

Ethics of Parasocial Relationships

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Abstract: In this chapter we analyse the nature and ethical implications of parasocial relationships. While this type of relationship has received significant attention in other interdisciplinary fields such as celebrity studies and fan studies, philosophers have so far had very little to say about them. Parasocial relationships are usually defined as asymmetrical, in which a media-user closely relates to a media-personality as if they were a friend or family member, and where this connection is mostly unreciprocated. We focus on the most typical form of this kind of relationship, between fans and celebrities. We argue that a parasocial relationship between fan and celebrity is a distinct kind of personal relationship, constituted by three basic structural asymmetries: attention, communication, and epistemic. These asymmetries give rise to a more substantial asymmetry concerning the way in which celebrities and fans have ‘directive’ or ‘interpretative’ influence over each other’s identity. This can lead to a failure of recognition respect, and generates ethical responsibilities for both fans and celebrities. We conclude by noting that the structural asymmetries we find in parasocial relationships are present in many other types of relationship, especially those in which one person holds a position of power. As such, it is valuable to pay attention to the way in which asymmetries point to forms of parasociality in these other relationships, and the extent to which they give rise to distinct ethical responsibilities.

Introduction

Philosophical work on personal relationships has tended to focus on the most paradigmatic examples of such relationships, such as romantic partnerships (Lopez-Cantero 2018), friendships (Jeske 1997), and parent-child relationships (Liao 2015). This focus makes sense given the centrality of these relationships to most people’s lives. There are, though, many other kinds of personal relationships that matter to people, and that give rise to distinct ethical challenges.

Our focus here is on the ethical challenges that arise from ‘parasocial’ relationships. A parasocial relationship, defined originally by Horton and Wohl (1956), is a relationship that media-users have with media-performers in which the user closely relates to the performer as if they were a friend or family member. The relationship is ‘para’ social, to the extent that the performer does not necessarily reciprocate the feeling of attachment or intimacy that is felt by the user (Rojek 2012: 125). This kind of relationship may be formed with fictional characters (Rain & Mar 2021), influencers on social media (Shupe & Chen 2020), as well as bots, avatars and other digital creations (Stein, Breves & Anders 2022). For our purposes, we focus on the most typical form of a parasocial relationship, between fans and celebrities.

Relationships between celebrities and their fans have been the subject of significant academic attention outside of philosophy, particularly in the interdisciplinary fields of celebrity studies (for example, van Krieken 2012; Marcus 2019) and fan studies (for example, Jenkins 1992; Sandvoss 2005). By contrast, philosophers have had very little to say about these relationships. The small amount of philosophical work on the ethics of fame and celebrity has focused on the question of whether celebrities have duties to be good role models (Howe 2021; Spurgin 2012), the responsibilities that arise from the epistemic power of celebrities (Archer et al 2022), the ethics of admiring immoral artists (Archer & Matheson 2021; Matthes 2021; Willard 2021), and the ethical implications that arise from a distinction between a celebrity’s private and public lives (Archer & Robb 2021).

In this chapter, we analyse the nature of parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities, and outline the ethical issues that arise from them. We argue that parasocial relationships are a distinct form of personal

relationship, and that the asymmetrical nature of these relationships gives rise to ethical responsibilities for both fans and celebrities. We begin, in Section One, by outlining the nature of parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities, and argue that they are a special form of personal relationship. In Section Two, we claim that parasocial relationships embody three structural asymmetries: attention, communication and epistemic. These three basic asymmetries give rise to a more substantial asymmetry concerning the way in which celebrities and fans influence each other's identity. As a result of this identity asymmetry, we argue that fans are in a position to exert a great deal of influence on celebrities to adopt or maintain a fixed identity. This can lead to a failure of recognition respect, and to the extent that it does, fans have the responsibility not to behave in ways that push a certain interpretation of a celebrity's identity. The limits of this responsibility are nevertheless constrained by the way in which the celebrity presents their public persona.

1. Parasocial relationships as personal relationships

A parasocial relationship between a fan and celebrity is one in which the fan forms an attachment to the celebrity, relating to the celebrity as if they were a close friend or family member. This close connection is formed through interactions with the celebrity's public persona and engagement with their media presence, giving the impression that there is a disclosure of intimacy. These interactions result in the fan becoming emotionally attached and personally invested in the activities and overall well-being of the celebrity (Rojek 2012: 123-141). The relationship is 'para' social since the interactions that form the relationship are supposedly one-sided. The interactions are largely initiated and directed by the fan rather than the celebrity, and the celebrity does not form a similar connection with the fan (Giles 2002). In many cases, the celebrity will not know who the fan is, and will never personally interact with them.

Despite their apparent unidirectionality, parasocial relationships are, we argue, a distinctive kind of personal relationship. To make this case, it is important to consider what distinguishes personal relationships from other kinds of relationship. We suggest that parasocial relationships share these paradigmatic and distinguishable features of personal relationships. Hugh LaFollette (1996: 4) provides a useful starting point: "a relationship is personal inasmuch as each person relates to the other as a unique individual; the other does not merely fill a role or satisfy a need". An impersonal relationship, on the other hand, is one in which a person relates to another instrumentally, merely because they fulfil a role or satisfy a need. For example, a regular at the local pub may relate to the bartender Remco, simply as someone who provides them with drinks in exchange for money, or offers them useful advice about which beer to drink. This is a relationship, as the customer interacts with Remco regularly and over an extended period, and it might be a significant relationship for the customer, depending on how often they visit the pub. But in this example, the relationship is impersonal because the customer only cares that someone is at the pub to give them drinks and advice, not who it is specifically that does this. Remco's friends on the other hand have a personal relationship with him as they care about Remco for who he is as a unique individual: his sense of humour, kindness, and enthusiasm for beer. This personal relationship is directed at a particular individual and is grounded in their personal characteristics, not just the role they fulfil or the needs they meet.

Another exemplary feature of personal relationships is partiality (Betzler 2014). If a relationship is personal, then there is good reason to expect that those in the relationship will have special reasons to act or respond in ways that favour each other (Keller 2013: 11). For example, when considering for whom you should buy a birthday present, the fact that Remco is your friend gives you good reason to buy him a present rather than the stranger who is sitting across from you in the pub. Similarly, when deciding whether to move to a new city, you might take Remco's feelings into consideration but not the strangers, as your friendship with Remco means

that he factors into the reasons involved in your decision-making. Depending on the nature of your personal relationship with Remco, he might legitimately expect that you buy him a birthday present, or take his feelings into consideration when you are making important life decisions (Newey 2022). If Remco was merely a bartender with whom you had no personal relationship, there would be no special reasons to treat him differently or favour him over others, and he would have no legitimate claim to any expectations about your behaviour towards him.

Personal relationships, then, are those in which we relate to the other as a unique individual rather than merely fulfilling a role or need, and from which arise legitimate reasons (and perhaps expectations) for partiality. Given this understanding of what makes a relationship personal, there is good reason to accept that most, if not all, parasocial relationships are personal relationships. Horton and Wohl (1956: 216) describe a parasocial relationship as one in which a media-user relates to a media-performer as a unique individual, rather than to someone who merely happens to be fulfilling a role. The audience member ‘knows’ the performer “in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations”. When forming a parasocial relationship, then, the fan pays attention and interacts with the celebrity as an individual, getting to know their personal character traits, and forming an attachment that is not merely instrumental. These parasocial relationships often acquire added meaning over time and develop into long-term associations. A fan may come to feel that they know the performer “more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives” (Horton and Wohl 1956: 216). As such, a parasocial relationship can develop in similar ways to a relationship with a close friend, and involves relating to the celebrity as an individual, rather than a substitutable icon.

An exemplary case of parasociality is found in the relationship that many fans have with pop icon Britney Spears. Spears’ fanbase do not relate to her merely as someone who makes music, and who could be easily replaced by someone else. Rather, the fans care that it is specifically Spears who makes and performs the music, with her distinctive personality, vocal timbre, and physical dance moves (Kheraj 2021). Furthermore, long term fans may feel that they have grown up with her, making the transition from teenager to adult together, adding depth and meaning to their relationship. Calling themselves ‘The Britney Army’, many of Spears’ fans are emotionally invested in her personal well-being, standing by her during the thirteen years in which she lived under a conservatorship (Hopkins 2022; Robb and Archer 2022). Fans have actively protested the conservatorship, offered to carry legal documents to the court on her behalf, and personally called the police to check on the safety of Spears at her own residence. Most of these fans have never met Spears in person, yet still feel closely connected and attached to her, consider her a friend, and feel genuine emotional responses when she is harmed.

The way that fans talk about celebrities provides further evidence for thinking that parasocial relationships can be deeply intimate and personal. As anthropologist John Caughey (1984: 53) explains, fans often label their chosen celebrity as a “‘friend’, ‘older sister’, ‘father figure’, ‘guide’ or ‘mentor’”. Similarly, fans of Lady Gaga consider her as a “mother figure” who plays an important role in guiding their values (Click et al. 2013: 371-2). Sociologist Nick Stevenson (2009: 90) draws a similar conclusion from his interviews with fans of David Bowie, stating that for many of those he interviewed, “Bowie operated as a kind of father figure”. Moreover, a common theme in studies of fandom is that celebrities have an impact on the values and self-understanding of fans. As Caughey (1984: 59) describes, fans often integrate a star’s values and world view into their own lives, much as they would with a friend or romantic partner. The outpouring of grief from fans when their idols die is further

evidence of just how strong these attachments can be. For some fans, the death of their favourite celebrity may create a challenge to their self-understanding as they struggle to know who they are in a world without their idol (Gil-Eguil et al 2017). These aspects of parasocial relationships provide good reason to view fandom as a form of love (Archer 2021: 548-549), emphasizing the extent to which parasocial relationships can be intensely personal and intimate.

It could be objected, though, that parasocial relationships are not truly personal, as they are unreciprocated by the celebrity. For example, Horton and Wohl (1956: 215) define parasocial interaction as characteristically “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development.” Similarly, the film critic Richard Schickel (1985: 267) describes parasocial relationships involving only an illusory intimacy, such that celebrities “do not know we [fans] exist as individuals; they see us only as the components of the mass, the audience”. If we accept this claim and we think that personal relationships must involve mutual interaction, then it seems we should reject the claim that parasocial relationships are personal relationships.

This objection relies on two claims: that parasocial relationships are necessarily and entirely unidirectional, and that personal relationships cannot be entirely unidirectional. However, there is good reason to reject both claims. First, while it is certainly true to say that parasocial relationships involve a different kind of interaction to friendships and romantic partnerships, it is not true to say that the interaction is entirely unidirectional (Gil-Eguil 2022: 264). Given advances in media technology, celebrities increasingly initiate and nurture communication with their fans, for example through messages and posts on social media platforms. Furthermore, this interaction is often reciprocal, with the celebrity explicitly affected by the attention and information that they receive from their fans. As the media scholar Cornel Sandvoss (2005: 104) argues, fans do not only receive what is transmitted from their idols, they also project their ideas back onto the celebrity. Indeed, in Click et al’s study (2013: 373) of Lady Gaga fans, they found that far from having a one-way relationship, the fans they interviewed “described a relationship in which they felt they received direct and regular feedback from their fan object”. Due to Lady Gaga’s active engagement on social media, this enables a form of personal interaction between her and her fans to the extent that this relationship is considered a “partnership” (Bennett 2014). Although Gaga mostly communicates to her fan base as a homogenous group, there are instances in which she responds to individual fan messages directly. Similarly, other celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Taylor Swift have directly communicated with individual fans, knowing fans by name, inviting them to private concerts, and letting them stay at their private residences. As we will further discuss in the following section, this is a distinctively asymmetrical kind of two-way interaction, but it is nevertheless not entirely unidirectional.

We should also reject the second claim of the objection, that personal relationships cannot be unidirectional. As Becky Miller and Pilar Lopez-Cantero (2022: 422) argue, a one-way relationship can still be personal. They argue for this by distinguishing impersonal love from personal love. Impersonal love is nonreciprocal, meaning that it is targeted at objects that by nature are incapable of reciprocating the love. Those who love basketball, philosophy or a great work of art are all engaging in this form of love. Personal love, though, is targeted at specific persons and grounded in an appreciation of their individual characteristics. This kind of love is personal, arising due to personal interactions with the object of love, and will generally aim towards being reciprocal. But the love may not be reciprocated, as is the case in unrequited love. In this case, the love is personal but unreciprocated. Likewise, the fact that a relationship is one-sided, or that the affection in the relationship is unreciprocated, does not offer good reason to think that the relationship is impersonal, as the relationship may involve a personal form of affection, directed towards a specific individual and their characteristics.

Another objection against the claim that parasocial relationships are personal relationships could be based on the claim that the interaction in parasocial relationships is illusory. As many media theorists have noted, the intimacy that fans feel towards celebrities is the result of deliberate use of techniques designed to foster intimate identification. For example, Horton and Wohl (1956: 216) argue that the use of “designed informality” by media-performers is intended to encourage the audience to feel as if they are engaged in face-to-face interaction with the performer. Similarly, specific camera angles, in particular the use of close-ups, also play an important role in fostering this intimacy and a sense that the audience truly know the performer (Schickel 1985: 10). Rojek (2012: 128) also claims that parasocial relationships are based on a “presumed intimacy” that is specifically generated by celebrities who are able to present themselves as “ordinary”. This allows the celebrity to represent and mirror the values of their fans, so that fans recognize themselves in the celebrity’s behaviour. For example, chat-show hosts specifically present themselves as relatable to their audience members, by wearing the right clothes, gesturing in the right way, and speaking directly to the camera (Robb and Archer 2022). These techniques are deliberately used to foster an intimate connection between audience and performer.

It is not only the relational intimacy that is carefully constructed in this way, but also the characteristics of the celebrity’s public persona with which fans engage (Morrison 2014; Rockwell and Giles 2009). As Horton and Wohl (1956: 226) argue, the images that audiences identify with are not straightforward presentations of an individual as they exist in their private life, but “is to some extent a construct – a façade”. This divide between a celebrity’s public persona and who they are in private is so central to understanding celebrity that the historian Antoine Lilti describes it as “at the heart of the celebrity system” (Lilti 2017: 32). Parasocial relationships, then, involve a deliberately orchestrated intimacy with a public persona that may be quite different from the private individual. If personal relationships require us to have a relationship with who the person ‘really’ is, rather than a fictional creation or inaccurate representation of a person, then it seems that parasocial relationships are not genuine personal relationships.

Although there is often a demarcation between a celebrity’s private life and their public persona, it is an exaggeration to say that the public persona of the celebrity is completely unconnected from the private individual. One of the disorientating aspects of celebrity is that even if celebrities may feel disconnected from their public persona, they cannot escape that this is part of who they are (Archer and Robb 2022). The ubiquity of the public image means that most people engage with the celebrity as their public-facing persona. This is likely to spread into the celebrity’s own self-conception and may even run the risk of completely engulfing their private sense of who they are (Rojek 2001: 12). Even if the celebrity successfully negotiates the divide between their private and public selves, it remains the case that the public self is part of who they are, even if it is an incomplete picture. Furthermore, there are many cases in which a celebrity will embrace their public image and incorporate parts of it into their private life. Celebrities such as Taylor Swift, Beyoncé or Ashton Kutcher often share personal information with the media, such as political voting records, pictures of their children, or details of their romantic partnerships. As such, a fan who feels closely connected to a celebrity does not necessarily or merely connect with a fabricated construction without personal characteristics.

Moreover, there is no reason to think that personal relationships need be based on a full understanding of the other person, or fully accurate information about who the person is. This is the case in traditional interpersonal relationships. We can form legitimate bonds with loved ones even when we do not know everything about their personality or when some of our beliefs about them false. A personal relationship is characterised as one which someone relates to the other as a unique individual rather than someone who merely fulfils a role or function,

and in a way that generates partiality. Fans of celebrities relate to these celebrities as unique individuals, even if the individual persona they are relating to might be carefully curated, with varying degrees of informational accuracy. The emotions that fans feel towards these celebrities, such as admiration for their talents or grief for their deaths, are genuine person-directed emotions even if they have an incomplete picture of who that person is. This makes sense of why fans react strongly when information or characteristics they thought were accurate about a celebrity turn out to be false, such as when Paris Hilton revealed the ‘real’ sound of her voice, claiming that her previously heard ‘baby voice’ had been a fake performance as part of her intentional public act as a ‘dumb blonde’ (Dean 2020). The emotional dissonance felt by fans when celebrities reveal personal unexpected personal information highlights the way in which strong emotional bonds can be formed to a celebrity, even when the information about that celebrity is (partially) fabricated or constructed.

One might still insist that parasocial relationships cannot be genuine personal relationships, despite sharing the exemplary features of personal relationships. It could, for example, be objected that while these relationships involve some form of two-way interaction, the interaction is too asymmetrical for the relationship to be considered a personal one or perhaps even as a relationship at all. The strength of this kind of concern depends on how liberal we are willing to be with the term ‘personal relationship’. We suggest that there is good reason to accept parasocial relationships as relationships, as this tracks how people already describe and experience these interactions. Both non-academics and academics studying celebrity and fan cultures regularly use the term ‘relationship’ to refer to the parasocial interactions between celebrities and their fans. The burden of proof, then, is on those who think that these interactions do not amount to a relationship, to explain why it is wrong to use the term in this way. We accept that some may be reluctant to describe parasocial relationships as personal relationships. For those who are persuaded by this concern, it is worth noting that the discussion below regarding the asymmetrical nature of parasocial relationships and the arising ethical implications, only requires one to hold a weaker form of our argument. Rather than accepting the claim that parasocial relationships are a distinctive kind personal relationship, one need only accept that they share distinctive forms of the paradigmatic features of personal relationships.

2. Asymmetry in Parasocial Relationships

The objections raised in the previous section do point towards the distinctively asymmetrical nature of the interaction in parasocial relationships. In this section we outline the three basic structural asymmetries that constitute a parasocial relationship: (i) attention, (ii) communication, and (iii) epistemic. These structural asymmetries give rise to a more substantial asymmetry concerning the way in which the relationship influences the identities of both fans and celebrities.¹ In the next section, we outline the ethical implications and responsibilities that arise from this identity asymmetry.

The first basic structural asymmetry in a parasocial relationship stems from the way in which dedicated fans often intently follow the developments in a celebrity’s life and pay close attention to what they do. In response, the celebrity is likely only to interact with a fan as one member of a large collective fanbase. If the fan is fortunate, there may be an occasion when the celebrity does interact with them as an individual, for example, when responding directly to messages on social media. However, this is likely to be a unique event, and in stark contrast to the countless hours that the fan will have spent paying attention to the celebrity. Parasocial relationships, then, are constituted by an *attention* asymmetry, which manifests in two ways. First, the fan will be

¹ Archer and Sie (2023) also point to a moral asymmetry found in the relationship between fans and celebrities. This asymmetry raises important yet sufficiently distinct kinds of concerns to the ones we discuss below.

more likely to give individual attention to the celebrity, whereas the celebrity is more likely to pay attention to their fans as part of a more generalized fanbase. Second, the individual fan is likely to spend more time interacting with the celebrity, whereas the celebrity is less likely to prioritize fan interaction. In fact, as Schickel explains (1985: 303), most celebrities consider interacting with fans as a necessary yet undesirable part of their fame, as “nuisances to be managed, not presences to be heeded or particularized”.

Parasocial relationships are also often constituted by a *communication* asymmetry, as an individual fan will be placed predominantly in the role of a receiver of communication, and the celebrity predominantly in the role of broadcaster: celebrities will “send (and send and send)”, while fans only “receive (and receive and receive)” (Schickel 1985: 267). Social media has seemingly blurred the boundaries of this communication asymmetry, with fans having more opportunity to contact the celebrity directly by messaging or commenting on the celebrity’s accounts and posts. However, as Kehrberg’s (2015: 93) analysis of fan interaction on Twitter has shown, many of these interactions involve messages of praise and admiration, which suggests that fans consider themselves “not as celebrity peers but as consumers, positioned lower on a hierarchy of sender/receiver relations that dictate rhetorical structure”. Furthermore, for all the messages that Kehrberg analysed, none were responded to by the celebrity. This shows that even though fans might engage in sending direct communication with a celebrity, this does not imply that the celebrity will receive and engage with these messages.

The amount of time that fans spend receiving and engaging with information about a celebrity leads to an *epistemic* asymmetry, as fans know a great deal about the life of the celebrity, while the celebrity will know very little, if anything, about the lives of their individual fans. As we have already discussed, the celebrity that fans feel they know is likely to be a curated public persona. Nevertheless, this persona is not entirely separable from the private individual, and in many cases, private information about the celebrity’s personal life is made available either willingly by the celebrity, or controversially by third parties such as journalists or photographers. But this does not influence whether the relationship a fan feels with the celebrity is personal. Instead, it highlights that a fan may have a genuine emotional attachment to the celebrity based on information that is either accurate, misinformed or withheld in much the same way as with many other personal relationships. What is important for our analysis, is that the fan will have detailed knowledge of a celebrity’s life, attitudes and opinions, and this knowledge vastly outweighs what the celebrity is likely to know about any individual fan. A celebrity might have some knowledge about their fanbase, including general demographic or value trends, but this knowledge does not amount to an awareness of information about specific individual fans.

The attention, communication and epistemic asymmetries that constitute the structure of parasocial relationships gives rise to a more substantial asymmetry that has ethical implications for both fans and celebrities. This asymmetry concerns the way in which celebrities and fans influence each other’s identity. In more conventional personal relationships, such as friendships, each party in the relationship will influence the identity of the other by both ‘directing’ and ‘interpreting’ their identities. According to Cocking and Kennett (1998), part of what friendship involves is being receptive to your friend, so that your friend has the potential to ‘direct’ and influence your identity. This may involve taking on new interests in which your friend is interested, or having your character shaped by your friend. When one friend becomes interested in ballet for example, the other may also become interested, not through a sense of duty, but because their friendship makes them receptive to their friend’s interests (ibid: 504). Similarly, when a short-tempered person becomes friends with a patient person, the short-tempered friend may find herself mellowing the more time she spends with her friend. As well as having our interests and characters directed, friends also influence each other’s identity through ‘interpreting’ each other’s behaviour. If one friend consistently interprets the other as being a brave

and confident person, this is likely to shape how the other friend sees herself and she may begin to think of herself as more confident and self-assured.

These two ways in which friends influence each other helps us to recognize a distinctive feature of asymmetry in parasocial relationships. Celebrities typically play a more *directive* role for fans, than fans do for celebrities. Fans may view celebrities as friends, parental figures, or some other family figure, and in doing so allow their sense of who they are to be influenced and shaped by their idols (Medelli 2022: 74-5). Fans are likely to be receptive to be influenced by the interests of their favourite celebrity, often seeking to emulate the celebrity's behaviour and looking up to them as exemplars of conduct (Marcus 2019: 148-170). Due to the directive nature of their influence on fans, celebrities will have a far greater ability to influence the beliefs, knowledge, or opinions of any individual fan, than the fan will have in return (Archer et al 2020). In characteristic parasocial relationships, then, the celebrity will have a more significant directive impact on the identity of a fan, yet the fan will almost have no individual directive impact on the identity of the celebrity.

Although celebrities are more likely to direct the way in which fans shape their identities, fans also have an impact on a celebrity through the way they interpret the celebrity's identity and public persona. Cultural theorist Sharon Marcus (2019:4) argues that fans play a key role in co-constructing a celebrity's public persona, together with the media and the celebrity themselves. Fans are considered as agents who "form and execute intentions, express preferences, pass judgements, exercise intelligence, and demonstrate initiative". By actively interacting with the celebrity and their media presence, by sending letters to magazines, posting on social media, choosing to cheer or boo at a live performance, for example, the public plays an important role in interpreting the celebrity's behaviour, and in turn shaping how a celebrity presents themselves and the persona that is offered to the public (Marcus 2019: 6). This means that fans do have a role to play in constructing a celebrity's public identity, which, as we discussed earlier, cannot easily be detached from their private identity. This role amounts to providing an interpretation of who the celebrity is, which influences how the celebrity sees herself. Although the majority of this influence is generated by fans considered as a group, individual fans also have the ability to assert this influence, by directing the interpretative focus of the group or directly communicating with the celebrity. Celebrities, on the other hand, often do little to interpret their fans' behaviours and characters. Some celebrities, as discussed above, do make an effort to know individual fans personally and form intimate interactions with them. However, this kind of interaction is rare, and when celebrities do not know about the lives of their individual fans means they cannot provide those fans with an interpretation of who they are. Fans might use celebrities to try and interpret and make sense of their own lives, but that is different from the celebrity interpreting the fan's behaviour and character for them. While celebrities do most of the directing in a parasocial relationship, the fans do most of the interpreting.

In summary, parasocial relationships are constituted by three basic structural asymmetries (attention, communication, and epistemic) that give rise to a more fundamental asymmetry regarding the way in which celebrities and fans influence each other's identity. This asymmetry is grounded in the difference between 'directing' and 'interpreting', with a celebrity more likely to have a larger directive influence on their fans, and a fan more likely to have a larger interpretative role in the identity formation of the celebrity. As we will go on to suggest, the asymmetries found in parasocial relationships may be amplified versions of the asymmetries that might be present in other kinds of personal relationships.

3. Ethical Implications

The identity asymmetry found in parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities gives rise to distinctive ethical implications, specifically with regards to the responsibilities that fans and celebrities have towards each other. So far, the discussion of these ethical implications has focused on the celebrity's directive influence on the behaviour and beliefs of their fans. For example, celebrities are argued to have certain responsibilities towards their fans, such as the duty to be a good role model (Howe 2021; Spurgin 2012), and the obligations stemming from celebrity epistemic power (Archer et al 2020; Archer et al 2022). Although these discussions aid in an understanding of celebrity, it is fans who are the primary and most active members of parasocial relationships. As such, our focus here is on the ethical responsibilities for fans that stem from their interpretive influence on celebrities. As a result of this influence, we argue that fans are in the position to exert a great deal of pressure on celebrities to adopt or maintain a certain identity. When fans exert this pressure, it can harm the celebrity and constitute a failure of recognition respect. This generates ethical responsibilities for fans, though these responsibilities will be affected and potentially mitigated by the behaviour of the celebrity.

The way in which fans have influence over the interpretation of a celebrity's identity has the potential to put pressure on the celebrity to adopt or maintain a certain identity. A good example of this is highlighted by the documentary *Miss Americana* (Wilson 2020), charting the career of Taylor Swift. Swift found fame as a country singer, eager to please her fans. As she describes this part of her life, "I became the person who everyone wanted me to be" (ibid: 2020). The role that 'everyone' wanted Swift to fulfil was that of the 'nice girl', the typical role that is apparently expected of American female country artists. Swift describes this role in the following way: "a nice girl doesn't force their opinions on people. A nice girl smiles and waves and says thank you. A nice girl doesn't make people feel uncomfortable with her views" (ibid: 2020).

One of the main events that ruptured Swift's ability to maintain the identity of being a 'nice girl' was in 2018, when Republican candidate Marsha Blackburn ran to represent Swift's home state of Tennessee in the US Senate. Swift spoke publicly about her opposition to Blackburn's political views, which included Blackburn's opposition to abortion rights, gay marriage and laws designed to protect victims of domestic violence. By speaking out about her political views, Swift broke with the identity that many fans expected from her. In response, she faced significant backlash from her right-wing fans who resented the fact that she had changed from playing the role of the female country artist into a woman willing to speak her mind about political issues (Stuart 2018).

The identity asymmetry is important here, as it can act as a barrier to a mutual negotiation of the meaning of the relationship and the identities of those involved (Horton and Wohl: 216-217). The difficulties in this kind of negotiation become a particular problem when fans remain attached to a version of the celebrity's public persona that the celebrity wishes to adapt or drop altogether. As the historian Leo Braudy describes (1986: 589), this situation can lead to fans refusing to give up on their attachment to how a celebrity has presented themselves in the past. As Braudy emphasizes, fans can become attached to a parasocial relationship with a celebrity who embodies certain values and displays certain personality traits. These fans may react with hostility when the celebrity attempts to alter their public persona, and so put pressure on the celebrity to remain the same. In extreme cases this can amount to a form of "embalming above ground" as the celebrity feels forced to freeze their identity at a particular moment in time (Braudy 1986: 589).

The wrong involved here can be understood as a form of disrespect. Stephen Darwall (1977) famously claims that there are two kinds of respect. Appraisal respect involves a positive appraisal of someone for qualities they possess. This is the kind of respect that fans may refer to when they say that they respect Swift's talent as a musician. Recognition respect, on the other hand, involves recognizing some feature of that person and taking it into account in how you appropriately behave towards them. Recognizing someone's humanity, for example,

would mean ensuring that one acts in a way that respects that person's human rights. As Darwall (1977: 38) notes though, recognition respect can also involve recognizing someone in the roles they take on and how they present themselves to the world. For example, someone may be deprived of recognition respect if people fail to take them seriously as a husband or a father.

When fans fail to accept a celebrity's adoption of a particular persona this can amount to a failure of recognition respect, as it is a failure to respond appropriately to the presented self. When Swift's conservative fans fail to accept her presentation as a woman with political opinions rather than a deferential 'nice girl', this is a failure of respect. Of course, people are not owed recognition respect for any way in which they choose to present themselves. Someone who chooses to present themselves as holding a PhD in Astrophysics does not deserve recognition for this presentation if they do not in fact possess the qualification. However, people do deserve recognition respect for the presentations of self which they are entitled to perform, and a woman such as Swift, who decides to express her political opinions does deserve respect for presenting herself as someone with views on political issues. This does not mean that there is a duty to respect those opinions, or to have appraisal respect for Swift's talents as a political thinker. But what our claim does amount to, is that failing to recognize the identity of someone's legitimate presented self, in this case a female public figure who has political views, amounts to a lack of recognition respect.

This lack of recognition is harmful as it restricts the agency of the person whose identity is not recognized. As Hilde Lindemann (2014) has argued, our personal identities are crucially informed by an interaction and negotiation between the stories a person tells about herself, and also the stories others tell about her. Our identities are defined by these stories, as they influence how we define our agency, actions, experiences, values, relationships, and commitments. Importantly, these narratives may accurately represent who we are, or they may misrepresent us and can often become outdated as people change. For example, someone may tell herself and others that she is a social drinker when she is in fact an alcoholic (ibid: 82). How others receive that story changes how they interact with her: if someone is viewed as a social drinker, her friends will be happy to drink with her, but if she is viewed as an alcoholic they may refuse to do so and may seek to intervene when they see her drinking. Similarly, narratives that depict someone as an irresponsible alcohol-drinking party animal may accurately depict a person in their teens, but fail to do so as they grow into a responsible adult.

Importantly for our purposes, we may wrong people by imposing certain narratives on people or by failing to let go of mistaken or out-of-dated narratives in ways that restrict their agency and autonomy (ibid: 86). For example, if Jane's parents continue to treat her as an immature party animal long past the time when this narrative is accurate, then this will influence the opportunities that they give her to demonstrate her identity as a responsible and mature adult. If Jane is lucky, then this will not severely damage her ability to develop a sense of herself as a responsible adult, as she will have others in her life who do give her opportunities to express herself and who recognize this part of her character. It will be very difficult for Jane to identify as responsible and mature, though, if most people in her life fail to give uptake to the new narrative she tells about herself. On Lindemann's view, our actions can only fully express who we are when this expression receives uptake from other people (Lindemann Nelson 2001: 70). If everyone in Jane's life interprets her sincere and dedicated attempts to become an illustrator as childish daydreaming, then Jane will have failed to fully express herself as a responsible, hard-working person.

When it comes to parasocial relationships, fans who fail to give uptake to a change in a celebrity's identity and continue to hold her to outdated narratives, wrong the celebrity by restricting their agency. This restriction makes it difficult for the celebrity to shape their own identity, as they are hindered from developing and expressing new narratives about who are they that receives genuine public uptake. This is one form of what

Laura Valentini (2022) calls “Public Identity Disempowerment”. This occurs when someone lacks a reasonable level of control over how other people view their identity. Valentini outlines various forms that this lack of control can take. Most relevant for our purposes is the power to effectively reveal who one is to others, which Valentini calls “Transparency Public-identity Power” (Valentini 2022: 465-6). When one lacks this power, one’s agency will not be socially effective, meaning that the appraisal properties that are ascribed to the agent (such as praise, blame, admiration and contempt) will not fit the agent’s actions and this will deprive the agent of the social bases of self-respect (Valentini 2022: 473-4).² For example, if one is a talented musician but people fail to recognize this, then one is likely to soon lose one’s sense of self-respect as a musician and the motivation to continue developing and maintaining one’s talent. Similarly, if every time Swift tries to express a political opinion she is dismissed because this does not fit with the ‘nice girl’ image that people have of her, then she suffers from practical agency disempowerment.

The full extent of the wrong in these cases is only fully understood when the asymmetrical nature of parasocial relationships is taken into consideration. Due to this asymmetry, celebrities may be faced with a large mass of people interpreting their behaviour in ways that fail to uptake and restrict their public presentation. This can have a damaging impact on the identity of celebrities, as it is difficult to adapt and develop one’s identity when there are a large mass of people demanding that you stay the same, refusing to change how they will interpret your behaviour. For example, Swift was faced with many people who continued to interpret her behaviour as a ‘nice girl’ and refused to provide recognition for a public presentation that deviated from this ideal. This had a profound effect on her identity, making it difficult for her to adapt and move on from this ideal, and constricting her sense of who she was. Swift herself claims that this restriction led her to continue to play the role of the ‘nice girl’ long into adulthood (Wilson 2020). As we have discussed above, the intertwining and sometimes indistinguishable relationship between a celebrity’s public persona and public life means that the restriction and lack of uptake of a celebrity’s public identity can greatly impact the identity a celebrity adopts in private.

The asymmetrical nature of parasocial relationships becomes particularly problematic with regards to the different levels of control that celebrities and fans have over the decision to end parasocial relationships. Aside from cases of pathological celebrity obsession (Sansone & Sansone 2014), a fan can decide to end a parasocial relationship by ceasing to pay attention to the celebrity. Celebrities, on the other hand, often find it difficult to distance themselves from fans who have formed close bonds with them, even when they choose to keep out of the public eye. For example, even though child actors and twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olson have made a concerted effort to live a normal life outside the public eye, giving up their acting careers and refusing to give public interviews, they still have dedicated fan groups who form emotional attachments to them and seek further personal interaction (Tashjian 2018).

The identity asymmetry makes the failure of recognition respect damaging for celebrities in parasocial relationships. As a result, fans have a responsibility to be open to changes in the public persona of their idols, and to refrain from pressuring celebrities to adopt or maintain a particular form of public presentation. This does not mean that fans have a responsibility to maintain their fandom as the identity of a celebrity undergoes changes. Rather, they have a responsibility not to put the celebrity under undue pressure to adopt or retain a certain persona, nor to continue to interpret the celebrity’s behaviour in relation to their previous public

² Valentini (2022: 473) stresses the need for this to be modally robust to count as a power, but for the purposes of our argument it is not necessary to further explore this point here.

persona. Fans also have a responsibility not to confuse a celebrity's private life and public image, leaving room for a celebrity to distinguish between the two if they so choose (Archer and Robb 2022: 15).

The strength of this responsibility for fans, however, is affected and potentially mitigated by the behaviour of the celebrity. As the communication asymmetry of the relationship implies, celebrities are more likely than fans to be the sender of information and content in the relationship, and this has the potential to be highly directive with regards to the influence on a fan's behaviour and identity. In short, how a celebrity presents themselves influences how a fan interprets the celebrity's identity. If fans are expected to refrain from fixing a celebrity's identity, then the way in which a celebrity presents themselves and the information that they send to the fans is highly important when determining the limits of the fan's responsibilities and in turn, what counts as recognition respect.

For example, reality television star Paris Hilton is well-known for presenting herself as a 'ditsy blond'. However, in the documentary, *This is Paris* (Dean 2020), Hilton laments that the public fix her in this identity, and do not see her for who she 'really' is. Hilton explains that her public presentation was a performance and the intentional attempt to create a successful media brand, based on what she thought the public wanted from her. In this case, fans cannot be held responsible for interpreting Hilton's identity as a 'ditsy blond' if this is the way in which Hilton presents herself. When Hilton does attempt to change or break free from this persona and publicly presents herself with a new persona, fans have the responsibility to be open to this change and give Hilton the recognition respect that comes with the new roles, behaviours and narratives that she adopts. This does not mean that fans should not be emotionally affected by the change in identity. However, if a celebrity accurately and unambiguously presents themselves as adopting a certain role or identity, then despite their initial emotional reactions, fans have a responsibility to the celebrity to respect this presentation. The nature of this responsibility is in part mediated by the accuracy and clarity of the information that the celebrity sends. Partly due to a desire for privacy, many celebrities do not disclose all the information necessary for fans to interpret a full impression of the celebrity's identity, or celebrities may disclose ambiguous information that is open to competing interpretations. In these cases of misleading or ambiguous information, fans can be forgiven for getting it wrong. This does not negate the responsibility that a fan has to give recognition respect to a celebrity, but it does mitigate the blame that could be bestowed on a fan when they fail to respect a celebrity's change in identity.

4. Conclusion

We have argued that many, if not all, parasocial relationships between fan and celebrity have the potential to be personal relationships. We have outlined how a fan relates to the celebrities unique individuals rather than merely fulfilling a role or need, and from which arises legitimate reasons and expectations for partiality. We suggest that these parasocial relationships are a distinct kind of personal relationship that is constituted by three basic structural asymmetries: attention, communication, and epistemic. These asymmetries give rise to a more substantial asymmetry regarding the way in which fans and celebrities influence each other's identity. The celebrity has a high degree of 'directive' influence over the fan, whereas fans have a high degree of 'interpretative' influence over the celebrity. As a result of their interpretative influence, fans are in a position to pressure the celebrity into adopting or maintaining a certain kind of identity.

In order to explain what is wrong when a fans' interpretative influence results in this pressure, we argue that failing to allow a celebrity the freedom to change or drop a particular persona amounts to a failure of recognition respect. The asymmetrical nature of parasocial relationships makes this disrespect particularly damaging for the celebrity, as they are faced with a large group of people who fail to respect the way in which they publicly present themselves. It is therefore difficult for the celebrity to adapt and develop their identity when their fans

refuse to change how they interpret the celebrity's persona. As such, this generates ethical responsibilities for fans, though these responsibilities will be affected and potentially mitigated by the behaviour of the celebrity.

Throughout the chapter we have focussed on the parasocial relationship between fans and celebrities. While this is the most typical example of a parasocial relationship, it is worth noting that parasocial relationships exist in many other areas of life. We have already mentioned how parasocial relationships can be formed with fictional characters, influencers on social media, and digital avatars. Even more ubiquitously, parasocial relationships can be formed with many who hold positions of leadership and power, for example between political leader and an ordinary party member or member of the general public, manager of a company and an ordinary worker, religious leader and religious follower, teacher and student.

These relationships are largely one-sided and will involve many of the same asymmetries that we have discussed, and so the same ethical worries may apply in these relationships. Our claim that fans' undue pressure on a celebrity to adopt and maintain a certain identity results in recognition disrespect, stems from the specific worries that arise from a parasocial relationships identity asymmetry. Any relationship that embodies this asymmetry will be at risk of engendering recognition disrespect, insofar as one of the parties has higher levels of interpretative influence over the other's identity, and might refuse to allow a change in the way that identity is interpreted. Given the structural asymmetries that are present in so many of our personal relationships, more attention could be paid to the way in which these asymmetries point to parasociality, and the ethical issues arise from the nature of these relationships.

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