversation, where the communication of moral concern sparks self-scrutiny and exchanges of moral insight. Initiating this kind of conversation does not require the critic to possess (though it *can* sometimes stem from) superior moral knowledge. In effect, much moral criticism is not so much about issuing definite *prescriptions* for how to act as it is constructing open-ended *prompts*: it poses a problem — some discrepancy between an agent's action and a moral ideal — that should motivate her to reflect critically or engage in a conversation on how it can be solved. In the case of structural wrongs, where the solutions require large-scale collective action, this is usually achieved by drawing an agent's attention to the ways in which her actions are implicated in unjust wrongs, and the obligation to right them through participation in structural transformation. Thus, giving one another formative criticism for structural wrongdoing need not³⁹ be a signal of one's superior virtue, but an ongoing acknowledgement of how far we all have to go.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that we should distinguish between two kinds of justification for moral criticism. Summative responses are warranted

³⁸ The kind of learning that takes place through moral criticism conforms much more closely to what Paolo Freire (1970) dubs the 'problem-posing model', which contrasts with the dominant 'banking model' of education in which teachers 'deposit' knowledge into students' minds. For Freire, education is much less hierarchical, less didactic, and much more dialogical, taking place between 'teacher-students' and 'student-teachers' with the common goal of solving problems in the world that sits between them.

³⁹ Regrettably, though, it can go wrong in just this way; see Tosi and Warmke (2016).

because agents possess the *power* to exercise agency, which they sometimes choose to do *wrongly*. When we can confidently establish blameworthiness, negative sanctions are justifiably imposed on persons who fall below standard. Formative responses, by contrast, are warranted precisely because agency is *constrained* in important respects and we exercise it only *non-ideally*. Such feedback, which aims only to improve individuals' actions and attitudes, is called for in light of the fact that all our agency is finite, limited, imperfect, and easily thwarted by social forces.

I have also demonstrated how expanding our moral repertoire helps us do justice to the moral complexity of structural wrongs. This approach nudges us from the realm of ethics, that is, of moral claims incumbent on individual lives, into the domain of political and social philosophy, concerning how we as a community (or communities) should structure our shared social world. Only by keeping one foot in both can moral theory adequately rise to the challenges of our modern world.⁴⁰

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