

Some Notes on Flattery

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Flattery is a strange part of language. Compliments are indispensable in navigating social life and yet we rarely stop to consider what they are. Even in philosophy, the treatment of compliments is almost absent. The closest theme, I suppose, would be the ethical topic of praise and blame; and this latter field is more about assessing the morality of particular acts, i.e. awarding praise to good acts and censuring others as blameworthy. However, most of us wouldn't consider compliments as a part of moral philosophy because, indeed, they seem to be simple expressions of the things we approve of or like. And yet, compliments, like any other part of speech, can take part in both truth and falsity, good and evil. Flattery can be deceptive or it can be genuine—although what exactly *genuine flattery* is will need some further consideration. Whatever flattery is, it is certainly not simple, and considering its (largely unnoticed) importance in our lives seems like a meaningful and pressing task. In what follows I will attempt to think through some of the most peculiar aspects of compliments and flattery in general. Since the topic has received little to no treatment in philosophy thus far, this paper will not attempt to put forward any comprehensive theory of flattery, but will instead risk a series of more or less preliminary observations on the phenomenon. My hope is to show just how strange and mysterious compliments and flattery are, and to open the way for future investigations on the topic.

1. What is flattery?

A basic statement about the world (i.e. “The tree is tall” “the dog is dead” “your hat is on fire” etc.) aims to express an opinion we have about it. (For the moment I won't consider untruthful or deceptive statements.) I experience the tree as being tall and I say so. I see that your hat is burning and I let you know. Flattery is ostensibly, however, identical with the common statement insofar as it too expresses an opinion about the world: I think that your dress is pretty and I say as much. A flattering statement is here identical in structure with the common statement: it merely expresses an impression of or opinion about the world (albeit a *more subjective* one, perhaps—although it is not clear that my thinking that the mountain is tall is any more subjective than thinking that your dress is pretty). Flattery differs most significantly from common statements in that it aims to produce a positive response in the listener (i.e. the object of the flattering remark). Flattery, in other words, aims

to please. (Not inconsequently, the verb *to flatter* ultimately comes from the Old French *flatter* which meant *to caress* or *stroke*. And so we can also think of flattery as a kind of *lover's touch*, where the goal is to produce pleasure—albeit through the use of complimentary language in the modern use of the word.) This condition doesn't seem to hold for most other kinds of utterances. Any number of other statements can, of course, aim to please the listener, but this intention is not a necessity as in the case of flattery.

Without the intention to please, flattery returns to the level of the common statement: in saying “you are beautiful” I may (however strange it may seem) simply be describing what I see as a fact about the world, in the same way that I would say, “you are standing.” And so it is perfectly possible that the same statement, uttered with different intentions, could become flattery or non-flattery.

2. Flattery and praise

What is the distinction, if any, between flattery and praise? Our general sense is that flattery is strategic, calculating, and ultimately deceptive. In other words, when I flatter someone, they may be inclined to think that I am *aiming at* or *in pursuit* of something, whether that something be money, sex, status, a good table, etc.; hence the common response to (failed attempts at) flattery: *flattery will get you nowhere*. Praise, on the other hand, doesn't seem to suffer from this bad reputation. The word itself comes originally from the Latin *pretium*, meaning *worth* or *reward*, suggesting that to praise someone is to give them their *due*, i.e. to give them what they are worth. And thus if I were to say to John Banville (the Irish author) that he is an excellent writer, my comment ought to be understood as praise in the strict sense, insofar as it merely *does justice* to Banville's ability. By praising him, I am simply recognizing his worth for what it is. In this sense, to praise someone is only to point out the obvious. Flattery, however, is often thought to exaggerate (or completely fabricate) someone's worth in order to achieve some calculated end; meaning, of course, that the flatterer secretly believes that the worth of the thing he flatters is much less than he says.

On the face of it, praise seems to come across as the better of the pair, as the honest half to flattery's falseness. But can we rest easily with this conclusion? I am inclined to think that the line between praise and flattery is not so clear as our common understanding of them leads us to believe. Flattery may perhaps be more overtly strategic and manipulative because, with some expected end or benefit in mind, it gives a positive evaluation to something that it believes to be unworthy. Praise may be more truthful in its evaluation of the thing or person being praised, but this does not mean that it is any less prone to manipulative use.

In my definition of flattery at the beginning of this paper, I argued that one of the conditions of flattery was that it aims to produce pleasure in the person being flattered. Praise seems to be bound equally by this condition of pleasing the other, for without it praise too would be reduced to a simple statement of the facts. The statement “You are a great writer” may be a fact (as I see it) but unless I am aiming to please Mr. Banville it is certainly not praise in the sense that we have been discussing. And where making someone else happy is the immediate goal of a statement—whether it be flattery or praise—we should not discount the possibility that a more calculated motive lay in the background. Indeed, telling my beautiful date that she is beautiful may be straightforward praise, however a clever observer (or my clever date) might suspect ulterior motives at work behind my kind words. Thus the problem of praise and flattery isn’t solved by asking the question, “*Do you really mean that?*” Rather, we might want to ask those who praise us the more prickly question, “*Why do you say that?*”

(Keeping the above analysis in mind, I will throughout the rest of the paper refer to flattery and praise more or less equivocally, distinguishing them only as necessary.)

3. Who can we flatter?

If flattery is ultimately an attempt to please another, a “true” compliment must be directed towards someone (or something) that can be *pleased*. In this sense, inanimate objects, landscapes, ancient civilizations, and flowers are all *unflatterable*, precisely because they cannot be affected by anything I say, complimentary or otherwise. I may of course say that Venice in the spring is beautiful, but this doesn’t seem to qualify as a compliment; rather it is merely an expression of my opinion, with no thought about *pleasing* Venice.

The matter is not so simple when the object of our flattery is a dead or absent person. It is absurd to say that I please a deceased loved one by speaking well of him, and yet friends and family often speak *in a complimentary way* about the deceased. Here, we can distinguish between the affective act of complimenting someone, and the quality of being complimentary. The compliment, as an act, seems to be of the two-part structure that I described earlier; namely that a compliment both points out something in the world and at the same time aims to make the listener feel good about what is said. Speaking in a complimentary way, however, seems to be the more like speaking positively about something. In this way I can speak in a complimentary about the lifestyles of the ancient Greeks or about my third-grade English teacher without the intention of affecting either the Greeks or Mr. Thomson. (The same distinction seems to apply to insults and speaking in an insulting

(or derogatory) way about something or someone.)

What about complimenting infants or pets? Such practices are frequent enough, but when I praise my fish for being clever or cute, it is not immediately clear whether or not this is a compliment. The case with higher order animals or infants is more problematic however. When the trainer tells the dog that it is a “good boy” this seems to be a rather clear case of a successful compliment, despite the fact that the dog certainly cannot understand the statement. (It can, perhaps, understand the *meaning* of the statement; but this is surely different from comprehending the words themselves.) Chimpanzees are even more problematic, because while there is no doubt that some trained chimps can effectively communicate with their trainers, it remains a complete mystery as to what the chimp’s state of mind is during these interactions. Nevertheless, if one of the conditions of a compliment is that it pleases the other, a flattering remark to a chimpanzee which makes her appear glad can probably be understood as a compliment.

4. Flattery that fails

Flattery, like many social gestures, can appear to vary differently depending on how one stands in relation to the compliment. There are at least two positions that we need to consider: the position of the flatterer and that of the person flattered. The meaning of the compliment can change radically depending on the position one occupies. Imagine the following situation: A tells B that B’s English ability is excellent. A believes that he has said something complimentary to B, however B, whose first language is actually English, is not at all flattered by the remark, and is instead insulted by the suggestion that his English sounds like a second language. From A’s perspective, a compliment has been made; but B only feels insulted. In this situation how do we determine whether or not a compliment has been made?

5. Asking for flattery

The question—heard on many an American sitcom and possibly quite often in real life—“Do I look fat?” is an unfairly charged one. The person asking is probably seeking only one answer: a negative one; and thus is not asking a genuine question, insofar as there is only one acceptable response: “No.” If, for example, the person being asked replies positively, saying that yes, indeed, the other looks fat, then he will probably be resented for his blunt cruelty, rather than be appreciated for his candor. The person answering is effectively trapped into offering a negative response.

Indeed, many questions posed between friends, family and lovers are of this one-sided nature,

insofar as they only really allow for one possible response. When asked if I like a present, or a cake that was baked especially for me, I am essentially forced into offering a flattering response. Of course, if I happen to love the present or the cake, no problem presents itself; but when the opposite is true, then my position becomes perilous. Good manners and social commonsense call for false flattery in such cases, but what are we to make of such *white lies*? We may perhaps justify them on moral grounds by suggesting that the person asking the question is not seeking *truth per se*, but only one kind of truth: the kind that flatters. In that sense our white lie does not really count as a deception insofar as the questioner gives their *implied consent* by the mere fact of asking such a question. In answering the question, we are probably right to assume that the questioner is primarily interested in the positive reinforcement of something that they wish to believe (i.e. that the cake they baked was good) regardless of the *truth* behind the statement. To express this in another way, we might say that the questioner has an active interest in *avoiding* the disappointment that a negative response would bring. The proof of this comes when we attempt honesty in the face of such questions, saying, for example, “No, I didn’t really enjoy the cake.” We would surely be met with the resentment and disappointment of the other—unless they too had an exceptional penchant for honesty.

The unfairness of such questions becomes visible in this light. If we respond negatively the questioner might accuse us of callousness or ingratitude; but we could equally accuse them of asking such loaded questions to which an honest response becomes nearly impossible.

6. Flattery and falseness

If we accept that one of the essential conditions for flattery is an aim to please the other, we immediately encounter a difficulty. We said that a flattering statement is largely similar to any common statement about the world, insofar as it describes something that the speaker believes to be true. This aspect can, of course, be judged in terms of truth and falsity or at least truthfulness and falseness; which is to say that when I comment that your dress is beautiful despite the fact that I think it is ugly, I am speaking falsely, I am expressing something which I do not actually believe to be the case. Put simply, I am lying.

The difficulty that I referred to above is that the standard of truth that we apply to common speech is largely overlooked or put aside when it comes to flattery. This is because flattery’s other aspect (producing pleasure in another) often takes precedence over the impetus to speak truthfully. Truthfulness is forced to take a back seat in the case of flattery, especially when the two come into conflict—which is a common enough occurrence. Nevertheless, many would be reluctant to

categorize flattery as lying. Instead, people are apt to focus on the positive effects of flattery—namely making another person feel good, which is undoubtedly a noble goal. And perhaps it is true that untruthful flattery is less (or even far less) morally problematic than outright lying, but as with many kinds of so-called *white lies*, flattery is not as benign or harmless as many of us would like to believe.

When we engage in false flattery to spare someone's feelings or simply to be polite we may feel that we are acting in the other person's best interests; in other words, we might feel that we are acting altruistically and are thus justified in our choice. Indeed, when my grandmother gives me an unwearable sweater that she herself has knitted and asks whether I like it, it may seem like the best choice for all concerned to tell her how much I like her present. This will certainly spare her any feelings of disappointment or (conceivably) resentment that might appear were I to tell her the truth; and furthermore she will probably be tremendously pleased that I like her present, thus making her feel better about herself and our relationship. This is, too be sure, all good stuff, and when seen from this limited perspective (of my grandmother's immediate reaction) my actions seem perfectly justified. Indeed, when we judge this situation from a (consequentialist-)utilitarian perspective which weighs the good and bad consequences of my choice, my flattering lie again finds justification. In the immediate situation that we are discussing, the various goods that I bring about (my grandmother's pleasure, the happy continuance of our relationship, etc.) surely outweigh the relatively small evil of my lie; and thus on a utilitarian scale my choice is justifiable.

However when we widen the perspective and consider the consequences of flattery over a long period of time, the assurance of the goodness of our act, even in utilitarian terms, becomes questionable. Just like lies, flatteries are rarely isolated to a single instance: once they are given, they have to be repeated and reinforced with other flatteries. If I lie in regards to my joy at receiving my grandmother's present once, chances are that I will continue to do so in the future; and thus flattering her in such a way may become second nature for me, turning a single instance of false flattery into a pattern of it. And when deception proliferates in this manner, the narrow utilitarian calculus that we applied above seems to fall short of its task. The harms incurred by a single act of deceptive flattery may be subtle and far-reaching, including damage to the flatterer's moral conscience (or integrity) and the further possibility of a reduced resistance to various forms of deception in the future.

7. The goodness of flattery

The generally-believed claim that flattery and kind excuses are more or less good or are even

altruistic is doubtful. When she employs flattery, the flatterer may tell herself that she is only acting out of an interest for the wellbeing of the other, but we can recognize more egotistical and self-serving motives like the desire to avoid the complexity of telling the truth and the risks that truth might bring for her. While these may be completely understandable motives, they are far from being altruistic or disinterested. We can see how much potential difficulty the flatterer can avoid and, indeed, how much she stands to gain—at least at first glance—when she pays an untruthful compliment.

8. Flattery and modesty

It is a strange fact of social life that a compliment paid to another becomes, if turned towards ourselves, an act of boasting. Saying, “You are very intelligent,” sounds startlingly different from, “I am very intelligent.” Why is this the case?

If one of the aspects of flattery is simply that it expresses an opinion about the world, then why are such expressions limited to being about others? Modesty demands that we reserve our kindest words for others, and if we fail to do this then the implication is that we are full of pride and conceit. But what if we straightforwardly believe that we are intelligent or beautiful or talented? Why is it so wrong to express this about ourselves when it is acceptable (even laudable) to express such opinions about others? Is our judgment not to be trusted when the object under consideration is ourselves? Modesty not only demands that we keep these opinions to ourselves, but it even forces us to *deny* them when offered by others. If someone tells me that I am intelligent or handsome, good form demands that I refuse their evaluation or at least sheepishly shake my head as if I were both pleased and embarrassed by their compliment. Here in Japan the *de rigueur* response to a compliment is a flat-out refusal, saying, “That is not the case”. But what if we (in poor taste, as philosophers are likely to be) were to apply a standard of truthfulness to such responses to compliments and modesty in general?

If someone tells me that my Japanese ability is excellent, I am expected to deny this compliment humbly. But what if I actually believe that I speak “excellent” Japanese? Social protocol still demands, however, that I refuse the compliment, or perhaps soften it by replying that my Japanese is only mediocre or that I still have a long way to progress. When we evaluate such situations in terms of truth and falsity, strictly speaking, I am lying. What I believe and what I say are two very different things. Of course, my aim here isn’t exactly to deceive the other; but it is rather to show my modesty to her. However if my modesty doesn’t reflect what I believe about myself then

we can say that it is *false modesty*. But isn't all modesty of this character? When we speak modestly we are essentially downplaying or denying those things that are laudable or praiseworthy about ourselves. It seems to be a condition of modesty, however, that we *in fact* believe quite differently from how we speak. If someone compliments my artistic ability but I actually feel that I have no talent at all, I am not being modest in denying their compliment; rather, I am being honest. I am merely expressing a truthful opinion about myself. Of course, our flatterer will likely say that we are "just being modest" in evaluating ourselves so poorly; but they will only be correct if my belief is actually different from what I say.

Modesty then is always a kind of *false modesty*. It forces us to give lowered evaluations of ourselves; for if we do not then we are guilty of pride. Pride, understood as an exaggerated and inflated sense of personal worth, is certainly a vice and to be avoided by anyone who wishes to maintain a clear view of themselves. This kind of pride, in its embellishments and delusions of grandeur (like the pop-star who imagines that world revolves around him), is simply another kind of deception, namely of the self. We might term this *false pride* or *unwarranted pride*. However, when we understand pride as merely an honest sense of self-worth and joy for all that we are and have accomplished, there seems to be nothing wrong about it at all. Being clear-headed about who one is and what one has done—even if that means taking pride in one's achievements—ought not to be disparaged in the way that false pride is. The two states of mind are fundamentally different and should not be confused. False pride and false modesty are interpreted very differently by society—the former is vilified while the latter is seen as laudable (an irony in itself: to be praised for refusing all praise....)—however, as I have attempted to show, they are both guilty of a kind of deception and should thus be criticized accordingly.

9. Why not flatter?

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about the idea. There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity.... This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler—for the liar—than it really is, or ought to be.... It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation. It is important to do this because in doing so we do justice to our own complexity. It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us. (Rich, 1993, p. 197)

The “hard way” of telling the truth is not, of course, to be accepted as good itself without further ado (for there are certainly circumstances when giving an untruthful compliment is the only reasonable option) however we can nevertheless recognize the merits of such an arduous path. Relationships wherein polite deception is the standard, where the false smile and forced laugh become everyday tools, are demeaning to the dignity of all of the parties involved—similar to the way that, in a society where counterfeit currency abounds, value itself is radically undermined. These kinds of relationships and environments abound, however, and most of us are obliged to take part in them to some degree or other. (The service industry here in Japan is an extreme example of this kind of environment, saturated by plastic smiles and near-comic expressions of reverence and respect for the customer.) In such situations we may be untroubled by the superficiality that politeness and flattery often induce—however it seems clear to me that we would want to avoid this in our closest and most important relationships with those we care about. Here, I am not recommending some Kantian, absolutist position where all untruths are forbidden, whatever the circumstances; rather, what I want to suggest is simply the desirability of relationships where the necessity for falseness is either absent or at least as minimal as possible. To be able to speak frankly and openly with those we love and care for is a great privilege and, as Adrienne Rich points out in the above quotation, there are few people with whom such candor is possible: “We can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.”

Being able to tell a friend or lover or family member that the present that she has given you is not to your taste or that the food she has cooked doesn’t taste all that good is not an easy task. Many people, in thinking of the difficulties that such candor can cause, opt quite naturally for an untruthful flattery: indeed, being less-than-honest in these circumstances seems to show a greater sensitivity for the other than does telling the truth. I am not doubting that there are times when such is the case, where being honest would be totally inappropriate and harmful for the other; however I think it is important to question the assumption that flattery should be the default choice in all such situations and that honesty, because it is hard and potentially risky, is never to be desired.

It is important to point out that being candid and being insensitive are two very different things, and that just because one chooses not to flatter does not mean that we must be crude or cruel in our honesty. Obviously, while they may be candid, expressions like “that is ugly” or “this tastes terrible” are not the necessary alternatives to flattery—indeed, there are clear moral problems with such brutal statements, however “honest” they may be. Especially with those we care for we have a duty (or at

least a strong interest) to speak with kindness, and this does not necessarily preclude speaking with candor. What we might say in lieu of an easy flattery ought to do justice to our complexity as individuals and therefore it is likely to be more arduous than simply saying “This tastes delicious!” or “I love it!” We might explain to the other that while we appreciate their cooking for us, the meal itself didn’t match our taste. We might even try to pinpoint what was wrong with the dish and offer advice on how to avoid the error in the future. By risking such a complex confession we place ourselves in a vulnerable position in front of the other. There is every possibility that they will resent us or feel hurt by our remarks. However there is also the hoped-for possibility that they will appreciate our candor and appreciate furthermore that we feel close enough to them to risk such delicate speech. Again, as Rich pointed out, there are few people with whom such honesty is possible, and feeling that you are part of such a relationship carries a value that few flattering phrases can convey.

References

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