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Appraisive Things

ABSTRACT: *Philosophical literature on praise primarily focuses on* verbal *expressions of praise. But* material *expressions of praise are a pervasive feature of our social practices: we use cash prizes, bonuses, statues, trophies to celebrate and esteem others and their good deeds. What is the normative significance of using things to praise, when using (mere) words is an alternative? Beyond the instrumental and symbolic significance, we draw on recent literature on world-shaping and mind-shaping to explain what can be achieved by* appraisive things. *We point to, and illustrate, two normatively important properties that are brought to the fore by material praise: the finitude and durability of things. In light of these previously neglected dimensions of our appraisive practices, we revisit norms of positive appraisal, showing the need for a multidimensional account of apt praise.*

KEYWORDS: Praise, Material, Cognitive niches, Responsibility practices

There is an increasingly lively literature on praise, and the ethics of its expression (Stout 2020, Jeppsson & Brandenburg 2022, Telech 2020, 2022, 2024, Calhoun 2022, Bingeman 2024, Holroyd 2025, Kwiatek 2025a, 2025b). Most of this literature focuses on *verbal* expressions of praise. But *material* expressions of praise are pervasive in our social practices: we use cash prizes, bonuses, statues, trophies to celebrate and esteem others and their good deeds. A prominent line of thought has it that 'the material sign is not the isomorphic substitute for the linguistic sign' (Malafouris 2013, 95); a material thing cannot without alteration be substituted for the verbal expression. If this is right, then a material thing used to praise is not straightforwardly substitutable for a verbal expression of praise. In what ways might the material expression of praise differ? This is a question we take seriously here.

It is particularly pressing, since recent literatures have attended to the normative complexity of things. Artefacts that are prima facie positive (medical technologies, honorific statues) can be morally and politically problematic, even oppressive (Friedell & Liao 2022, Liao 2025, Liao & Carbonell 2023, Lim 2020, Lim & Lai 2024). A further examination of the normative structure of *appraisive things* is required, and this is what we aim to provide.

We start by surveying the conceptual resources developed in the philosophical literatures on praise and on embedded cognition (section 1). We then provide reasons, illustrated with examples of monuments and money, for thinking about the subtlety and complexity of appraisive things (section 2). We revisit norms of (verbal) praise and augment them by providing a multidimensional framework for evaluating material praise (section 3). The key questions we address are: *what reasons* do we have for

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(sometimes) using things to praise; and to *what considerations* should we attend in order to do so well? Our aim is in part descriptive, in that we seek to bring into focus features of our actual practices of positive appraisal; but it is also ameliorative: by bringing to attention a multidimensional model for evaluating apt use of appraisive things, we hope to inform and improve future practice.

1. Conceptual resources

Much of the literature on praise takes as a starting point instances in which praise is verbally expressed. For example, the literature takes these instances as paradigmatic cases of praise:

> '"That was a lovely thing to do"' (Macnamara, 2013, 547).
> 'Saying "it was very considerate of you to host a dinner to welcome B to the department"' (Telech, 2023, 238), and
> '*Saying* with enthusiasm something like, "Well done! Your hard work is really going to help people"', and '*saying* things like "good on you!" or "I admire what you're doing"' (Telech, 2024, 1236, 1238, emphasis added).
> '"Yes, what you did is really amazing"', and utterances of '"Yes, I too admire Trump's wise foreign policy moves"' (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2024, 156—here describing an exchange, rather than endorsing the appraisal).
> Saying "best daddy ever", "You're a great dad! You're father of the year!" (Holroyd, 2025, 19-20, 31, discussing Khader & Lindauer 2020 and Stramondo 2020)

Brennan and Pettit (2004) investigate the extent to which positive appraisals can be leveraged to incentivise certain desired behaviors in an 'economy of esteem'. Notably, they refer to esteem as 'the intangible hand', writing that 'the attitudinal reward associated with having the esteem of others is intangible in comparison to the material goods and services that characterise the invisible hand case [of the market]' (2004, 246). This suggests they conceive of a sharp contrast between the rewards of esteem, and the rewards of material goods and services. But this obscures the extent to which esteem might be expressed *through material goods*.[1]

Whilst David Shoemaker's indicative list of praise includes many attitudinal manifestations—thinking well of, having warm feelings, increasing respect for—verbal expressions are prominent: complimenting, saying nice things, crediting. Some items on his list acknowledge the material aspects of our practice: rewarding or promoting, as well as expressions that have typically taken more material form, such as honoring or memorializing (2024, 23). But the significance of the *material* dimensions of these expressions is not noted or examined further.

[1] Later, they mention that '[c]orporations may give medals for good workers. Winegrowers associations may give prizes for best wines' (2004, 152-153). But this is considered simply as a publicity strategy, a means of leveraging the economy of esteem.

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None of these theorists have commitments which require this partial approach: the problem is that their accounts are incomplete. And it remains an open question as to whether our thinking about praise can simply be extended to praise expressed with things. As such, we need to ask whether the resources generated by thinking about verbal praise are adequate for the aspects of our practice that express praise using things: cash prizes, bonuses, statues, trophies. So next we briefly summarize: what conceptual resources do we have for thinking about using *things* to praise? We should want the resources that govern the expression of praise to address a puzzle introduced by thinking about appraisive things, namely: *why*? Why do we sometimes use *things* to express praise, when (merely) verbal praise is also available? What else is expressed, or done, by using material resources to express praise?

We start by looking at the conceptual resources developed for thinking about verbal praise, and for how we might understand our use of things.

a. Norms of praise

We understand praise as a broad umbrella phenomenon that overlaps with a range of positive expressions, such as honoring, celebrating, commemorating, appreciating, admiring. Some instances of these expressions will not be praise; some instances of praise differ from each of these expressions. But they are all (at least sometimes) positive evaluative appraisals that share the features we identify below—and these are the expressions with which we are concerned.

Drawing on the literature on *verbal* praise, we can glean two key ideas. First, praise is *communicative* (Macnamara, 2013, 2015). It aims to express something and receive uptake from its audiences, who (the hope is) recognize the positive appraisal, and share in apt emotions (such as pride, if one is the target and recipient, or admiration and affirmation if one is a third party audience). With Shoemaker (2024) and Holroyd (2023, 2025) we maintain that praise has a key role in norm maintenance and value affirmation. So, the means through which praise is expressed must be well suited to communicating the relevant norms and values.

Second, communicative expressions of praise are governed by (at least) five types of *norms*, which may sometimes be in tension with each other:

a) *Backward-looking norms* for apt praise determine whether, and *how much*, praise is deserved or fitting. Given these norms, praise might be unfair, as Stout suggests: "it involves serious problems of fairness for those who unduly receive it" (2020, 221).
b) *A comparative fairness* norm concerns the comparative proportionality of expressed praise. These norms may determine that patterned discrepancies in expressions of praise are problematic.

These two norms may sometimes be in tension with each other, or with a forward-looking norm.

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c) *Forward-looking norms* determine how praise should be used to encourage or motivate, or shape sensitivity to norms and values—in short, to cultivate agency (Vargas 2013, McGeer 2019).
d) *Epistemic norms* concern what praisers ought to reasonably believe for their praise to be apt. This may concern beliefs about the extent to which praise is deserved or fitting, or beliefs about what their praise will effect (see Holroyd 2025, 136-140).
e) *Standing norms* that govern praisers, which have to do with their being in an appropriate position to signal commitment to and promotion of the values celebrated in the praise (Telech 2022, Lippert-Rasmussen 2024 chapter 5, Holroyd 2025, 124-133).

These norms may all have a role to play in evaluating the use of *things* to praise. But they will likely need further articulation: what are the ways in which materials can affect how much praise is expressed? What must be believed about the thing used to praise? How, if at all, might considerations of standing apply to things? And, to fully appreciate the role such norms may have, we should consider further the normative significance of things, and the role things can have in shaping our world, and our minds.

b. Normatively significant things

Things have normative significance in multiple ways. They can have positive or negative valence. A statue can positively appraise its subject, such as the monument to Martin Luther King Jr. (to be discussed in more detail in section 3). Or, a statue may condemn or denigrate its subjects, such as the statue of Qin Hui and Lady Wang, depicted (in recognition of their betrayal) bound and kneeling in humiliating pose (Lim 2020). Of course, other statues neither honor nor condemn, but do something else—commemorate an event, local lore, embody an evaluative ideal, and so on.

Things can also be normatively complex: honorific statues can be morally and politically problematic, as per the attention of much of the recent philosophical literature on statues (Archer & Matheson 2019a, 2019b). For example, the Colston statue which was installed in 1895 in honorific recognition of Colston's philanthropy became a symbol of Britain's implication in the slave trade in particular and projects of racist colonization more generally—and of contemporary society's unwillingness to confront racist legacies. (After decades of contention and campaigning, activists defaced and dumped the statue in Bristol harbor in the summer of 2020.)

Things with positive utility may also have negative—indeed, oppressive—aspects. Things can embody power relations when they are "convenient means of establishing patterns of power and authority in a given setting" (Winner 1980: 122; compare Young 2011: 53, Kern 2020, Dolmage 2017). This applies to things large (overpasses, in intentionally discriminatory town planning) and small (unintentionally racist medical tools). To illustrate, Winner (1980) offers the example of the development of low-hanging overpasses that Robert Moses oversaw in 1920s New York City, which meant public buses could not use the

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parkway to access Jones Beach on Long Island (though see Campanella 2017 and Joerges 1999 for complications). In a sociohistorical context in which white, middle-class people own cars and non-white, lower-class people do not, these low-hanging overpasses offer a convenient means to reinforce the racial and class relations. These overpasses have utility, enabling transit; but also sustain and normalize racist and class-based oppression.

Consider next the fingertip pulse oximeter (Liao & Carbonell 2023): a medical device that gives readings of oxygen levels in the blood by detecting patterns of reflection and absorption of light that passes through the fingertip. These tools became familiar, and were bought for home use, during the COVID pandemic, in addition to their already widespread use in medical settings. But their design is such that people with darker skin tones typically get less accurate readings: the pulse oximeters overestimate levels of oxygen in their blood. This is most likely to occur when saturation levels are low, which are of course the most life-threatening scenarios. The significance of this is contextualized in relation to the differential rates of COVID fatalities in black and brown people (Liao & Carbonell, 2023, 10-11).

When things are causally embedded in patterns of power, they can be *oppressive*: embedded in a causal structure, they follow from, and are followed by, other manifestations of oppression; and are directionally aligned with the oppressive structure in which they are embedded—the overpasses and oximeters sustain, rather than resist, those structures (Liao & Huebner 2021, Liao & Carbonell 2023). Of course, things can be more or less oppressive, depending on the degree of their causal embeddedness and the degree of their alignment. Since things—even things that have utility for some—can be harmful and oppressive, any evaluation should be attentive to the extent to which appraisive things may embody oppressive power relations. This is especially so since, it has been argued, praise can itself be oppressive or otherwise harmful (Holroyd 2021, 2025, Jeppsson & Brandenburg, 2022, Bingeman 2024).

In a survey essay on 'the economics of awards', which examines the ways in which esteem and status is conveyed through prizes of symbolic and material form, concerns are raised about whether they are always positive: whether they do indeed have any motivational effects, or are valued by their recipients. However, the authors note that further study is needed, writing that '[d]espite the importance of awards in society, research in social science has largely disregarded them' (Frey & Gallus 2017, 193).

Of course, this normative complexity arises for verbal expressions: positive expressions and positive appraisals may also be negative, even oppressive (consider positive stereotypes, or, indeed, oppressive praise). So what, then, might be the distinctive ways in which *appraisive things* might be harmful?

c. Cognitive niches and mind-shaping

All living organisms stand in a reciprocal relationship with their environments. Not only do they adapt to the world that they live in, they also modify the world to suit their aims (Odling-Smee, Laland, & Feldman, 2003). Much work has focused on how humans change our environments to extend our cognitive capacities, by

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reducing our brains' cognitive load. The world that we make is essential to what we are able to do, say, and think (Clark 1997, 2003, 2008; Gibson, 1979/2014; Haugeland 1995/1998; Huebner 2013; Hutchins 1995, 2005; Kirsh 1995; Sterelny 2003).

Some environmental modifications are local, temporary, and personal. For example, an academic might arrange their work desk in a way that facilitates their thinking: each pile of paper represents an unfinished research project; when they return to a dormant project, they might just have some memory traces of the literature they need to review (compare Kukla 2021: ch. 1). Other environmental modifications are global, persisting, and societal. For example, roads and bridges are signposted, and a path becomes recommended, an area becomes accessible (or, as we saw above, accessible only to some). In constructing a *cognitive niche*, an environment for particular patterns of thought and action, we also stabilize social norms and give them force (Stotz 2010; see also Clark 2008; Saltz et al. 2016; Sterelny 2003). Aspects of our environment may in particular construct *normative* or *evaluative* niches—stabilizing certain values or evaluations.

Cognitive scientists who highlight the fact that cognition is *embedded* in the world —partly constituted by and also partly causally dependent on the environment, in addition to the brain and the body—are typically positive about the relationship that we humans stand in with our environments. Jesper Aagaard (2021) calls this common assumption, that humans and environments stand in a cooperative and collaborative relationship, the *dogma of harmony*. Only recently has this dogma of harmony come under scrutiny (see Liao & Brinner 2026 for an overview). At the individual level, there are environmental modifications that might undermine an agent's prior orientations and future interests without their knowledge or their consent (Coninx 2023; Slaby 2016; Timms & Spurrett 2023). That is, there are things that are prudentially negative for humans who interact with them: the design of casinos and the slot machines within them is an example. And, as we have seen with the example of Moses' overpasses, at the societal level, there are also environmental modifications that exacerbate the oppression of some agents (Krueger 2023; McClelland & Sliwa 2023; de Carvalho & Krueger 2024; Slaby 2016; Spurrett 2024; Spurrett & Brancazio 2024). Such environmental modifications foster cognitive niches that enable patterns of thought and action and stabilize norms that are harmful and oppressive. If one of the functions of praise is to express values and affirm norms, a function of appraisive *things* which distinguishes them from mere verbal expressions will be their role in shaping our cognitive niches, embedding in our material environment values and norms which shape our patterns of thought and action.

d. Normative niches in mind and world

Bringing together the ideas of this section, we pose the distinctive issues that arise for using *things* to praise. Firstly, things that may be on their face positive or useful, can be normatively complex: they may be harmful or causally embedded in oppression or harm. Secondly, things can shape not only our material environment but also our thinking, and can stabilize the norms and evaluative dispositions that govern how we

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navigate our environment and relationships. So, when we use *things* to express praise, these aspects of our material world need attention. How does the use of material resources to express praise affect our environment? What sorts of causal or normative structures and patterns do those things embed? How might those things shape our cognitive niches—our thoughts and norms, for example, about who and what is praiseworthy, and what praiseworthiness or esteem worthiness consists in? And, how are norms of praise—backward and forward-looking, fairness, epistemic and standing norms—activated by the use of *appraisive things*?

2. Two Examples of Appraisive Things: Monuments and Money

Can we simply port over the norms articulated for verbal praise to appraisive things? There is reason to believe that a different, or more expansive, set of conceptual and evaluative resources would be needed for praise expressed with material things. Using things and using words may not be functionally, or normatively, equivalent.

In developing 'material engagement theory' (a philosophical/archeological theory about the codevelopment of artefacts and cognitive functions), Lambros Malafouris emphasizes that '[t]he material sign is more than a thing that stands for something else, or the passive conduit of a message' (2013, 117).[2] The differences have perhaps been obscured by a tendency to think of things as 'speaking' (Dixon 2022; Friedell & Liao 2022; Lai 2020; Lim 2025; Shahvisi 2021). But there are features of material things that affect their meaning and significance. Malafouris puts this as follows:

> The durable nature of the material sign clearly contrasts with the ephemeral nature of the linguistic sign. A physical sign can be touched, carried, worn, possessed, exchanged, stored, transfigured, or destroyed....
> The questions evoked [by materials] may include questions of being and substance, questions of what is and is not, questions of quantity and quality, questions of relation and becoming, questions of place and time, questions of position and state, and questions of potentiality and actuality (2013, 95-97).

How should we understand these claims? First, Malafouris remarks on the durability of a material sign—using things to express praise typically has greater *durability* than a verbal expression of praise.[3] And, things have different degrees (and kinds) of durability, which might affect their normative significance. Second, we can

[2] Malafouris's key thesis is ultimately that things have *agency*. But we need not subscribe to this strong and radical view to endorse the claims we advance here—we use his claims simply to illuminate the ways in which the material nature of some praise is significant.

[3] This is a matter of degree, not kind, however. There may be records of verbal expressions. And linguistic expressions that are written down—like a certificate of achievement, an etching on stone—have physical durability. Appraisive things may be accompanied by verbal expressions. So we take the claim to be a matter of the salience or degree of a feature in material versus verbal praise, not an absolute dimension of difference. Nonetheless, these features have been overlooked in work on praise.

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draw on Malafouris to articulate our own questions about using material things to praise:

i) What is the thing made of ('substance')?
ii) What or whom is praised using that kind of thing—as opposed to another thing, or not at all ('what is and is not')?
iii) How many appraisive things are there, and of what quality, or with what qualitative meanings, in comparison to how such things are used for others ('quantity and quality')?
iv) By whom were they made, for whom ('relation and becoming')?
v) Where are they? How long will they remain? On what authority ('place and time', 'position and state')?
vi) What do they express now, and what could they express in future ('potentiality and actuality')?

We have identified *durability*, as a normatively significant property of appraisive things, especially in how it relates to the *stability* of the expression of praise. The durability of things is central in the role they can have in shaping not only our physical environment, but in shaping cognitive niches.

Another feature that Malafouris's comments draw our attention to is the *finitude* of resources, and what that means for determining to whom they are (and are not) assigned (questions of quality and quantity, what is and is not) and by whom (relation and becoming). Given resource constraints, how appraisive things are allocated and by whom is particularly significant (though again, this is a matter of degree—verbal expressions of praise are not infinite). This cannot straightforwardly be a matter of distributive justice, since praise serves to mark out the targets as exceptional and elevate them in comparison to others (see Porro 2021). These remarks also help us to think through, and expand, the various norms that may be applicable to appraisive things. They enable us also to highlight that things can differ —from verbal praise and, notably, from each other—with respect to their symbolic and instrumental significance. Something of little instrumental value may have great symbolic significance (a commemorative plaque); something with instrumental value (a cash prize) may be symbolically inapt.

We start by considering these questions in relation to two examples of material praise with differing symbolic and instrumental significance. In the final section we articulate and develop an evaluative framework which extends and develops the norms of praise to appraisive things.

a. Monuments

Different monuments serve different functions—a monument can commemorate (Archer & Matheson 2021, 2022), and a monument can also humiliate (Yun 2021)—but a very common function of monuments or statues is to praise their subjects or the deeds they represent. (Much of the literature frames what monuments do as 'honoring'. We take this to be a partial subset of the broader notion of praise, which can also include some forms of celebrating, recognizing, commemorating.) To

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illustrate, take as our example the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., which can be understood as a material realization of the nation's posthumous praise of him and his role in the US Civil Rights movement.

What is achieved by expressing this praise in material form, rather than (merely) verbally, especially given the costliness of doing so in terms of the time and resources put into its construction, as well as the space it takes up? The materiality is significant both due to the *durability* or *stability* of its form, and the *finitude* of resources that compose it.

Consider first *finitude*. Efforts to remake the physical world come with natural limits imposed by, well, the physical world (and the laws of nature). There is a limit to how much granite can be extracted for statues, how many monuments there can be in the National Mall of Washington, D.C., and correspondingly how many people can be singularly praised in this form, due to the physical things necessary for making them, the cost of those physical things (and the labor on them) and to the space available (and relatedly, the authorization needed). These variables inform our understanding of how much praise is expressed, or the *magnitude* of the praise: arguably, King deserves an honor as high as a national memorial for his work in the Civil Rights Movement. It also engages questions of *comparative fairness*: the worry has been raised that praise for King alone obscures the role of the many others alongside him, who also deserve recognition and esteem. On the other hand, black people are considerably under-represented in the commemorative statues of the USA (and the UK, where these issues have also had prominence). It is considerably harder to redress these comparative injustices in the resources used to praise than it would be to redirect, or redistribute verbal praise. And, withdrawing an appraisive thing, such as a statue, whilst difficult—witness the contention over the removal of statues—can be particularly significant.

Efforts to remake the world can be worthwhile because (we hope) they can outlast us (compare Coninx 2023). This brings us to their *durability* or *stability*, and their forward-looking role in shaping values and norms. While it is of course possible for a monument to be destroyed or removed (or vandalized or recontextualized), many of them continue to exist in the same context after their commissioners and makers are gone. Indeed, their persistence is part of the function of making our values concrete. As C. Thi Nguyen (2019) argues, monuments are prime examples of how we commit not only ourselves, but also future generations after us, to specific *values* that we have, especially values that might be too subtle to be made explicit. This environmental modification to the National Mall gives expression and lasting structure to particular patterns of thought and action, and gives force—beyond that typically possible in verbal praise—to particular social norms and values: in this instance, the value of civil rights in particular and racial justice more generally.[4]

[4] A complexity: resources that are not wholly material can be used to praise, such as when a national holiday named after a person. The creation of Martin Luther King., Jr. Day presumably took as much time and as much effort as the creation of the Memorial. Whilst not a 'thing' in the same sense as a statue, where there are paid days off such holidays are a (collectively large) sum of money into the pockets of (some) employees, so are in another way material. In such cases there is finitude: there are only so many national holidays that a government can mandate in

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Distinctive issues arise that have been overlooked due to a narrow focus on verbal praise. For example, contentions abound in relation to this King statue, pertaining to the subtle values embodied in the statue: whether the pose, and the text inscribed, (inaccurately) suggest and thereby valorize arrogance (Greenberger 2023). This helpfully highlights that the values and norms stabilized by an environmental modification need not have been *intended* by their creators.

Many appraisive things naturally come with stability given their physical form, thus creating cognitive niches that promote and stabilize values not only for present but also future communities. Much of the concern with 'objectionable commemorations' is that they valorize and celebrate condemnable characters, activities, or values—such as Thomas Jefferson (a slave owner, despite signing the Declaration of Independence), or Confederate Soldiers (Lim 2025). We inhabit social environments populated with things that express misplaced praise and celebrate hierarchical and racist values, causally embedded in—downstream from, and themselves reproducing—racist social structures.

Such environments—in particular, the appraisive things in the environments—have a role in producing symbolic and psychological harms (see Burch-Brown 2017). Rather than (though compatibly with) specifying the forms of praise, such monuments have recently been characterized as forms of hate speech (Lai 2020, Dixon 2022) or slurs (Shahvisi, 2021). Perhaps most resonant with our analysis here is Lai's characterization of some statues—focusing in particular on monuments to Chiang Kai-shek, the brutal authoritarian who oversaw much of the White Terror period in Taiwan during which many were executed, imprisoned, or exiled, presented as a benevolent ruler—as forms of 'derogatory pedestalling' (2020, 604, see also Lai 2024). Such monuments pedestal their subject whilst entrenching derogatory values which denigrate others in the community. In vivid description of the role that appraisive things can have in producing hostile cognitive niches, Friedell & Liao (2022) argue that statues honoring generals and soldiers who fought for the Confederacy in the American Civil War function as exercitive speech acts which enact permissibility facts—prohibiting criticism of military generals who fought for the preservation of slavery, suggesting celebration of their role instead (see also Archer and Matheson 2022 on 'emotional imperialism'). Unlike verbal speech acts, however, statues embed, over time and with some degree of stability, such permissions and prohibitions in our social world. Such things shape beliefs and norms in ways which are undesirable and deleterious to (many members of) the communities they inhabit.

The use of things to praise activates a further dimension of evaluation that is largely obscured by focusing only on verbal praise: namely, whether the materials through which the praise is expressed are apt. A further contention regarding the King statue on the National Mall illustrates this: the materials themselves were reportedly worked on by unpaid and un-unionized laborers (Greenberger 2023). The materials would appear to be causally implicated in processes and relations in conflict with the values of equality and justice for which King and others strived.

a year. And there is stability: once a holiday enters the calendar, it can be incredibly difficult to get rid of it—just ask the opponents of Columbus Day in the U.S.

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An isolated monument can in this way entrench harmful values. Patterns of appraisive things can also entrench (again, perhaps unintentionally) harmful social meanings or values where choices about whom to honor in material form convey judgments about which social groups are particularly esteem-worthy, such as where white men are disproportionately represented (compare Lim & Lai 2024 on "commemorative landscape"). Patterns of marginalization and disadvantage are thus sustained.

This returns us to two orthogonal roles the finitude of resources can play in shaping the social meaning of appraisive things: because finite, appraisive things 'speak for' a community's values in particularly strong terms. And because finite, the distribution of praise can speak to whom is considered praiseworthy. This too can stabilize norms and values—not only shaping which are readily accessible to us, but with whom, or what group, they are associated. Indeed, it is the persistence of these values, in the face of their contestation, that makes these monuments the site of critique, protest, vandalism and, sometimes, removal.

To be clear, the "appraisive landscape" includes things of varying degrees of finitude and stability: for example, mugs (e.g. inscribed with 'world's best teacher!') are not as stable as monuments. When we use things to praise, the degree of finitude or stability might be part of what informs that choice. Again, to emphasize—we do not claim finitude and durability are exclusive to things, but that they are particularly significant, typically more so than in relation to verbal praise. This example is one in which the materials have great symbolic significance. The next example brings the instrumental value of appraisive things to the fore.

b. Money

Perhaps one of the things with the greatest symbolic and instrumental significance in our lives in the 21st century is money. Our societies are shaped around money, relationships mediated by it, almost everything valued in terms of it (Wolff 2003, James 2012). But money does not always have a purely instrumental role; it can also have an appraisive function, and it is often used to express praise. (To be clear: we do not claim that all money is appraisive. But it sometimes clearly has such a role.) Restricting our attention to the domain with which we and readers are likely familiar, consider the appraisive role of "academic money". Academics receive material praises in different monetary forms, including: research grants, funded fellowships, year-end or *ad hoc* bonuses, occasional or perennial essay prizes. Of course, such money has an obvious instrumental function, enabling its recipients to engage in further research activities and so to accumulate other markers of prestige, such as publications or further grants; attending conferences, sharing research and developing networks of like-minded researchers (sometimes fellowships are bestowed on the promise of doing these things); as well as to pay the rent and put food on the table. But such money also has an appraisive purpose: it marks out certain work, or workers, as particularly creditable, as exemplifying certain values taken to be important in academic life. And, it does so in ways that verbal praise alone cannot, due to the finitude and stability of monetary resources.

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To illustrate, take the example of a research grant that bestows on its recipient substantial funds to enable some years of independent research, free from administrative and teaching duties. Why express praise in this form, when verbal accolade is possible? In one sense, the instrumental value of the grant addresses this question. But it is worth exploring further the significance of those instrumentally useful resources for the praise that is expressed. The grant is bestowed on a particular individual (or team), marking them out as particularly worthy. That the resources are *finite* makes the use of them particularly significant, affecting our assessment of the *magnitude* of the praise.[5] Such awards would not play this appraisive role if they were distributed by pure lottery, or on equal terms to all participants. Nor would the praise be as significant if it were only verbal.

On the other hand, the grant is not just about the creditable qualities of the recipient(s). Just as importantly, the award serves a forward-looking function: to signal the values of importance in an academic community (according to current academic conventions, achieving research publications, or making novel contributions to debates) to encourage others to pursue those values also. Issues of *comparative fairness* also arise here, in relation to both what and whom are praised. Some achievements–publications, previous grant wins–are highly lauded whilst others–collegiality, fostering inclusion–are much less so; at least the latter are rarely rewarded with, or supported by, awards of hundreds of thousands of (e.g.) pounds or dollars.

Importantly, the material resources used to praise signal what values are considered worth *investing in*. Moreover, the use of finite resources to express praise provides a stable underpinning to these values. Whilst we could relatively easily redirect, redistribute or simply express *more* verbal praise, the same is not true of monetary resources and the bureaucratic structures through which they are distributed. This is partly a function of the finitude of the resources (money runs out); but also of the embeddedness of resources in wider causal and institutional structures (with their own regulations).

Choices about *whom* to esteem convey judgments about whose excellences should be recognized; and patterns of praise can imply judgments about which (members of) social groups are worthy recipients. For example, reporting indicates that there are significant differences in success rates for black and white researchers applying for UKRI funding (the main source of public funding for research in the UK). Over three years (2017-2020), the success rates for black researchers were 8, 12, and 12% respectively; for white researchers 29, 30 and 29% respectively (Ellis 2024). Patterns of marginalization and disadvantage, within academia, are thus sustained. There are very clear ways in which this shapes the cognitive niches we inhabit—our attention to particular researchers, or fields of research, what questions and contributions are considered valuable and important. The point is not only to do with procedural unfairness. This pattern of allocation is problematic even if the procedures that generate it are fair (such as a lottery). This is because the pattern of

[5] This is so, we think, even though there are widely acknowledged imperfections and some degree of luck or arbitrariness in the awarding process—perhaps there are some ways of being flawed that would undermine the idea that the prizes track merit more thoroughly.

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allocation stably entrenches the idea that black researchers and their work is less esteemable.

In entrenching values and norms, money is often more emphatic—and indeed, incentivizing—than is even the most effusive verbal praise. Like other forms of praise, this material form of praise contains both a second-personal dimension, esteeming its recipient; and a communal one, for the wider academic community: marking the values, activities, and achievements considered esteemable, and entrenching the respective norms.

There are further ways in which material praise may be *durable* or *stable*. Unlike a statue, money is thoroughly fungible. While not stable in the same way as monuments are—the money is to be spent, after all— monetary expressions of positive appraisal do allow for the accumulation of resources in ways that stabilize evaluative hierarchies. The research papers the funds enabled, the conference trips supported, the next applications facilitated, all persist. Indeed, there is a "Matthew effect" (loosely based on a parable from the gospel of Matthew) (Merton 1968) in science funding such that early funding winners tend to win significantly more funding in the subsequent years, compared to nearby nonwinners (Bol et al. 2018). The symbolic significance of the award affects who, and whose research, is prominent in our cognitive niches. The instrumental significance of these awards affects who can do more of such research, thus sustaining the prominence of those researchers and contributions. So there is much causally downstream of the monetary award that stably entrenches the norms and values of our academic community. And, where these impacts are unjustly distributed, these causally downstream effects can serve to entrench existing patterns of inequality and marginalization within academia (and can do so to far greater effect than (merely) verbal praise would).[6]

We can see the instrumental significance of using money to praise; but is it an apt vehicle for the expression of praise? Unlike (some) statues, in many instances money lacks the capacity to communicate subtle meanings and values: the main expressive dimension of money is a scalar one of quantity. Sometimes awarding committees might accompany the money with verbal remarks to specify the qualities they are lauding. And sometimes the quantities themselves can have significance: a truly astoundingly large research grant can express the vital importance of philosophical research within higher education. In contrast, a small quantity can end up expressing tepid praise. Anecdotally, consider the communication, from the vice-chancellor of one of the authors' institutions, praising employees for the way their 'extraordinary efforts have helped us through what has been a challenging time' during the COVID pandemic. The message went on to communicate that all staff

[6] There are of course extensive literatures on the role of money in oppression; how the monetizing of values can distort them (Wolff 2003); how our social relations are mediated and constrained by the wage relation (James 2012); the ways money conditions how we meet our needs, alienating us from our labor, compelling us into exploitative labor relations (Kandiyali, 2020; Shelby 2002); how the material and ideological are mutually sustaining (Wills 2018). There are variously expressed concerns (from left-libertarian to strict egalitarian) about how money, and resources more generally, are distributed. Whilst we agree with a number of these concerns, our focus here is on the distinctive consequences and harms that can arise from using money to express praise.

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(on the main payroll) would receive a £50 voucher, as 'a way of recognising your contributions'.[7] Some employees felt that whilst praise for their considerable efforts was welcome, it was rather undermined by the material quantity of £50. Part of the problem here concerns the parameters of *finitude* and *comparative fairness*: whilst institutional resources are of course finite, the portion of those finite resources reallocated seems sufficiently small (e.g., in comparison with vice-chancellors' annual bonuses) as to undermine the putative praise for 'extraordinary efforts'. The material value is simply insufficient to match the effusiveness of the verbal praise. Also relevant is the *durability* or *stability* of the praise, in terms of its lasting impact on our social world. Where resources (here, money) contribute to the significance of the appraisal, these resources barely altered the socio-physical environment. In contrast, the 'extraordinary efforts' people made significantly altered both the environments of and indeed those who made them, leaving people burned out, and in some cases increasingly vulnerable, or disabled, having contracted long COVID in the course of their workplace efforts.

Thus, issues arise that have been obscured by the narrow focus on verbal praise: the instrumental value of money which may sometimes make it an apt vehicle for praise may be offset by its expressive bluntness, meaning that it may not always communicate what is intended; or may be liable to too many interpretations to enable reliable predictions about how the praise will be interpreted.[8]

3. Norms of Appraisive Things

The two examples we have introduced—monuments and money—illustrate how material praise raises novel questions: not only what and who is praised and how much—but also questions of with what materials, the durability and finitude of those resources, where they are located, how and by whom they are made (as well as by whom or on what authority they were commissioned). These issues all affect what the social meanings of those things are, the values they express, and whether they do so with sufficient expressive subtlety or transparency to clearly communicate with current and future audiences for whom we anticipate the praise to endure. In turn, these issues all shape the nature, nuance, and normative power of the environmental and cognitive niches these appraisive things construct.

We now bring into contact these claims about things with the conceptual resources articulated in section 1 to further develop a framework for evaluating appraisive things. Each norm addresses one way in which an expression of praise can be more or less apt. That is, it informs the evaluation of the praise, but need not affect the permissibility of its expression. This list of norms is not intended to be exhaustive, but is intended to show the fruitfulness of considering this aspect of our appraisive

[7] Personal correspondence, Dec 2020.

[8] The examples of money and monuments are just two examples of appraisive things. They differ radically with respect to their dimensions of instrumental and symbolic significance. Other examples concern the resources of time and money—national holidays or celebration days, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, or Mothers' Day (in relation to the latter, see Martin 2021).

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practices more fully, since in relation to each norm, novel questions—beyond those that arise for verbal praise—are rendered visible.

a. Backward-looking norms

Norms of (verbal) praise attend to whether, and how much, praise is deserved; how much esteem is warranted and the form of expression proportional to that degree. Of course, there is no precise metric for determining this, but we are familiar with the idea of praise being excessive (gushing praise) or being stingy ('damning with faint praise'). In both instances, the idea is that (verbally) expressed praise can be more than is deserved, or less than deserved in ways that can be criticisable. We can say as much without supposing that there is one precise 'quantum' of praise that is the 'right' amount. Indeed, we might think something like Telech and Tierney's 'spectrum thesis' (for blame) applies to praise—the idea that there is a range of morally permissible degrees of praise for commensurately praiseworthy things (2019, 34).

A whole host of additional dimensions are present when thinking of appraisive things. Many variables contribute to 'how much' praise is expressed in an appraisive thing: What resources are involved, and what is their symbolic and instrumental value? How durable are the materials (wood or marble)? (This could pertain both to how long the thing will remain, or how costly its upkeep will be.) Where is the thing positioned—how public, how visible—for how long, and on what authority? The King statue is vast, durable, and in a place of national importance—intended to speak for the values of the polity for generations hence (one hopes). In contrast, Holroyd (2025 169) notes that the statue of Geffrye, a slaver and philanthropist, was relocated to a 'less prominent space' in the Museum of the Home, in acknowledgment of his moral wrongs. Some found this response insufficient—a mere relegation, rather than full repudiation (see Burch-Brown 2017 for related discussion).

These variables can all affect *how much praise* is expressed, which has implications for the norms and values affirmed. This in turn affects the normative and evaluative aspects of our cognitive niches, affecting what values are accessible to us, where, and when. Appraisive things can make certain values the default ones in our environment, or underpin assumptions about who is, or is likely to be, esteem-worthy. (This presumably explains why authoritarians are keen to install honorific monuments to themselves.) Appraisive things can stabilize norms and valorize certain ways of doing things. They can be part of our extended cognitive architecture that facilitates the promotion of values we care about; or that hinders and distorts those things we value.

b. Comparative fairness norms

The finitude and stability of the resources used to praise also raise questions of comparative fairness.[9] Are commensurately praiseworthy people or groups praised

[9] This might be thought to be analogous to the remarks Lim makes regarding the 'unfair exclusion' of some from commemorative practices (2025, 1023-4). Lim mentions that beyond who is represented, the relative prestige of the

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with things of commensurate stability, for example? Other variables also affect comparative fairness. For example, perhaps expressing praise with a wooden statue and a marble statue may both be within the range of permissible praise for commensurately praiseworthy things. But consider if one group only ever gets wooden statues, whilst another gets marble ones (quality); or if one group gets institutionally funded praise with things, whilst another relies on contributions from admirers (authority); or if appraisive things directed towards one group are displayed in a prominent position, whilst those praising another group are peripheral (place). In pairwise comparison, issues of comparative fairness arise.

These comparative matters can shape the cognitive niches in which we make appraisals, stabilizing the social norms that underpin appraisals and giving them force. Patterns of praise can be self-sustaining, anchoring future praise to ill-fitting or unfair expressions. Crucially—irrespective of whether such differences correspond to unfairness in expressions of praise—these differences contribute to differences in social meaning. The norms and values can be expressed with greater or lesser cross-temporal stability depending on the materials used, for example. And that can inform how high or significant the current expression of praise is.

c. Forward-looking norms

That expressions of praise have a role in norm and value affirmation is key to the forward-looking goals of agency-cultivation. Expressions of praise aim to sensitize, encourage and perhaps even incentivize future promotion of the relevant norms and values. This means that careful attention is needed to what values and norms—instantiated by whom—are affirmed. And this can be affected by a number of the variables specified above, especially insofar as the significance of the norms and values is indicated by the force of the expression (quality, authority, place, perhaps also quantity).

Crucially, comparative fairness may be greatly important here. Consider a scenario in which men receive prizes for behaviors that women systematically do not (cf Heilman & Chen 2005); or where white people are praised with statues or cash prizes for things that black people rarely are (section 2 above; Lim & Lai 2024). Such patterns of praise not only say something about which values are important—but also about which values are important when instantiated *by whom*, or *by members of which group*. This is particularly salient given the feature of appraisive things we have remarked on—their stability or durability.

The normative cognitive niches created by appraisive things may promote not only values worthy of celebration (altruism, philanthropy, excellence) but also harmful values and norms—sexist and racist meanings, for example. These meanings become part of the environmental backdrop, and affect, for example, our cognitive associations between praiseworthy features and group members. This is in part because of the finitude of resources—prize money is limited, or space for statues is constrained. This means that *to whom* such resources are

artefacts and their location are relevant—both considerations also relevant to using things to praise (including of course commemorations that express praise).

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allocated, and such patterns of allocation, have particular significance in shaping our environment and the cognitive niches they foster.

d. Epistemic norms

Given the durability of things, one issue to which we have already pointed concerns *how long* the appraisive thing will last (and how commensurate that is with other targets which are praised). But a further issue arises concerning the transparency of the values praised with the thing. Will the norms and values expressed in the praise remain transparent to later audiences? Or will it be opaque for what—the instantiation of what values—the praise was expressed?

This may be thought to relate to the idea of epistemic norms for praise. Suppose such a norm holds that one should praise only if one reasonably believes that the target of the praise is praiseworthy. A thing cannot form beliefs—but as we have emphasised, things make up our cognitive niches and, in turn, shape our patterns of thought and action. In this instance, appraisive things can bias us toward particular ways of thinking about values and norms, which we may or may not reflectively endorse. Accordingly, an epistemic norm for appraisive *things* may concern the extent to which it is reasonable to believe that the target of the praise, and the values and norms instantiated in the appraisive thing, will be reasonably believed to be praiseworthy by future members of the community, whose cognitive niches are to be shaped by those appraisive things. Or, on Holroyd's formulation of an epistemic norm, praisers should praise only if they reasonably believe their praise will not be harmful (2025, 134-140). Applied to appraisive things, this would concern the extent to which it is reasonable to believe that the values and norms instantiated by the appraisive thing will not be harmful for future communities whose cognitive niches are to be shaped by those appraisive things.

In both formulations, *which* future communities are at issue will be partly determined by the materials in question, and their expected durability. If the appraisive thing is expected to last generations hence, then we should consider whether the values it promotes and instantiates will be transparent to, and embraced by, those future generations (compare Fox 2023, Nguyen 2019). This presses the question of whether we anticipate the material aspects of the social environment we now construct will promote harmony or disharmony for future community members (and whether this is a desirable thing).

e. Standing norms

Questions have been raised about standing norms for praise (Telech 2024, Stout 2020, Lippert-Rasmussen 2024, Holroyd 2025). One way in which this might arise in relation to appraisive things may concern *from whom* the appraisive thing is issued —a bonus from an employer, a statue commissioned by a local council, a medal bestowed by a monarch. We can ask questions about whether such bestowers of material praise have standing in relation to the values they promote and norms they affirm in the praise: is their social position, or are their values, consistent with or supportive of the values celebrated in the praise.

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However, there is a different issue, perhaps related to standing, that concerns the extent to which the values that praise expresses can or cannot be reconciled with the values the *things* themselves instantiate. This may sometimes be a matter of the *form* the materials take. One example of this is the interpretation of the King statue as embodying an (inaccurate) arrogant posture, compounded by discontent with the (also inaccurate) words inscribed on the monument itself (Greenberger 2023). Another is the tribute to Mary Wollstonecraft installed in Newington Green (UK) in 2020, which garnered criticism for celebrating her, 'the mother of feminism', with a naked female form (Topping 2020).

But it may also be a matter of the materials, irrespective of form. As discussed in section 2, there is reason to believe the materials from which the King monument was sculpted were produced by means inapt for the values of justice the monument itself aims to celebrate. Or consider a hypothetical statue celebrating an environmental activist made from Carrara marble (the quarries that have wreaked devastation upon the landscape and wildlife of the Italian Alpi Apuane). Or a hypothetical plaque praising a slavery abolitionist made from minerals mined exploiting child labor.

The materials or substance through which the praise is expressed embodies values that are in opposition to those values celebrated in the praise. The choice not only of form, but of which materials to use to praise is highly relevant to the question of its aptness. This is not simply a matter of absolute or even comparative proportionality, but a matter of the extent to which the values instantiated in the appraisive thing resonate, or are in tension with, each other. It is a matter of whether the materials and form are suitable to express the praise. The material and normative structures that shape our cognitive niches may in this way either promote harmony or undermine the values the things are intended to celebrate.

4. Conclusion: A Multidimensional Model of Apt Appraisive Things

We raised the question of the significance of using *things* to express praise. Why do it at all? And if we are to do it, how to do it well? In particular, might the norms that govern verbal expressions of praise similarly govern our use of things to praise?

We have articulated some of the ways in which norms of desert or fit and comparative fairness, agency cultivation norms, epistemic norms, and something like norms of standing might arise in relation to appraisive things. The landscape of material praise is subtle and complex in ways that differ considerably from the landscape of verbal praise: there are different variables, raising different normative issues, involved in our use of things to praise. A more complex set of considerations arises, in particular due to some normatively significant features that are at the fore in the use of things to praise: the finitude of the resources, their durability, and what this means for their role in shaping our cognitive niches.

We took two primary examples, monuments and money in their appraisive roles, and expect that there will be much rich and fruitful analysis to do of other things we use to praise, which may vary in their symbolic and instrumental significance, their finitude and durability, their social meaning and the pattern of their distribution. Our interest in this topic is not merely descriptive; we hope that bringing these features of

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our appraisive practices into focus can help us to use these resources well, and better shape our moral-material environments.[10]

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