

# 1 Moral Criticism and Structural Injustice

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## 5 6 1. Introduction

7  
8 We are dual-faceted creatures. On the one hand, each of us has the power of individual agency:  
9 we experience our choices as up to us, to do with as we will. On the other hand, we confront a  
10 world that prevents us from doing as we would choose: we are finite beings subject to limitations  
11 of time, space, and energy, and we are inexorably caught up in wider sociohistorical processes.  
12 This double nature has implications for our interpersonal practices of *moral criticism*, that is, our  
13 evaluative responses to other agents' actions and attitudes. While extant theorizing is dominated  
14 by a focus on reactive attitudes like blame and resentment, many have noted that these alone  
15 seem inadequate to the task of responding fully to the variety and complexity of problems we  
16 encounter in moral life.

17 One of these is the problem of living ethically in a highly unjust world. It has become  
18 impossible to ignore the moral implications of everyday actions that contribute to globalized  
19 systems of exploitation and oppression: eating foods whose production contributes to the  
20 devastation of the planet, wearing clothing stitched by maltreated workers, or indulging in  
21 middle-class enjoyments while others are sick, starving, imprisoned, and impoverished. I will  
22 refer to such forms of quotidian participation in injustice as 'structural wrongs'. Structural  
23 wrongs raise challenges for moral theory. For instance, how should we account for them in our  
24 practices of moral criticism? When the world's most pressing moral problems result from  
25 complex forces wholly outside individual control, blaming people for structural wrongs can seem  
26 injudicious. And yet, moral critique feels absolutely necessary.

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

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

43 us to expand our moral repertoire of critical responses to include both summative and formative  
44 criticism of individual shortcomings.

## 45 **2. Morality, in two keys**

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

50

### 51 *2.1 The difference between oughts and ideals*

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

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

73 In response to this moral experience, philosophers since at least Kant onwards have tried to  
74 capture the felt difference between these two kinds of moral claims: by distinguishing ‘negative’  
75 vs. ‘positive’ duties or ‘perfect’ vs. ‘imperfect’ duties, ‘duties of justice’ vs. ‘duties of virtue’, or  
76 ‘moral rules’ vs. ‘moral ideals’ (e.g., Gert 2004). More broadly, we speak of the Good vs. the  
77 Right, where the former is variously characterized as ‘axiological’, ‘evaluative’, or pertaining to  
78 *values*, while the latter is ‘deontic’, ‘normative’, or based on *duties* (for an overview, see  
79 Tappolet 2013). Whatever we make of any one of these distinctions, taken together they  
80 adumbrate a fundamental duality in the nature of morality.

81 This duality, however, has not been fully appreciated in most theories of moral criticism,

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

82 which rely on a model derived from systems of legal punishment (cf. Young 2011; Westlund  
83 2018; Dover 2019). Just as breaking the law licenses the imposition of penalty or punishment,  
84 moral criticism on this view operates according to a logic of sanctions, in which:

- 85  
86 (A) an agent's violation of moral standards  
87 (B) licenses the imposition of negative sanctions against her, under certain conditions.  
88

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

97 The juridical model, however, implicitly presumes that morality is essentially imperatival.  
98 Establishing (1) the wrongness of an act is easiest where there exist well-defined, well-  
99 understood moral standards, e.g., prohibitions against lying or cheating. But there are no clear-  
100 cut standards delineating just how much striving towards an aspirational moral ideal is enough,  
101 notwithstanding obvious cases on either side. Establishing (2) responsibility for some act  
102 requires that it fall within the agent's capacity (in the relevant sense) to do. But by their very  
103 nature, ideals are in some sense *unrealizable*.<sup>4</sup> They can never be fully achieved; otherwise, they  
104 would be mere goals. Since the concept of moral ideals remains undertheorized (Coady 2008),  
105 let me say a bit more about them before moving on.

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

115 Aspirational morality is populated by various ideals of different shapes and sizes. Some

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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'.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Sarah Buss for this way of putting the point.

116 ideals represent morally perfect worlds (e.g., the kingdom of ends), while others represent  
117 morally perfect agents (e.g., the virtuous person). Some are optional and personally chosen by  
118 individuals (e.g., being a good professor), while others are mandatory (e.g., eliminating  
119 injustice). I am not committed to any particular substantive conception of moral perfection here.  
120 I will simply take it that to exercise *morally ideal agency* would be for an agent to act, without  
121 fail, on every available opportunity to bring herself or the world closer to some state of moral  
122 perfection.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the moral ideal of being a good professor conceivably requires  
123 something like tutoring every student individually, re-tailoring the syllabus to every new  
124 classroom, or joining every committee on outreach, equity, inclusion, and educational  
125 innovation. Eliminating injustice might involve giving aid to every needy person one meets,  
126 intervening in every oppressive interaction one witnesses, participating in every nearby political  
127 demonstration, or totally eliminating consumption of exploitatively produced goods.

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

136

## 137 2.2 *Beyond the juridical model*

138 It might be assumed that this is really just a problem with first-order ethics. Once we know  
139 precisely how much morality requires us to devote to our ideals, we can apply the juridical  
140 model as usual. Indeed, an extensive literature attempts to do exactly this: convert aspirations  
141 toward moral ideals (e.g., a world without poverty) into clear imperatival requirements (e.g., a  
142 duty specifying how much we are obligated to donate to charity). But this is notoriously difficult,  
143 for, as Allen Buchanan puts it: ‘No amount of ethical reasoning will discover a determinate  
144 obligation for the simple reason that there is no determinate moral obligation to be discovered’  
145 (Buchanan 1996, p. 29). Thus, efforts to turn ideals into oughts — two of which I consider below  
146 — are in general<sup>7</sup> unsatisfying for the purposes of moral criticism, because there can be a  
147 criticizable ‘remainder’ that lingers in our actions even when we successfully conform to moral  
148 imperatives.

149 One standard approach to conceptualizing the relationship between imperatival and  
150 aspirational morality relies on the distinction between obligatory vs. supererogatory acts. But the  
151 existence of the supererogatory is contested — for instance, by many consequentialists.<sup>8</sup>

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

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

<sup>8</sup> 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 vs. surpassing a minimum threshold may thereby still acknowledge the difference between imperatival vs. aspirational morality. Alternatively,

152 Moreover, it does not by itself explain our practices of moral criticism. Since supererogatory acts  
153 are good to do but not wrong *not* to do, failing to perform them is not blameworthy. Yet as  
154 Gregory Trianosky points out, when people are confronted with opportunities to pursue moral  
155 ideals, they typically offer *excuses* if they refuse. He writes: ‘We seem often to feel  
156 uncomfortable or even ashamed that we are unwilling to do more than is required of us, to “go  
157 the extra mile”’ (Trianosky 1986, pp. 27–28). This suggests that — even though they are not  
158 blameworthy — agents are deflecting some kind of moral criticism<sup>9</sup> that would otherwise be  
159 warranted for failing to perform supererogatory acts.

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

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

176 The trouble is that neither appeals to the supererogatory nor to a ‘weak’ sense of imperfect  
177 duty can capture morality’s aspirational face: the fact that it calls on us to pursue ideals which  
178 are in fact unrealizable. Imperfect duties (understood weakly) indicate some indeterminate  
179 minimum threshold of effort, below which an agent counts as blameworthy and above which is  
180 supererogatory. But they cannot tell the whole story, because aspirational morality requires us to  
181 continue doing as much as we can even if we are well above this threshold. For this reason, some  
182 theorists advocate ‘strong’ conceptions of imperfect duty according to which they serve as  
183 ‘ideals of virtue toward which the best of moral agents strive but which even they never fully  
184 attain’ (Hale 1991, p. 278), and are ‘incompatible with...seeing morality the way one might see  
185 mowing the lawn (or as a child might see doing his homework or performing his boyscout  
186 deeds): as something to get out of the way’ (Baron 1987, p. 250). An imperfect duty in the strong  
187 sense is a moral aspiration.

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(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.

<sup>9</sup> For Trianosky, these agents are trying to prevent others from judging that they have vicious motives, apart from any wrongdoing: ‘we 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.

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

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

203

### 204 **3. Formative responses to non-ideal agency**

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206 In this section I introduce a distinction between *summative* vs. *formative* moral criticism, which  
207 helps us do justice to both the powers and limitations of our agency. To bring out the contrast  
208 between these two kinds of critical response, I develop an analogy with criticism in educational  
209 contexts,<sup>10</sup> where their distinct aims, justifications, and methods<sup>11</sup> have been explicitly theorized,  
210 and I illustrate how, similarly, formative responses in the moral context function essentially to  
211 improve agency.

212

#### 213 *3.1 From pedagogical evaluation...*

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

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to the Editors for this way of framing these differences.

<sup>12</sup> I owe this example to Sarah Buss.

225 The distinction is not absolute.<sup>13</sup> However, it has long been recognized that summative and  
226 formative aims are often in tension, e.g. when students' fixation on their letter grade prevents  
227 them from absorbing the substantive comments intended to spur learning (Bloom et al. 1971;  
228 Sadler, 1989). Sadler (1989, p. 119) thus concludes that 'many of the principles appropriate to  
229 summative assessment are not necessarily transferable to formative assessment; the latter  
230 requires a distinctive conceptualization and technology'. For instance, the adequacy of a  
231 summative assessment is a function of its 'validity' — how accurately it measures the outcome  
232 of interest — and 'reliability' — consistency across different classrooms — for only then can it  
233 be used fairly for certification and so on (William and Black 1996). Because of the high stakes  
234 involved, summative assessments must evaluate students' learning as fairly and accurately as  
235 possible.

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

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### 247 3.2 ...to moral criticism

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

255 But these, I argued in §2, are precisely what is missing when we try to evaluate failures of  
256 aspirational morality. Much less attention has been paid to the possibility of essentially *formative*  
257 moral criticism aimed at improving agency.<sup>15</sup> In other words, rather than following a logic of

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<sup>13</sup> 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 (William and Black 1996).

<sup>14</sup> 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, e.g., openness to criticism, epistemic humility, and commitment to truth (Mills 2018).

<sup>15</sup> 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 (e.g., Calhoun 1989).

258 sanctions, such criticism would exhibit a logic of feedback, wherein:

259

260 (A\*) a discrepancy between actual and ideal performance

261 (B\*) licenses the provision of information about the relevant ideal, perhaps with  
262 suggestions for improvement.

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

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

282 In brief, summative moral criticism can be justifiably used as a negative sanction against  
283 agents who wrongly exercise their agency in ways that violate moral standards. Formative moral  
284 criticism, by contrast, is feedback that identifies behavior falling short of moral ideals, in order to  
285 motivate, inform, and reinforce our efforts to improve. Formative responses to our actions are  
286 thus warranted wherever summative responses are, and even when the latter are not.

287

### 288 3.3 Identifying formative moral responses

289 What does formative moral criticism actually look like? I suggest that it is present in much of  
290 everyday moral criticism, which is animated not so much by an interest in assessing the quality  
291 of agents — something treated as foundational or definitional in many philosophical discussions  
292 of praise and blame — as by a concern to redirect attention toward the problem at hand (Springer  
293 2013). This kind of ‘course correction’, performed without any investigation into

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<sup>16</sup> 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, e.g., the impossibility of satisfying some moral demands.

<sup>17</sup> Strengthening one’s inner life is particularly important for those agents whose actions are most severely constrained, i.e., 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.

294 blameworthiness, is so ubiquitous that it might sometimes not even be best understood as a  
295 separate ‘genre of action—like eating or promising or purchasing—but as a *dimension* of our  
296 activity’ (Springer 2013, p. 44, emphasis in original). It can be quite subtle, discernible only in a  
297 mere tone of voice, raised eyebrow, well-timed question, or a pointed ‘Next time, then!’

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

301

302 *Bono*: Rose a good woman, Troy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

318

319 Here, I read Bono as deploying formative rather than summative moral criticism. He refuses to  
320 say that Troy does not ‘measure up’, i.e., to make a judgment of blameworthiness.<sup>18</sup> He does not  
321 evince angry or hostile feelings, nor does he seem to be ostracizing, withdrawing from, or  
322 modifying his relationship with Troy. Bono does not infer that Troy has ill will towards Rose (‘I  
323 know what Rose means to you’). It is just that the obvious discrepancy between Troy’s affair and  
324 ideals of marital love have led him to point it out, and exhort Troy not to ‘mess up’. Notably,  
325 Bono does not extract promises of changed behavior. It is enough for him that Troy has adjusted  
326 his attitude: no longer defensive, Troy re-affirms the importance of loving Rose and  
327 acknowledges that ‘messing around on’ her is a *problem*. Bono demonstrates that we can  
328 magnanimously (or strategically) deploy formative responses even toward actions that actually  
329 warrant summative moral criticism, since he would certainly be justified in blaming Troy for the

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<sup>18</sup> 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).

330 standard-violating offenses of deception and promise-breaking. He simply chooses not to.  
331 By declining to summatively evaluate others in acts of moral accommodation (cf. Harman  
332 2016), we lubricate social exchanges in morally charged situations involving strangers as well as  
333 our intimates. As Jean Harvey has emphasized: ‘Good people are not morally perfect, and  
334 supporting each other in the moral life is a nonstarter if we cannot “accept” morally imperfect  
335 people’ (Harvey 2015, p. 74). Yet she is quick to emphasize that ‘accepting’ agents into the  
336 moral community is compatible with ‘calling on them to move forward in their perceptions,  
337 thinking and actions’ (Harvey 2015, p. 79). If we think back to Trianosky’s puzzling cases, as  
338 related in §2.2, it should now be evident why and how we can formatively criticize agents’ token  
339 failures to pursue ideals or perform the supererogatory — that is, how we should call on people  
340 to ‘move forward’. I will offer some brief sketches of how this might go, by examining three  
341 cases of falling short in our aspirations: of agents who 1) have likely fallen below the threshold  
342 of imperfect duty, 2) are at the cusp, but fail to do the supererogatory, and 3) are already  
343 operating at full capacity. Drawing together the disparate suggestions of philosophers who have  
344 lately championed deviations from juridical models of blame and resentment, I use the  
345 framework of aspirational morality to present a more unified picture of the different species of  
346 formative response that might apply in morally diverse circumstances.

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

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<sup>19</sup> 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 vs. non-therapeutic contexts.

<sup>20</sup> 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 toward her, but it does not involve punitive sanctions.

366 ideals and their personal relation to them.

367 In the second case, agents act in ways that cannot be judged blameworthy, but still warrant  
368 criticism. Julie Tannenbaum argues in her discussion of ‘mere moral failures’ that we must  
369 identify a reactive attitude that recognizes when blame is unjustified but maintains that the agent  
370 is still ‘on the moral hook’ for her failure, because it was within her control to have acted  
371 successfully and she should make up for it (Tannenbaum 2015, p. 60). One candidate is Miranda  
372 Fricker’s (2007) ‘resentment of disappointment’, which arises when we cannot blame agents for  
373 not acting against the grain of routine social practice, but still lament and hold them responsible  
374 for not making some exceptional leap of moral insight that was within their reach. Alternatively,  
375 Adrienne Martin describes disappointment stemming from what she calls ‘normative hope,’ a  
376 stance in which we ‘aspire on someone’s behalf that they be more than ordinary’ (Martin 2013,  
377 p. 130). Because it is a way of ‘treating a principle as worth aspiring to, without *insisting* on  
378 compliance’ (Martin 2013, p. 130), we feel grateful if others live up to it, but only non-resentful  
379 disappointment<sup>21</sup> when they do not. Thus, when agents blamelessly fail to cross from the  
380 obligatory into the supererogatory, we may express resentment of disappointment that they have  
381 narrowly missed a chance to go beyond the routine, perhaps by invoking examples of actual  
382 moral saints operating at full capacity<sup>22</sup> (‘You know, Greta Thunberg was 15 when she began  
383 weekly protests by herself...’). Or, when a greater leap is required to achieve the extraordinary,  
384 we might feel only non-resentful disappointment and express our normative hopes for them,  
385 affirming our faith in their abilities (‘Well, I look forward to seeing you next time’). When we  
386 point out these missed opportunities to agents with moral aspirations, we remind them of the  
387 need to work toward moral ideals. We exhort them to strive for what is challenging but still  
388 achievable, and support them in doing so.

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

403 Much still remains to be worked out regarding the respective uses of summative and

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<sup>21</sup> 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.

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

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

418

#### 419 **4. The problem of structural wrongdoing**

420

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

424

##### 425 *4.1 Perpetuating and addressing structural injustice*

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

438 I thus use the term 'unendorsed structural wrongs' (or just 'structural wrongs') to refer to  
439 actions of an otherwise morally unobjectionable type that harm others by forming part of unjust  
440 social-structural processes — usually without the agent's knowing, willing, or desiring to do so.  
441 Identifying these as 'wrongs' staves off any implication that these are random or free-floating  
442 harms such as those caused by bad luck or (some) natural disasters, stressing instead that those  
443 harmed are victims of real injustice.<sup>23</sup> They are actions we have serious reason to care about, just

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<sup>23</sup> 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

444 as we do paradigmatic wrongs. However, structural wrongs only produce harm in conjunction  
445 with the accumulated actions of others, in the context of systemic injustice. It would be possible  
446 for the same act, if performed within an alternative scheme of social arrangements, to no longer  
447 cause *unjust* harm.<sup>24</sup> Hence, as the modifier ‘structural’ emphasizes, the primary source of their  
448 wrongness is located in the overarching *system* of domination as a whole and only very  
449 derivatively in the individual acts themselves. Unlike with most paradigmatic wrongs, there are  
450 many cases in which the world would not be appreciably improved even if a *particular* agent  
451 were to refrain from some structural wrong, for the system as a whole would still perpetuate  
452 injustice.<sup>25</sup> (It should be conceded that the distinction between paradigmatic and structural  
453 wrongs is a blurry one; however, my concern here is not to adjudicate borderline cases. I will  
454 assume that there are clear enough cases for a meaningful distinction.<sup>26</sup>)

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

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

472

#### 473 4.2 *The limits of blameworthiness*

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important thing is that we recognize both their moral weightiness and their distinctness from classic wrongs.

<sup>24</sup> 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 labor 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.

<sup>25</sup> For example, many employers commit the structural wrong of hiring workers under exploitative conditions (e.g., 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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 Jaggar (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.

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

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

487 Recall that blameworthiness comprises two elements: we must know that (1) an agent's act  
488 was wrong, and (2) she was morally responsible for it — in other words, morally competent and  
489 lacking justification or excuse. To begin with, one might resist the idea that so much of our  
490 ordinary activity could be morally wrong (cf. Williams 1973; Sinnott-Armstrong 2005). Yet even  
491 if it is wrong (cf. Wilson 1993), there might be enough justification, as when structural wrongs  
492 are deeply woven into valuable forms of life, to absolve us from blame. Furthermore, insofar as  
493 agents are excused for behaving in ways that do not properly manifest their agency (e.g., under  
494 coercion, from non-culpable ignorance, etc.), they may likewise have excuses for unendorsed  
495 structural wrongs. Purchasing exploitative products, for instance, is unavoidable insofar as  
496 people cannot spare the effort and money needed to locate and buy 'ethically' sourced products.  
497 The same goes for reducing emissions, joining protests, and so on — things we cannot do every  
498 single time opportunities arise. People often make injustice-perpetuating choices regarding  
499 employment, housing, and so on that they *would* not make if they had better options; hence these  
500 actions offer a distorted picture of a person's moral agency. The more we appreciate how (1) and  
501 (2) are called into question, the more unease we should feel about imposing negative sanctions  
502 for structural wrongdoing.

503 Additionally, even if we judge agents blameworthy, it might not be appropriate to actually  
504 blame or otherwise sanction them. Further conditions must be in place, two of which are  
505 particularly relevant here. First, it is widely thought that blaming is inappropriate when the  
506 blamer is hypocritically engaged in the same behavior (but see Dover 2019). The ubiquity of  
507 injustice generates high risk of hypocrisy: while it is easy to notice and blame others for habits  
508 we have already altered or for failing to support causes near and dear to us, we ourselves have  
509 almost certainly overlooked worthy causes and harmful habits of our own. Second, blame may  
510 be inappropriate when the epistemic soundness of the judgment of blameworthiness is in doubt  
511 (Coates and Tognazzini 2013, p. 22–23). Negative sanctions are only warranted if we are  
512 reasonably confident that we are not mistaken about an agent's blameworthiness — just as courts  
513 can only convict with sufficient evidence, even if the accused truly is guilty. But the epistemic

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<sup>27</sup> 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.

514 challenges raised by structural wrongs are not trivial. It is virtually impossible to trace how one  
515 person's *particular* actions cause harm to another *specific* individual. This is because of how  
516 structural injustice works: harm is produced 'indirectly, collectively, and cumulatively through  
517 the production of structural constraints on others' possible actions', rather than as the direct  
518 effect of a single isolated action (Young 2011, p. 96). Moreover, since we lack determinate cut-  
519 offs specifying precisely how much effort is morally required, it is often difficult to be sure  
520 whether some individual has fallen below standard.

521 On the standard juridical model, then, it seems that moral criticism for structural wrongdoing  
522 is largely unjustified. Indeed, structural theorists have argued that the proper response to (most)  
523 agents participating in injustice is not the usual *backward-looking* reactions like blame and  
524 resentment. It is a mistake to locate wrongness in individual actions rather than social structure  
525 (Young 2011; Haslanger 2015; Zheng 2018a, 2018b; Aragon and Jaggar 2018).

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

531

## 532 **5. Criticizing injustice**

533

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

538

### 539 *5.1 Aspiring to address injustice*

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

553 This is consistent with acknowledging that a key strategy for dealing with injustice *is*

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<sup>28</sup> 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).

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

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

578

## 579 5.2 Formative reminders

580 It follows that formative moral criticism will be appropriate for structural wrongs. At the end  
581 of §4 I described how structural theorists conceive of holding non-blameworthy agents  
582 responsible for injustice by assigning them the burdens of joining in collective social  
583 transformation. This means that we can think of formative moral criticism for structural wrongs  
584 as *the vehicle by which we remind or convey to others that they bear the burdens of addressing*  
585 *injustice*. In this case, the discrepancy between actual and ideal behavior is a structural wrong or  
586 a failure to act on an opportunity to address injustice. This licenses others to critically inform us  
587 in an ongoing way of the ideals of justice toward which we must strive, that is, to remind us that  
588 we must join in efforts to bring about social change. The key thing to note here is that the  
589 difficulty of establishing blameworthiness for structural wrongs poses no problem for formative  
590 moral criticism. This is because the warrant for formative feedback lies not in blameworthiness,  
591 but in falling short of an ideal.

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

<sup>30</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this stylish turn of phrase.

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

603

### 604 5.3 *The bourgeois predicament: an example*

605 To apply this more concretely, let us consider what R. Jay Wallace (2013) calls the  
606 'bourgeois predicament'. Wallace argues that, for a certain class of people, the projects and  
607 relationships that lend meaning to their lives depend on institutions and practices inextricably  
608 bound up in injustice (e.g., academics in universities that were founded from slave trade profits  
609 and continue to reproduce class hierarchies). The predicament is that 'we become *implicated* in  
610 the objectionable impersonal structures that we inhabit, insofar as the sources of meaning in our  
611 lives are activities that would not be possible in the absence of those structures' (Wallace 2013,  
612 p. 223) — structures he characterizes as 'lamentable', 'regrettable', and 'unjust'. When a  
613 professor at an elite institution teaches seminars equipping her middle-class students to secure  
614 high-salaried, high-status employment (and thereby, vested interests in an unjust system), or  
615 takes a research leave made possible by the overabundance of precariously employed adjuncts  
616 willing to cover last-minute courses so as to pay their bills, her activities — however intrinsically  
617 valuable they genuinely are — constitute participation in structural injustice.<sup>31</sup>

618 What kind of critical moral response is appropriate here? If our professor exhibits behavior  
619 that alienates students from disadvantaged groups, includes no critical perspectives on her  
620 syllabi, shows no interest in the plight of her contingently employed colleagues, and so on, then  
621 we can hold her answerable for these actions or express disappointment, as described in §3.3, to  
622 convey that she should do more to work towards structural transformation. However, such  
623 reminders of our moral concerns ('Did you hear about the adjuncts' rally yesterday?') are  
624 appropriate even if we imagine that the professor's conduct is unimpeachable on all these fronts,  
625 because we can offer them without judging her blameworthy. After all, should we really expect  
626 her to refrain from teaching or taking leave, to quit the academy, or secede from human society  
627 altogether? This case makes plain that what really needs to change is not so much the actions of  
628 any individual, but the entire ecosystem of academic labor, higher education, and the wider  
629 political economy of which they form a part. The professor cannot eliminate her implication in  
630 injustice by refusing to teach, not going on leave, or taking more drastic measures; and her doing  
631 so would not rectify injustice. Still, insofar as there is something lamentable, regrettable, and

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<sup>31</sup> I owe the examples in this section to two anonymous reviewers.

632 unjust about this situation,<sup>32</sup> it deserves comment. When the occasion presents itself, then, it is  
633 appropriate for others to remind her how she should further contribute to efforts toward structural  
634 transformation (Zheng 2018b): by directing her attention to methods for improving her courses,  
635 expressing normative hope that she will offer substantial support to the adjuncts' cause, and so  
636 on.

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

651

#### 652 5.4 Some objections

653 One might protest that summative responses should play a more prominent role in  
654 responding to structural wrongdoing. Blaming and shaming, especially at the collective level,  
655 may be particularly effective ways to mobilize action against injustice (Javeline 2003; Jacquet  
656 2016; but see Pettigrove 2012). Where these are directed at specific egregious acts committed by  
657 identifiable perpetrators or at unjust social structures as a whole, I agree that such criticism can  
658 be fully justified.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, sometimes politically efficacious expressions of reactive  
659 attitudes may outstrip their moral warrant: for example, by denouncing entire classes of people  
660 (e.g., 'White people'), of which some members are indeed bad actors but which also include  
661 people trying, as we all do, to live ethically within structural constraints. As Cheshire Calhoun  
662 (1989) argues, in oppressive contexts the *justification* of moral criticism can cut against its *point*:  
663 in other words, if the value of our practices of moral reproach lies in their power to educate and  
664 motivate others to act better, then we may have reason to criticize agents in ways they do not  
665 deserve. However, as stated earlier, my aim is not to establish what kinds of criticism are most  
666 efficacious; I cannot offer here a full account of precisely when these forms of public

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<sup>32</sup> Wallace's concerns are not the same as mine: he focuses on retrospective attitudes toward 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.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

667 condemnation and protest are warranted, all things considered.<sup>34</sup> While Calhoun emphasizes the  
668 tension between point and justification, I am more sanguine that these can go together in a good  
669 many cases, because the point of interpersonal *formative* responses — which are in principle<sup>35</sup>  
670 always justifiable — is precisely to improve agency.

671 One might also insist that people really are blameworthy for structural wrongdoing. Even if  
672 no one has the standing to actually blame, the reasoning goes, there remains a fact of the matter.  
673 Moreover, we routinely blame others without second thought for the risk of hypocrisy or unmet  
674 evidentiary standards. In reply, let me say two things. First, I completely agree there are many  
675 cases in which we have good reason to judge people blameworthy for structural wrongs —  
676 especially powerful agents (McKeown 2015). Greater power weakens structural constraints, and  
677 hence increases the likelihood and degree of culpability. Second, given the enormous  
678 complexity, opacity, and ineluctability of structural injustice, I am confident there are many  
679 cases of structural wrongs in which agents, including the powerful, are genuinely *not*  
680 blameworthy. Yet this should not exempt them from criticism. If traditional theories of moral  
681 criticism fit uncomfortably with our best understandings of social reality, as has been repeatedly  
682 observed (Lavin 2008; Scheffler 2009; Lichtenberg 2010; Young 2011; Haslanger 2015), we  
683 should try out new moral frameworks and practices that may prove more apt, illuminating, or  
684 viable.

685 Along similar lines, one might acknowledge the usefulness of formative moral criticism for  
686 friends and allies, but deny that it is appropriate for political enemies seeking to perpetuate  
687 injustice. This is a formidable objection. For those of us suffering at others' hands, blame and  
688 resentment might be justifiable in spite of — or *because* of — considerations involving standing  
689 and evidence. As victims, we might have special moral standing to blame implicated agents, and  
690 occupy better epistemic standpoints to ascertain their blameworthiness. While I concede this, I  
691 also want to stress the importance of developing formative responses even where sanctions are  
692 justified. For punitive measures must still be paired with avenues for reform and rehabilitation  
693 (Lacey and Pickard 2019); as McGeer and Funk (2017, p. 539) put it: 'we human beings not only  
694 care about communicating a message of reprobation in our response to offenders, we care  
695 about...their undertaking self-transformation and reform'. It may be necessary to pass through  
696 blame and resentment to bring down injustice; but we fail to reach genuine justice if we stop  
697 there without promoting deeper transformation on all sides.<sup>36</sup> However detestable our opponents,

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<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, there may be situations, e.g., of grief and mourning, in which criticism of any form is not all-things-considered appropriate.

<sup>36</sup> As many radical thinkers have stressed (e.g., Freire 1970), true liberation requires that we reach a point where the 'oppressor vs. 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

698 they remain members of the world that we need to build. It may help, then, to think of them not  
699 only as perpetrators but products of centuries-old social processes who have the potential, as we  
700 all do, to act better under a more just scheme of social arrangements.

701 Finally, it might be thought that my view encourages a kind of ‘holier-than-thou’  
702 condescension. One might worry that outside educational contexts and amongst moral equals,<sup>37</sup>  
703 formative responses are liable to come off as insulting or arrogant, because the critic  
704 presumptuously makes claim to some kind of privileged knowledge or authority (Calhoun 1989,  
705 Dover 2019). This objection highlights an important difference between educational contexts and  
706 ordinary moral life: our grasp of moral knowledge tends to be far more tenuous than our  
707 understanding in other domains, and (contra the Sophists) there can be no accredited instructors  
708 of morality. Accordingly, even though moral criticism can — especially in oppressive contexts  
709 — serve to educate, this does not happen via an asymmetrical, unidirectional transmission of  
710 knowledge.<sup>38</sup> It thus resembles the feedback that scholars give one another when they workshop  
711 each other’s projects, even when there is disagreement over the evaluation criteria; this kind of  
712 formative criticism is essentially different from the summative assessments that they make  
713 during peer review, when it must be decided whether a submission ‘makes the grade’. Similarly,  
714 as theorists like Springer (2013) and Dover (2019) stress, giving moral criticism can be thought  
715 of as a process of opening up critical dialogue: as the first move in a conversation, where the  
716 communication of moral concern sparks self-scrutiny and exchanges of moral insight. Initiating  
717 this kind of conversation does not require the critic to possess (though it *can* sometimes stem  
718 from) superior moral knowledge. In effect, much moral criticism is not so much about issuing  
719 definite *prescriptions* for how to act as it is constructing open-ended *prompts*: it poses a problem  
720 – some discrepancy between an agent’s action and a moral ideal – that should motivate her to  
721 critically reflect or engage in a conversation on how it can be solved. In the case of structural  
722 wrongs, where the solutions require large-scale collective action, this is usually achieved by  
723 drawing an agent’s attention to the ways in which her actions are implicated in unjust wrongs,  
724 and the obligation to right them through participation in structural transformation. Thus, giving  
725 one another formative criticism for structural wrongdoing need not<sup>39</sup> be a signal of one’s superior  
726 virtue, but an ongoing acknowledgement of how far we all have to go.

## 727 6. Conclusion

728  
729 I have argued that we should distinguish between two kinds of justification for moral criticism.  
730 Summative responses are warranted because agents possess the *power* to exercise agency, which  
731 they sometimes choose to do *wrongly*. When we can confidently establish blameworthiness,

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punishment of their malefactors to truly heal and feel that justice has been achieved.

<sup>37</sup> 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).

<sup>38</sup> 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.

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

732 negative sanctions are justifiably imposed on persons who fall below standard. Formative  
733 responses, by contrast, are warranted precisely because agency is *constrained* in important  
734 respects and we exercise it only *non-ideally*. Such feedback, which aims only to improve  
735 individuals' actions and attitudes, is called for in light of the fact that all our agency is finite,  
736 limited, imperfect, and easily thwarted.

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

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