The problem with moralism

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Abstract
Moralism is often described as a vice. But what exactly is wrong with moralism that makes it aptly described as a character flaw? This paper will argue that the problem with moralism is that it downgrades the force of legitimate moral criticism. First, I will argue that moralism involves an inflated sense of the extent to which moral criticism is appropriate. Next, I will examine the value of legitimate moral criticism, arguing that its value stems from enabling us to take a stand against immoral behavior. Finally, I will argue that unwarranted moral criticism downgrades the force of legitimate moral criticism and that this is why moralism should be seen as a vice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Moralism is a criticism leveled at people who are overly judgemental, self-righteous or unforgiving. It describes the busybody at the school gate, always on the lookout for failings in her fellow parents. It also describes the tabloid newspaper columnist, that paragon of moral authority, raking for scandal in the private lives of the famous. But what exactly is wrong with moralism and what makes this trait a character flaw? The moralistic person may well be motivated by a dedication to morality and a firm belief that she is helping to improve the behaviour of others. In order to explain why the moralistic person ought to change her behaviour, we need to have a clear understanding of why this behaviour is problematic.

A number of answers have been suggested to the question of why moralism should be viewed as a vice. Some see moralism as involving a violation of our moral requirements to others. For example, Fullinwinder (2006, pp. 10–11) claims that morality requires us to be charitable towards other people’s behaviour. Moralism is wrong, then, because it violates this duty to others. Others see moralism as damaging the moral character of the moralistic agent. Coady (2006, p. 25) for example, claims that moralism, ‘can bring with it crippling psychological attitudes that themselves damage the operation of moral judgement.’ Similarly, according to Dean’s (2012) reading of Kant, moralism displays a flawed character and serves as an obstacle to moral improvement. Finally, moralism has been claimed to be damaging to the agent’s own interests. Jauss (2008, p. 255) claims that moralism may deprive people of potentially valuable aesthetic and epistemic experiences.

My aim in this paper is not to cast doubt on any of these existing claims about what is wrong with moralism. Rather my aim will be to identify and defend a new account of why moralism is rightly considered a vice. I take the
account I will defend to identify the central reason why moralism is a vice, though this is compatible with moralism also being bad for the reasons identified by previous work on the topic. I will argue that moralism is bad because it undermines the force of legitimate moral criticism to morally blameworthy agents and states of affairs. My discussion will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will explore various accounts of what moralism is. Drawing on these existing accounts, I will argue that a disposition to engage in inappropriate moral criticism is a core part of moralism. My strategy will then be to explore the general functions of the legitimate moral criticism of agents and states of affairs in order to shed light on why illegitimate moral criticism is problematic. In Section 3, I will outline existing work on the function of moral criticism. I will then, in Section 4, argue that moralism serves to undermine the function of legitimate moral criticism.

2 | WHAT IS MORALISM?

Moralism is characterized in various ways in the small but growing literature on the subject. In his book-length investigation of the subject Taylor (2012, p. 153) claims that moralism is, ‘a failure to recognize what moral thought or reflection requires (and does not require) of us’. This failure can take various forms. It can involve making judgements about people while failing to recognize their common humanity. When we make moral judgements about other people without responding to or recognizing them in the way that it is appropriate to respond to our shared humanity we commit the vice of moralism. According to Taylor a purely judgemental response to another’s wrongdoing is often not enough. If we are to respond in a way that recognizes our shared humanity we must also respond sympathetically, which involves having the correct emotional reactions to the person we are judging. Fullinwider (2006, p. 9) makes a related point, claiming that, ‘the bad odour of moralism, in short, arises from judgementalism, the habit of uncharitably and officiously passing judgement on other people’.

Another way in which moralism can present itself according to Taylor (2012, Ch. 4) is in allowing moral thought and judgement to extend their influence beyond their proper limits in our lives. Driver (2006, p. 37) makes a similar claim, arguing that moralism is, ‘the illicit introduction of moral considerations’. In other words, there are some situations in which moral judgement is simply inappropriate and moralism may involve a disposition to make moral judgements in these situations.

Moralism then, can involve unsympathetic or uncharitable reactions to another’s action or the making of moral judgements in situations where they are inappropriate. Dean (2012, p. 577) summarizes these two aspects of moralism as, ‘being overly concerned with making moral judgments or being uncharitable in the judgments one makes’. What is it underlies both of these forms of behaviour that makes it appropriate to describe both as features of moralism? Both forms of moralism are failures of moral judgement but it is important to be clear about the precise nature of the failure. Someone might fail to recognize what morality does and does not require without being guilty of moralism. For example, a right wing extremist who claims that we have a moral duty to engage in ethnic cleansing fails to recognize what morality requires of us. What is wrong with her view, though, is not that it is moralistic but that her moral judgements are reprehensible. On the other hand someone who continually points out the many ways in which people could improve their moral behaviour may well be right about the ways in which others could morally improve themselves. Take, for example, the behaviour of a busybody who continually subjects parents to moral criticism for failing to do what is best for their children. Such a person may be right about the ways in which the parenting could be improved. This is compatible with her behaviour being moralistic. In this example, the problem is not that the judgement about how the parenting could be improved is wrong but that the criticism is inappropriate.

However, if moralistic moral judgements are not always false then what is the problem with these judgements? To answer this question we should consider why we might object both to those who react in uncharitable or unsympathetic ways to the actions of others and to those who make moral judgements where they are uncalled for. The common problem with both forms of behaviour is that they involve an inflated sense of the extent to which moral criticism is appropriate. This inappropriate moral criticism can take various forms.
One way in which moral pressure may be inappropriate is by engaging in forms of address appropriate for moral obligations when the act someone can perform is supererogatory rather than obligatory. A common claim made in the literature on moral obligation is that if an act is morally obligatory then it is appropriate to demand that others perform the act. For instance, Mill (2001/1863, p. 49), claimed that, 'it is part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it'. Similarly, many who work on the nature of moral obligation claim that it is appropriate to blame those who fail to perform a moral obligation (unless they have an excuse). Darwall (2013, p. 21) for example claims that, 'It is a conceptual truth that an act is morally wrong, if, and only if, it is blameworthy if done without an excuse'. These forms of address are appropriate when the act in question is a moral obligation but inappropriate when the act is supererogatory or beyond the call of duty. As Urmson (1958/1969) pointed out, there are some acts that are morally praiseworthy that it would be inappropriate to demand from people or to blame people who fail to perform them. Consider the opportunity to donate a kidney to a stranger. Many of us are in position to make such a donation but few of us think that doing so is morally required. To demand that someone donates a kidney to a stranger or to chastise someone who fails to do so would be to put inappropriate moral pressure upon that person and be a clear display of the vice of moralism.

Moral pressure can also be inappropriate when an act is morally indifferent rather than supererogatory. Kant (1996/1785, XVI) makes this point in the following:

But that man can be called fantastically virtuous who allows nothing to be morally indifferent and strews all his steps with duties, as with man-traps; it is not indifferent to him whether I eat meat or fish, drink beer or wine, supposing that both agree with me. Fantastic virtue is a concern with petty details which, were it admitted into the doctrine of virtue, would turn the government of virtue into tyranny.

While we might disagree with his choice of examples, the point Kant makes is clear. It is wrong to put moral pressure on someone to perform an act that is morally indifferent. Kant does not use the term moralism to describe this behaviour but his ‘fantastically virtuous’ man clearly exhibits the vice of moralism.

Another way in which moral pressure can be inappropriate is when it is applied to people who have an excuse for acting wrongly. For example, suppose a friend of mine promises to meet for lunch to help me prepare for an important job interview. However, when I arrive at the agreed time and place he is nowhere to be seen and won’t respond to my phone calls. I’m annoyed; I think quite rightly that he has acted wrongly. However, I later find out that he was suffering from depression. In this case we might say that although my friend acted wrongly, he has an excuse. In such a case it would be inappropriate to blame my friend for his action and to do so would again be evidence of the vice of moralism.

Finally, moral pressure can be inappropriate even when applied to someone who has performed a wrong act and who has no excuse. To see why, imagine that I perform a minor wrong such as being rude to a friend. This is wrong and some degree of blame is appropriate in this case. However, now imagine the friend responds with a level of blame that would only be appropriate for extreme wrongdoing such as murder. Perhaps she denounces me to my friends and family and refuses to be friends with anyone who won’t join her in denouncing me. In this case I deserve moral criticism but the degree of criticism far exceeds the appropriate level.

I have argued that moralism involves an inflated sense of the extent to which moral criticism is appropriate. Moralism commonly expresses itself through moral criticism of agents who are not deserving of that criticism.

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1 Other advocates of this view include Gibbard (1990, p. 42) and Skorupski (1999, p. 29).
2 Coady terms this ‘moralism of scope’ (2006, p. 25).
3 See Austin (1956) and Baron (2007) for accounts of the nature of excuses and how they differ from justifications. Some reject the claim that it is possible to act wrongly and to have an excuse. For example, Rivera-López (2006). I will skip over this complication as it has no major consequences for my discussion, those who reject this claim can simply ignore my claim that this is one of the ways in which moral pressure can be inappropriate.
4 Driver makes a similar point (2006, p. 37).
Before proceeding further it is worth quickly clarifying the limitations in what I am claiming here. I am not claiming that this is the only way in which moralism would present itself. Perhaps someone could be moralistic if they had an inflated sense of the extent to which positive reactions are appropriate. Nor am I saying that a moralistic person will necessarily engage in moral criticism to a greater extent than a non-moralistic person. The vice of moralism is a disposition to act in certain ways on certain occasions. Theoretically, someone could possess such a disposition without the relevant circumstances ever occurring. In contrast, a non-moralistic person may frequently find herself in situations in which moral criticism of others is appropriate and, as a result, engage in moral criticism frequently. What is true of the moralistic person, though, is that she will be more strongly disposed to engage in moral criticism than the non-moralistic person.

3 | THE VALUE OF LEGITIMATE MORAL CRITICISM

Moralism involves a disposition to engage in moral criticism of agents who do not deserve that criticism. I will argue that this aspect of moralism provides an explanation, or at least a partial explanation, of why moralism is problematic. However, before investigating what is wrong with illegitimate moral criticism, let us first investigate the function of legitimate moral criticism. Once we have a clear picture of the role that legitimate moral criticism plays in our lives we will be well placed to see why moralism is problematic.

To start let us consider what role blame plays in our lives. A good place to start our investigation is to look at the recent work on functional accounts of blame. According to these accounts, we can identify blame by its functional role. It is worth noting before we proceed that this is far from the only way in which we might seek to provide an account of the nature of blame. We might also seek to identify blame with certain kinds of judgements (see Watson, 1996; Zimmerman, 1998), emotions (see Strawson, 1962; Wallace, 1994) or conative attitudes (see Scanlon, 2008; Sher, 2006). In what follows I will examine only functionalist accounts of blame. My reason for this is that my goal in this section is to examine what function blame performs in our moral lives. Even if we are not ultimately convinced that the nature of blame is best identified by its function, we may nevertheless learn important lessons about the function of blame by looking to such accounts.

A view held by a number of philosophers who endorse a functionalist account of blame is that blame functions as a form of moral protest. As Hieronymi (2001, p. 530) argues, ‘In resentment the victim protests the trespass, affirming both its wrongfulness and the moral significance of both herself and the offender’. Smith (2013, p. 39) makes a similar point claiming, ‘It is only those modifications of attitudes that are undertaken as a way of protesting the relationship-impairing attitudes of others that qualify as instances of moral blame’. The common ground in both of these accounts is that blame functions as a form of protest against ways of acting that are deemed unacceptable.

Do we need this form of protest? In responding to the suggestion that feminists should seek to move beyond our practices of praise and blame, Houston (1992, p. 133) makes the following response:

I feel that to renounce blame is to leave myself without recourse when I am wronged; I feel I have no way to declare my boundaries, assert my rights, defend myself when I am treated unfairly or hurt. Along with this heightened sense of vulnerability comes fear: can I trust a world in which I cannot blame? Accompanying this fear is a sense of powerlessness. We blame not just on our own behalf but also on behalf of others. Without recourse to blame, I feel powerless to protest on behalf of others.

We need blame then in order to take a stand against abhorrent forms of behaviour, to protect our rights and the rights of others. Blame is the primary way in which we can make this form of protest. Eradicating blame would deprive us of our most powerful way of protesting others’ actions. As Calhoun (1989) points out, this function of blame is particularly important in cases where there is widespread moral ignorance. In such cases, a refusal to blame an action is

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5This is the label given by Coates and Tognazzini (2013, p. 15).
6Others who endorse the claim that protest is part of the function of blame include Talbert (2012) and McGeer (2013).
likely to be interpreted as sanctioning that action as morally permissible. It is primarily through blame that we can signal to the agent and to others that we find the action morally unacceptable.

It is worth noting that not everyone who endorses a functionalist account of blame, sees protest as the primary function of blame. For example, Duff’s (1986, p. 70) characterization of the function of blame stresses the importance of communication rather than protest. Alternatively, Bennett’s (2013, p. 78) functionalist view of blame stresses the importance of symbolism. Despite the differences between these different functionalist accounts, the valuable role that blame plays remains much the same. Blame is important on this view because it helps to raise awareness (either through protest, symbolism or a broader notion of communication) that a certain way of behaving is morally unacceptable. It plays an important role in our moral lives precisely because it enables us to take a stand against certain forms of behaviour. This I take to be a plausible view of the function and value of blame. I do not though wish to commit myself to the claim that we should analyze blame in terms of this function. Even if we do not think the functionalist analysis is a plausible analysis of blame we can accept that it provides a plausible view of the role blame commonly plays in our lives.

I have focused in this section on the role that blame plays in our lives. I take it though that the role of demands is very similar. When we make legitimate moral demands of others we indicate that we would find a given course of action or inaction to be morally unacceptable. We take a stand against the possibility of the target of the demand acting in a way that is unacceptable, as well as signaling the same to others. Like blame, moral demands are valuable precisely because they enable us to take a stand against immoral actions.

4 | THE PROBLEM WITH MORALISM

So far I have argued that a central way in which moral criticism is expressed is through blame. I then argued that one of the central reasons why moral criticism like blame is valuable is that it allows us to take a stand against certain forms of behaviour that we deem to be morally unacceptable. Given that this is why moral criticism is valuable, what is the problem with unwarranted moral criticism of others? The problem, I will argue, is that by engaging in moral criticism when it is unwarranted, we downgrade the force of legitimate moral criticism.

The starting point for this argument is a neglected point made by Urmson in his defence of the need to make room for supererogation in moral theory. Urmson first argues that we should make room for supererogatory acts in order to capture an important part of pre-theoretical, commonsense morality. Urmson then provides five reasons to think that a moral code that makes room for supererogation will do a better job of serving humanity than one that does not. The relevant reason for our purposes is outlined in the following:

If we were to represent the heroic act of sacrificing one’s life for one’s comrades as a basic duty, the effect would be to lower the degree of urgency and stringency that the notion of duty does in fact possess. The basic moral code must not be in part too far beyond the capacity of the ordinary men on ordinary occasions, or a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code would be an inevitable consequence; duty would seem to be something high and unattainable, and not for ‘the likes of us’ (Urmson, 1958/1969, p. 70).

Urmson’s point here is that a moral system that treats all morally praiseworthy acts as morally required will downgrade the force of moral criticism and moral demands. The idea behind this claim is very plausible. A moral code that demands that people achieve a standard of moral behaviour that is beyond the level that most people are capable of achieving will lead to a situation in which people regularly violate their moral obligations. In a situation where people regularly violate their moral obligations then, Urmson claims, respect for the moral law will be eroded, leading to a lower level of moral behaviour than would have occurred if the standards of moral obligation had been set at a lower, more realistic level. Urmson (1958/1969, p. 70) supports this claim with the following comparisons to legal rules:

7See also Mckenna (2012) and Macnamara (2011).
The prohibition laws asked too much of the American people and were consequently broken systematically; and as people got used to breaking the law a general lowering of respect for the law naturally followed; it no longer seemed that a law was something that everybody could be expected to obey.

Urmson’s examples show clearly the danger with imposing unrealistic demands in the legal context. Once people find that they are regularly incapable of obeying the law then they become accustomed to breaking it. This in turn leads to an erosion of respect for the law and behaviour moves further away from the ideal than it would be if the laws prescribed sub-optimal but realistic standards of behaviour. According to Urmson the same is true in the moral case. Making the general standards of moral obligation too demanding would lower the average level of moral attainment.

What would be the cause of this erosion of the force of moral obligation? According to Urmson the problem arises because moral obligations are acts that it is legitimate to demand from people and to blame people who fail to perform. As Urmson (1958/1969, p. 70) puts the point:

If we are to exact basic duties like debts, and censure failure, such duties must be, in ordinary circumstances, within the capacity of the ordinary man. It would be silly for us to say to ourselves, our children and our fellow men, ‘This and that you and everyone else must do’, if the acts in question are such that manifestly but few could bring themselves to do them.

If we start treating all morally optimal acts as morally obligatory then we will be applying these forms of censure far more often than we do at present. Moreover, we will be applying these forms of address in situations where performing the morally optimal act is something that ordinary people will usually fail to do. As Urmson points out, it seems reasonable to think that this will erode the force of these forms of address, so that they become less powerful tools of moral protest or persuasion. If Urmson is right then a moral system that demands too much will undermine its own goals by reducing general motivation to comply with moral requirements and lower the general level of moral behaviour. This means that there is a trade-off to be made between how much moral obligations demand from us and the motivational efficacy of such requirements.

If we accept that limiting the scope of our moral obligations, and the related moral demands and censure, is necessary in order to retain the motivational force of these obligations, then we can see what is problematic about someone who engages in moral demands and censure too liberally. The problem with such a person is that they will downgrade the motivational force of legitimate moral criticism by desensitizing people to these crucial means of moral protest and persuasion.8 Over time, this behaviour will be counter-productive, as the attempt to morally improve people will lead to a lowering of the average level of moral attainment.

While Urmson looks only at the case for not treating all morally praiseworthy acts as morally obligatory, similar arguments can be made to cover the range of actions that are characteristic of moralism. Engaging in moral criticism towards those who perform morally indifferent acts may not be asking people to achieve more than they are capable of. However, it seems reasonable to expect that this too will erode the force of the moral address. The first reason to think this is that it will increase the frequency with which people are addressed with moral criticism, something that is likely to dull their sensitivity towards such criticism. The more serious problem though is that the continued encroachment on people’s space to pursue their projects, goals and desires without being subject to the moral censure of others will be greatly reduced. Such a situation seems likely to foster resentment towards moral criticism itself, leading in turn to a decrease in respect for legitimate forms of moral criticism.

8Julia Driver makes a separate, though related, claim in her critique of hyperactive ethics (1994). Driver argues that attempts to impose one’s values on other people repels people from accepting one’s moral views. Those seeking to change the moral views of those they disagree with ought, at least in some cases, to deploy moral restraint. Failure to do so is likely to frustrate one’s attempts at persuasion. The view I am defending in this paper is separate from Driver’s claim, as she is looking only at cases where two people hold different moral values while my analysis would apply to cases where someone demands more than she should from someone who shares her values.
The same problems apply for addressing moral criticism towards those who have an excuse for their wrongdoing. This too seems likely to both dull the senses and foster resentment towards moral criticism. A similar claim can also be made about addressing a high degree of blame towards those who deserve only minor criticism. An increase in exposure to the severest forms of moral criticism also seems likely to dull the senses towards the severe forms of such criticism and foster resentment towards moral criticism in general. If someone is castigated for performing a minor moral wrong then this form of censure will have less force against more serious moral failings. This shows that all of the ways in which moralism may manifest itself that I discussed in Section 1 can be objected to on the grounds of downgrading the force of legitimate moral criticism.

Moral criticism plays an important role in our lives through helping us to take a stand against courses of action that are morally unacceptable. I have argued that all of the ways in which moralism is characteristically expressed are likely to downgrade the force of this moral criticism. The problem with moralism then is that it erodes the power of our most important means of taking a stand against morally unacceptable forms of behaviour. By being free and easy with moral criticism the moralist downgrades the force and value of moral criticism in general. In doing so she not only harms the victim of her inappropriate criticism but also, in an indirect way, the entire moral community. Moralism then is not a vice to be treated lightly. It is a vice that harms all of us even when we are not directly the victims of it. Moreover, it is a vice that threatens our ability to persuade others that their behaviour is unacceptable and in doing so, threatens morality at its core.

5 | OBJECTION AND RESPONSE

One objection that might be raised against my argument is that it assumes an undemanding view of moral obligations. On a radically demanding account of moral obligations (e.g., Feldman, 1986), according to which we are always required to perform the best act available, then perhaps an occasion would never arise in which anyone could correctly be accused of possessing an inflated view of the extent to which moral blame is appropriate. If we are always required to perform the best act available then we might think that it is always appropriate to blame someone who has not performed the best available action.

However, my argument does not depend on an undemanding view of obligations. Even a radically demanding view of moral obligations can leave room for the possibility that there are acts that are supererogatory. Take, for example, Singer’s (1972, p. 231) radically demanding principle which states we are morally required to prevent something bad from happening if in doing so we would not be sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Even such a radically demanding principle as this allows room for acts of supererogation. For example, if someone chooses to sacrifice something of comparable moral importance in order to prevent something bad from happening then this may count as supererogatory on such a view. This shows that this view leaves room for people to act moralistically by blaming people who meet but do not surpass their obligations.

In response, it might be claimed that my argument does at least depend on a view of moral obligations that allows some room for supererogation and so would be incompatible with a moral theory that held that we are always required to do the morally best action available. However, my argument can be accepted even with those who hold such a radical view, as blaming people for the non-performance of supererogatory acts was only one of the ways that I identified in which an inflated sense of the extent to which moral criticism is appropriate might manifest itself is appropriate. Even if no acts of supererogation were available, moral criticism could still be inappropriate when aimed at those who have performed a morally indifferent act, or at those who have performed a wrong act but have an excuse and finally when the extent of the criticism is excessively severe in relation to the wrong that has been committed. The problem I identify with moralism can be accepted then even by those who endorse such a radical view of moral obligations.

An alternative way in which my argument could be made compatible with such a radical view of moral obligations would be to hold that while we are morally required to perform the morally best act available, we should not demand the same from others due to the negative consequences of doing so. Such a view is suggested by Singer (1972, p. 238).
CONCLUSION

I began this paper by pointing out that a core component of moralism is an inflated view of the extent to which moral demands and criticism are appropriate. Moralism commonly expresses itself, I claimed, through blaming people for not performing supererogatory acts, blaming people who have acted in a morally indifferent way, blaming those who acted wrongly but who have an excuse and through excessive blame of those who only deserve mild criticism. I then argued that moral criticism plays an important role in our moral lives in enabling us to take a stand against morally unacceptable forms of behaviour. Finally, I argued that all of the ways in which moralism commonly presents itself serve to erode the force and efficacy of moral criticism. As a result moralism threatens our most powerful means of successfully challenging immorality. In order to protect morality we must be on guard against the moralists.

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