

Ethical Perspectives Special Issue – The Morality of Fame

Introduction

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Fame and celebrity play a powerful role in social life. For instance, celebrities often use their public platform to influence social and political discourse. A prominent example of this is how celebrity influence has been claimed to have an impact in helping Donald Trump become the 45th president of the United States (Street 2019). Similarly, the #metoo campaign has exposed the widespread misuse of the power of fame, as well as highlighting the power that famous people can have in raising awareness of social injustice.

The importance of fame and celebrity in society has sparked a significant growth in the field of celebrity studies, involving contributions from a diverse range of academic disciplines, such as sociology (Rojek 2001; van Krieken 2012), cultural studies (Dyer 1979; Marcus 2019), history (Braudy 1986; Inglis 2010), psychology (Giles 2000; Stever 2018), and politics (Marshall 1997; Street 2004). Nevertheless, contemporary philosophy has contributed surprisingly little to this field. Notable exceptions include the recent philosophical discussions of whether celebrities have duties to be good role models (Howe 2021; Spurgin 2012; Wellman 2003), how we should respond to immoral public figures (Archer 2021; Archer & Matheson 2021; Berninger 2020; Matthes 2022; Willard 2021), the impact of celebrity politicians on democratic legitimacy (Archer et al 2020; Archer & Cawston 2021), and issues specific to sporting celebrities (Feezell 2005; Yorke and Archer 2020).

The lack of attention paid to fame and celebrity in contemporary philosophy contrasts with the interest in the topic shown by some of the most important historical figures in the Western philosophical tradition. David Hume, for example, devoted a chapter of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2000 [1739]) to a discussion of the love of fame, an issue also explored by Schopenhauer (1890 [2004], 28), Spinoza (1677 [1949], 230), and Montaigne (1910, 33). Similarly, Jean Jacques Rousseau's status as a literary celebrity led him to reflect on the nature of fame throughout his work (Lilti 2017) and particularly in one of his later autobiographical works, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* (1780 [1990]). We believe that contemporary philosophy has much potential to add new perspectives to the historical philosophical discussion on the nature and value of fame.

In order to initiate current interest in the topic of fame and celebrity amongst philosophers, in December of 2020 we organized a two-day online workshop, *Philosophy of Fame and Celebrity*, hosted and funded by the Philosophy department at Tilburg University, and supported with the help of Mirte Nijhof, our student assistant. The overall aim of the workshop was to take a first step towards addressing the general philosophical issues regarding the nature and value of fame. To do this, we invited four keynote speakers, and opened a call for papers for the remaining fourteen presentations. Together these papers represented how already existing philosophical inquiry can provide a relevant and fruitful commentary on fame and celebrity, touching on varied philosophical topics and specialisms, including phenomenology, epistemology, political philosophy, philosophy of education, and ancient philosophy. One clear theme that emerged from the variety of papers presented at the workshop was a sub-focus on the moral and ethical considerations that need to be grappled with when we consider the nature, experience, and value of fame. As part of this special issue, we are pleased to be able to present six of these papers, each focusing on different aspects of the morality of fame.

The first two papers in this special issue address longstanding philosophical considerations regarding the morality of fame: the value of pursuing fame, and the value of celebrating the fame of others. In 'Summa et Perfecta Gloria: Cicero on Ambition, Reputation, and Care for Future Human Beings,' Evan Dutmer explores whether one ought to pursue fame for moral reasons. Drawing on the work of Cicero, Dutmer argues that virtuous people should care about their posthumous moral reputation. This need not be motivated by a selfish

desire, but can be motivated by the wish to benefit future people. When a virtuous person is remembered and celebrated after their death, their life can serve as a moral example to others, which they may wish to aim to emulate. In other words, by seeking posthumous moral fame, we may be able to assist in the moral education of others. By understanding how moral exemplars were used to offer ethical instruction in the ancient world, Dutmer claims we can better understand why we should care about how our own ethical life is regarded.

In ‘Talent, Skill, and Celebrity,’ Catherine Robb and Alfred Archer respond to one of the key objections made against celebrity culture: that it involves celebrating people who become famous without any connection to their skills, talents, or achievements. Robb and Archer explore the different ways this objection can be interpreted, and claim that underlying all versions of the objection is the assumption that celebrity culture severs the connection between fame and talent. However, Robb and Archer argue that given a properly philosophical understanding of what a talent is and the way that skills are developed, there is a clear connection between becoming a celebrity, maintaining this celebrity status, and being talented. This means that those who criticize celebrity culture should not base their criticisms on the claim that celebrities are talentless.

The next two papers involve moral issues that arise in the relationship between celebrities and their fans. In ‘The Case of Noname,’ Bram Medelli explores a recent case of celebrity shaming, involving the rapper Fatimah Warner (who is also known as ‘Noname’). Medelli argues that the shaming Warner experienced is philosophically interesting as it serves as an example of a ‘parasocial’ relationship, one in which fans engage in a one-sided relationship with a celebrity’s persona as if that relationship was reciprocated. Reflecting on the parasocial relationship in Warner’s case, Medelli claims we should view it as ‘unjust parasocial entitlement,’ such that Warner is subject to a greater degree of moral condemnation than she would otherwise be. Medelli suggests that the example of Warner’s shaming can help us understand how parasocial entitlement affects celebrities, and what we can do to ensure that celebrities are not damaged by this entitlement.

In ‘The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture,’ Jenny Janssens and Lotte Spreeuwenberg chart the shifting conceptual landscape of ‘cancel culture,’ exploring how this term is used to cover two distinct kinds of moral activity. On the one hand, cancelling someone is an act that negatively impacts upon the ideals of free speech and unimpeded public debate. On the other hand, cancelling can be the just redistribution of ethical attention, a public acknowledgement that the cancelled content is unacceptable. Janssens and Spreeuwenberg’s analysis leads them to conclude that cancelling should be primarily used as an ethical tool to redistribute attention, rather than to punish those who challenge the norms of public debate.

The final two papers in this special issue address how contemporary media affect the experience of fame and celebrity, both for the general public and for celebrities themselves. In ‘Infamous Monster Women: Siren Mythology and the Case of Elizabeth Holmes,’ Roos Slegers explores the relationship between gender and levels of public scrutiny. Slegers focuses on the unusually high level of media scrutiny experienced by Holmes, the former CEO of Theranos, an experimental blood-testing company. Slegers claims that we can understand why Holmes’ media scrutiny was especially fierce by reflecting on how her gender affected how she was treated in the public eye. As Slegers concludes, the effect of Holmes’ gender is starkly evidenced if we consider how differently the men involved in the case were treated.

The power of the media to influence the fame of a celebrity is further explored by Marc Cheong in ‘Ethical Dilemmas for @Celebrities: Promoting #Intimacy, Facing #Inauthenticity, and Defusing #Invectiveness.’ Cheong analyses the various effects of social media technology on celebrity culture, focusing on the recent rise of online celebrities, such as influencers and vloggers. Cheong focuses on the ethical harms that online fame can precipitate, whether those harms are endured by individual celebrities, their collective fanbases, or are

suffused throughout public debate. As Cheong argues, these harms are magnified by the use of social media, which means that today's online celebrities are forced to navigate a strikingly new ethical terrain. While social media can be highly effective at connecting celebrities with their fans, removing the traditional barriers to fame comes at the cost of making celebrities more vulnerable to online trolling and harassment.

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