

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Fame and redemption: On the moral dangers of celebrity apologies

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

After he was caught cheating on his wife, Tiger Woods said that:

I was wrong. I was foolish. I don't get to play by different rules. The same boundaries that apply to everyone apply to me. I brought this shame on myself. I hurt my wife, my kids, my mother, my wife's family, my friends, my foundation, and kids all around the world who admired me. ... Parents used to point to me as a role model for their kids. I owe all of those families a special apology. I want to say to them that I am truly sorry. (Woods, 2010)

Like most celebrity apologies, Woods offered his apology publicly. But he did not just apologize to those he directly wronged. He also apologized to *his fans*.

Why do celebrities sometimes apologize to their fans? Why do celebrities typically publicly apologize? In this paper, I first consider three possible explanations for why celebrities typically apologize publicly *and* sometimes also include their fans among the targets of their apology. I then identify three moral dangers of celebrity apologies, the third of which arises specifically for fan-targeted apologies, and each of which teaches us important lessons about the practice of celebrity apologies. From these individual lessons, I draw more general lessons about apologies

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from those with elevated social positions. So, while my initial focus is on celebrities and on learning about an important and undertheorized social phenomenon, this investigation into celebrity apologies aims to illuminate a more general social phenomenon by using celebrity apologies as a case study.

In Section 2, I outline an account of apology and redemption, drawing primarily on Radzik's (2009) work. In Sections 3–5, I consider three possible explanations for why celebrities apologies are often both fan-targeted and publicly given. Because my focus is on such apologies, I set aside standard reasons for why people might apologize (e.g., a desire to make amends), though I discuss the relevance of celebrities *also* being motivated by these other reasons. The first explanation I consider is that celebrities are motivated to set the public record straight. The second I consider is that celebrities see themselves as having role model obligations. And the third is that celebrities aim to maintain their fame—that is, their positive celebrity status—and its associated powers.

In Sections 6–8, I then identify three moral dangers of celebrity apologies and then draw out lessons each danger teaches us about the practice of celebrity apologies. First, by apologizing publicly celebrities can set the public narrative about their misdeed in their favor. So, we have reason not to trust celebrity apologies. Second, even when they do not set the public narrative in their favor, a publicly given celebrity apology can still function to disempower the victim from having control over their own life narrative. So, celebrity apologies can present an additional harm to victims. Third, publicly given fan-targeted apologies block a celebrity from, what I will call, *moral redemption*. So, celebrities ought to be concerned about caring about their fame more than anything else. Additionally, the third moral danger also risks exacerbating the first two moral dangers.

## 2 | APOLOGY AND REDEMPTION

According to Linda Radzik (2009, p. 113), redemption is the “proper end state of responses to wrongdoing.” She holds that “When one is redeemed, one has justifiably regained one’s moral standing” (Radzik, 2009, p. 113). On her view, moral standing is “the degree of esteem and trust to conduct oneself appropriately that we merit with the moral community” and we ought to be trusted to a particular degree by default (Radzik, 2009, p. 82). When we act wrongly, we demonstrate that we are not that trustworthy. When we are redeemed, we are seen to be trustworthy and thus have regained our standing within the moral community. Radzik draws on Karen Jones’s account of trust according to which trust is “an attitude of optimism that the goodwill and competence of another will extend to cover the domain of our interaction with her, together with the expectation that the one trusted will be directly and favorably moved by the thought that we are counting on her” (Jones, 1996, p. 4; cited in Radzik, 2009, p. 114).

To understand her account of redemption, we must first appreciate her account of wrongdoing. On Radzik’s view, wrongdoing damages relationships through presenting insults and threats that persist over time (see also Murphy & Hampton, 1988). For example, a solitary thief may have no friends or family, but she might still damage possible relationships between herself and others, and herself and the moral community, through her past wrongs grounding the persistent threat that she will steal from others. Because her past actions send this message, others will not trust her and so her moral standing is at least diminished. To redeem herself, the thief must therefore remove this threat—that is, she must stop her past action sending such messages. Once the threat is removed, the thief merits *reconciliation*—that is, she is such that

her victims and the moral community ought to reconcile with her. Importantly, removing threats requires more than just the wrongdoer morally transforming.

Moral transformation is still crucial for meriting reconciliation. By morally transforming herself, the wrongdoer becomes trustworthy. However, merely being transformed is not enough. Wrongdoers are responsible for their own diminished moral standing, so they are responsible for letting others know they have changed. In other words, they must communicate that they are now (or again) trustworthy. So, they must also communicate their transformation. Finally, the wrongdoer must meet any claims they have incurred through acting wrongly. In doing so, the wrongdoer demonstrates their trustworthiness. Thus, to merit reconciliation and thereby be redeemed, a wrongdoer must do three things: (i) morally transform, (ii) communicate that transformation, and (iii) meet any claims incurred through acting wrongly (Radzik, 2009, p. 85).

Moral transformation has backward- and forward-looking elements, which Radzik (2009, p. 86) takes to be tantamount to repentance. The transformed wrongdoer looks back at her wrongs and sees them in the proper light. This involves acknowledging her responsibility for what she has done, the wrongness of the relevant acts, the authority of the norms she violated, and that she should not have acted as she did. She must also care about the effect her actions have had. This involves feeling negative emotions, such as guilt, remorse, regret, and shame, with the right target and to an appropriate extent. The person who feels regret just because they have been caught acting wrongly does not feel regret with the right target. The person who feels slightly and briefly remorseful for a significant wrong does not feel bad enough. But the person who spirals into self-hatred for a minor wrong takes things too far. In short, wrongdoers ought to assess themselves and the impact their actions have had correctly. The transformed wrongdoer also looks forward to future behavior: she resolves not to repeat her past wrongs, to improve her character if more improvement is required, or to maintain her character improvements.

Because wrongdoing involves expressive harms—in particular, threats to victims and the moral community—wrongdoers ought to communicate their moral transformation—for example, by apologizing, truth telling, and undertaking reparative work (e.g., care and charity work). Radzik does not hold that any are essential to meriting moral reconciliation. Rather, they are all possible ways to communicate one's moral transformation. Which forms of communication are appropriate will depend on the details of the wrong and the impact it has had.

Apologies are a common and important way to meet this communication requirement. An apology can explicitly help to counter the harmful messages that one's earlier wrongs sent by demonstrating one's respect for the victims and community, as well as one's humility in response to one's earlier wrongs. Wrongdoers can make explicit that they are responsible for an earlier wrong, that they feel appropriately bad about the wrong, and so on. However, sometimes wrongdoers do not conceptualize or understand everything they ought to understand immediately. For this reason, Radzik endorses the view that apologies are often a *negotiation* between wrongdoer and victim/community (see also Battistella, 2014; Lazare, 2005; MacLachlan, 2014; Smith, 2008). Through this negotiation, a wrongdoer's feelings of guilt, regret, shame, and remorse, as well as her commitments for future behavior, can become more accurate and articulate.

Radzik also sees an important role for *public apologies*. She writes that:

Public apologies ... aid the reconciliation of both the victim and the wrongdoer to the community. They serve this end, first of all, by setting the record straight about

who was in the wrong. They also allow the community to hear the wrongdoer's message of respect for the victim and provide it with evidence of the wrongdoer's moral reformation. They play an especially important role in cases where a wrong done to one person sends an additional message of disrespect to people who are like the victim in some respects. So, for instance, in making a public apology, an employer who has sexually discriminated against one female employee withdraws the insult and threat that his action implied for all of the women in that workplace. (Radzik, 2009, p. 95)

In short, public apologies have a public record setting function and can send a message of respect to those subject to similar wrongs as the victim (see also MacLachlan, 2014, 2018; Smith, 2008).

If an apology serves the communication requirement of merited reconciliation, it counts as a morally good apology. Such an apology can also help to meet some of the claims the wrongdoer incurred in acting wrongly—such as repairing any damage done to the victim's reputation. A wrongdoer must meet any claims she has incurred through acting wrongly just so that they rectify their wrong, but this also has the initial benefit of communicating their transformation and renewed trustworthiness. While Radzik (2009, p. 84) holds that certain wrongs are beyond the pale and the wrongdoer cannot ever subsequently merit full reconciliation, she believes that wrongdoers often can atone for their past wrongs.

Importantly, all aspects of redemption can be feigned, misleading, or otherwise illicit. We can fall for a dodgy apology or believe someone has changed and trust them again, even though they have not changed and are not trustworthy. Even if we still distrust them, others can come to think that the wrongdoer has full moral standing again. In short, we can mistakenly believe someone has redeemed even though they do not in fact merit reconciliation. This, of course, is not genuine redemption, but rather a merely apparent redemption. To mark the distinction between these two types of redemption, call the former *moral* redemption and the latter *public* redemption.

### 3 | SETTING THE PUBLIC RECORD

Let us now turn to consider the first of three possible explanations for why celebrity apologies are sometimes both fan-targeted and given publicly. This is that celebrities are motivated to set the public record straight. For example, in his apology for masturbating in front of junior colleagues, comedian Louis CK (2017) begins by saying “These stories are true” which reflects a clear effort to set the public record straight.

One reason celebrities might be motivated to set the public record straight is that they recognize they have a particular sort of power that their victims lack. Consider more of CK's apology:

I ... took advantage of the fact that I was widely admired in my and their community, which disabled them from sharing their story and brought hardship to them when they tried because people who look up to me didn't want to hear it. I didn't think that I was doing any of that because my position allowed me not to think about it. (Louis CK, 2017)

He identifies the fact he was widely admired as a reason why his accusers were not believed. When a wrongdoer is widely admired, this can lead to a form of testimonial injustice for the wrongdoer's victims (Archer & Matheson, 2019, 2021). Unlike standard cases of testimonial injustice that focus on a person being judged to be less epistemically credible than she is because of features of her identity (Fricker, 2007), this form involves a victim being seen as less epistemically credible than she is *because* she contradicts a wrongdoer who has excessive epistemic credibility—that is, the wrongdoer is believed more than they ought to be. As I discuss in Section 5, the fact a celebrity can disable others from being believed when they ought to be believed means the celebrity has not only excessive epistemic credibility, but also excessive *epistemic power*. CK seems aware he has such power. Because he had the power to stop his victims being believed, he might have felt he ought to wield that same power so that his victims would now be believed.

Setting the public record is often a morally commendable motivation for apologizing—for example, when a person establishes an accurate and verifiable record of what wrongs they committed. However, it is not always. Consider an evil person who is motivated to set the public record straight so that the public know all the wicked things they have done. They could do this through an insincere apology, or simply by boldly stating what they have done. While this motivation is not always morally commendable, it remains that it often is.

Being motivated to set the public record straight is also not necessary for a celebrity apology to be a morally good one. A celebrity apology that was just motivated by usual motives for apologizing (e.g., a desire to make amends) could be morally commendable. For example, Samantha Geimer (2013, p. 291), who was drugged and raped by Roman Polanski, says that Polanski offered her a written private apology. Polanski's apology might well be a morally good one even though he did not offer it publicly.<sup>1</sup>

Correcting the public record helps to explain why celebrity apologies are typically publicly given. By giving the apology publicly, a celebrity acknowledges what they have been accused of doing. However, this motivation does not obviously explain why celebrity apologies are also sometimes fan-targeted. We must look elsewhere for such an explanation.

## 4 | ROLE MODEL OBLIGATIONS

The second possible explanation for why celebrity apologies are sometimes both fan-targeted and publicly given is that celebrities see themselves as having role model obligation that they can only meet by providing an apology that is both fan-targeted and given publicly.

Several authors have investigated whether celebrities—with a particular focus on athletes—have role model obligations (e.g., Feezell, 2005; Spurgin, 2012; Wellman, 2003; Yorke & Archer, 2020). The idea is that because celebrities occupy a privileged position, they have a special obligation to model good behavior. When they act wrongly, such role models incur greater blame than a person who performs a type-identical wrong. For example, a famous athlete who uses racial slurs is blameworthy for more wrongs than an ordinary person who also uses racial slurs. Both are blameworthy for using racial slurs, but the famous athlete is also blameworthy *for not modeling good behavior*.

There is a lot of controversy about role model obligation. Some argue that celebrities are not *prima facie* good role models, and so cannot be thought to have role model obligations (e.g., Feezell, 2005). Others argue that because these obligations violate a person's right to privacy, such obligations can only be acquired by consent (e.g., Spurgin, 2012).

Whether celebrities have role model obligations does not affect my present point. Rather, it is only important that celebrities *believe* they have role model obligations because this may explain why they sometimes apologize to their fans and in public for their wrongs. This is especially clear in the case of Tiger Woods. He explicitly identifies himself as a role model in his apology, and then apologizes to his fans on that basis. It is clear, then, that Woods takes himself to have violated a role model obligation and that his violation calls for an apology to those to whom he was supposed to be modeling good behavior. Because he cannot feasibly apologize to each fan individually, it makes sense that he gave his apology publicly to reach all his fans. Indeed, it is through his public behavior that he is a role model, so it makes even more sense that Woods would apologize publicly.

This motivation for apologizing to one's fans and in public is a morally commendable one: regardless of whether celebrities do in fact have role model obligations, it is a good thing that celebrities acknowledge they have the power to influence the behavior of others and that they then take extra steps to try to stop their wrongs from badly influencing others.

But this does not explain all fan-targeted and publicly given celebrity apologies. As the criticisms of role model obligations suggest, it seems unlikely that all celebrities see themselves as having role model obligations, regardless of whether they actually have them. For example, basketball player Charles Barkley once that said:

I am not a role model. I'm not paid to be a role model. I'm paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids.<sup>2</sup> (cited in Norris, 2020)

Barkley said in this in an advertisement for Nike trainers—an idea he apparently came up with—so there is perhaps something insincere or ironic about this statement. In any case, Barkley claims he does not see himself as a role model, and it is likely that other celebrities also do not see themselves this way. The fact that many celebrity apologies do not mention or allude to role model obligations, as Tiger Woods does in his apology, is further evidence that many celebrities do not take themselves to have such obligations. For example, consider Selena Gomez's apology for appearing to mock her ex-partner Justin Bieber's current wife, Hailey Bieber:

Guys no idea what I did but I really am sorry. Zero bad intention. Deleting soon. (cited in Reslen, 2022)

She issued this apology *to her fans* after they complained that a skincare routine video she uploaded to TikTok mocked a similar one that Hailey Bieber had recently uploaded. While she directs her apology to her fans, Gomez makes no claims about having role model obligations. So, not all fan-targeted and publicly given celebrity apologies are motivated by the celebrity's belief that they have violated a role model obligation.

## 5 | MAINTAINING FAME

Let us now consider a third possible explanation for why celebrity apologies are sometimes fan-targeted and publicly given. This is that celebrities offer such apologies simply or primarily to maintain their fame—that is, their positive celebrity status—and its associated powers. In what follows, I will first explain how celebrities depend (to a significant extent) on their fans and

potential fans for their social position and associated powers. I will then argue that this dependence helps to explain why celebrity apologies are sometimes both fan-targeted and publicly given. Finally, I argue that if this is a celebrity's sole motivation for apologizing, it is clearly a morally blameworthy motivation. Moreover, even if the celebrity has other motivations for apologizing, if they care about maintaining their fame *more* than anything else, their overall set of motivations for apologizing is morally blameworthy.

## 5.1 | How celebrities depend on their fans

Most celebrities have both fans and haters—that is, they are admired and loved by some and hated and despised by others. For example, businessman, and former president of the United States, Donald Trump is a clear case of a celebrity with both fans and haters. This observation is important to see how a feature of celebrity works.

This feature is that celebrities often have excessive epistemic power. According to Archer et al.:

A person has epistemic power to the extent she is able to influence what people think, believe, and know, and to the extent she is able to enable and disable others from exerting epistemic influence. (Archer et al., 2020, p. 29)

As noted earlier, epistemic power is related to epistemic credibility. However, epistemic power is a wider concept as it also includes both a person's tendency to be believed *and* their ability to make other people be believed or disbelieved. For example, many celebrities took part in the “pass the mic” campaign to spread accurate information about COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Through doing this, celebrities used their epistemic power to enable others to be believed.

Epistemic power is not always used so benignly. As discussed earlier, Louis CK exercised epistemic power by disabling his victims from being able to exert epistemic influence with their accusations against him. A common feature of celebrity is excessive—that is, undeserved—epistemic power, especially in areas “unrelated to their career, talent, or expertise” (Archer et al., 2020, p. 28). CK had epistemic power over what people thought about accusations against him, even though his comedic traits and achievements do not imply anything about whether or not he would sexually harass others—and in fact the content of his work even lends credibility to these accusations as he joked about the kinds of acts he later confessed to committing (Bradley, 2017).

It is important distinguish *positive* epistemic power from *negative* epistemic power. A person with negative epistemic power tends to be disbelieved more that they ought to be and disables those they try to enable epistemically. Celebrities usually have both kinds of power, depending on who their *audience* is. Consider Trump again. Some tend to believe his statements, while others tend not to believe them. For example, Trump fans were more likely to believe his bizarre statements about how to treat COVID-19, with several of them hospitalizing themselves (Smith-Schoenwalder, 2020). On the other hand, Trump haters were more likely to disbelieve his statements. For example, many did not believe his statements about COVID-19 originating in a laboratory in China. At the time, I dismissed these as racist and incendiary ramblings. Later it transpired these claims were more credible than his haters might have thought (though still not confirmed as of the time of writing).<sup>4</sup> Trump thus has negative epistemic power over me, a hater of his. More generally, celebrities have positive epistemic power over their fans, and negative epistemic power over their haters.

However, it is not just fans that celebrities have some power over. Fans give celebrities power over *potential fans*—that is, members of the public who are not yet fans but who might become fans (in part because they are not haters). Fans help to establish a celebrity's positive epistemic power in the social imagination—that is, the collectively constructed “kind of imagination that opens our eyes and hearts to certain things and not others, enabling and constraining” how we understand and conceptualize others and social life more generally (Medina, 2012, p. 22). Someone who appears to be a well-loved celebrity is someone we might come to like. Even if you are not currently a fan of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, you might have a positive view of him because many others see him positively. This might then make you open to seeing one of these films, which might help to make you a fan of his. So, having more fans helps potential fans become actual fans. Haters can also help to stop potential fans becoming actual fans. That someone is widely despised might make us not want to engage with their work (though, of course, some people are contrarians and the fact someone is hated might be an alluring feature).

Because celebrities typically have both fans and haters, celebrity typically involves a continual *power struggle*. This is not just a power struggle between fans and haters, but also among all the various social, political, and economic forces that come into play to determine a person's image and social position. For example, celebrities sometimes try to avoid negative stories in newspapers and gossip websites to maintain their positive image in the social imagination. The fact they do suggests celebrities are aware of the importance of having a positive image. With such an image comes an elevated social position and various powers, including positive epistemic power.

Celebrities, then, are aware there is a struggle to maintain their social position and associated powers. One important source of their power is *their fans*. While a celebrity has power over their fans, it is their fans that help to support their image in the social imagination as widely loved and admired. While celebrities might have other sources of positive epistemic power (such as a strong public relations team that promotes positive stories about them), celebrities still depend on their fans to a significant extent for their positive epistemic power—that is, celebrities depend on their fans to love and admire them so that they maintain their positive celebrity status. It is their fans, after all, who will support what the celebrity does both financially and socially. Regardless of how much they ought to be believed and regardless of how many positive stories there were in the press about them, if a celebrity were exclusively despised and hated, no one would actually believe anything they said, and no one would find anyone they recommend to be credible. That is, such a celebrity would only have negative epistemic power.

## 5.2 | How this dependence explains publicly given fan-targeted apologies

Those celebrities who are aware of their dependence on their fans have a clear motivation to apologize to their fans for wrongs that do not directly involve their fans.<sup>5</sup> Fans might feel betrayed or upset by a celebrity's wrongdoing.<sup>6</sup> A notable feature of fandom is that fans often have an impression of their idol's character that is at odds with their actual character. Their idol's misbehavior can sometimes reveal what the idol's actual character is. To avoid losing their fans, a celebrity must act to avoid or allay feelings of betrayal and sadness that their wrongs might cause. An apology can help to do this. It can assure their fans that they really are, or aspire to be, how their fans see them.



To serve this fan-appeasing function, a celebrity apology must be given in public. Of course, celebrities do not always just want to appease current fans. They sometimes also want to avoid putting off potential fans. Consider Will Smith's apologies to Chris Rock. Smith infamously slapped Rock at The Oscars in 2022 after the latter mocked Smith's wife's, Jada Pinkett-Smith's, alopecia. In his first apology, issued the day after the assault, Smith apologized directly to Rock but also said that:

I would also like to apologize to the Academy, the producers of the show, all the attendees and *everyone watching around the world*. (Smith, 2022; my emphasis)

Here Smith makes clear that he takes a subset of the public to be among the intended audience of the apology. I take it that by explicitly mentioning the public this way, Smith is targeting both fans and potential fans.

Now consider Smith's second apology. While his first apology was just an Instagram post, Smith's second apology took the form of a recorded YouTube video. In the video, he is asked:

What would you say to the people who looked up to you before the slap or people who expressed that you let them down?

Smith responds:

Two things. One: disappointing people is my central trauma. I hate when I let people down, so it hurts me psychologically and emotionally that I didn't live up to *peoples' image and impression of me*. The work I am trying to do is—I am deeply remorseful and I'm trying to be remorseful without being ashamed of myself. I'm human and I made a mistake and I'm trying not to think of myself as a piece of shit. So I would say to those people, I know it was confusing. I know it was shocking. But I promise you, I am deeply devoted and committed to putting light and love and joy into the world. If you hang on, *I promise we will be able to be friends again*. (cited in Whiting, 2022; my emphasis)

This part of Smith's apology is notable for two reasons. First, he explicitly acknowledges that he did not live up people's impression of him. Second, he promises “we” will be able to be friends again. These reasons suggest Smith is directing this part of his apology to his fans. It is his fans whose impression he has not lived up to and it is his fans (perhaps among others) who he promises to be friends with again.

We therefore have another potential explanation for why celebrities apologize to their fans and in public—namely, to maintain their fans, and potential fans, and thereby maintain their fame. Celebrities are often aware their fame depends on their fans, and so they think they must also apologize, or dedicate part of an apology, to their fans. Their fame depends on being “friends” with their fans. The apology must be publicly given because it is only this way that the apology can have its fan-appeasing function and its wider effect on the social imagination.

### 5.3 | How this is a morally blameworthy motivation

A celebrity who was motivated to apologize *only* to maintain her fame would be apologizing for a bad reason. Only aiming to maintain one's fame is self-serving, so a celebrity who apologized for just this reason would act from a morally blameworthy motivation.

Of course, people often act for multiple reasons. A celebrity might be motivated to apologize to her fans and in public also because she takes herself to have role model obligations and because she wants to set the public record straight. Such a celebrity might also be motivated to apologize because she feels remorse about what she has done and wants to make amends. When a celebrity publicly gives a fan-targeted apology, her overall set of motivations might not be morally blameworthy even though it includes the motivation to maintain her fame. Will Smith's apology might be an example of this. He plausibly had all these motivations, given his words and other facts we can infer from the context of his apology. For example, his talk of not living up to the image people had of him could also be understood as him implicitly acknowledging that he has role model obligations.

But while all these motivations may be present, a celebrity may place more importance on one of them. For example, it might be that Smith *cared more* about maintaining his fame than he did about meeting his role model obligations, setting the public record straight, expressing his remorse, and making amends. If it is true that Smith cared more about maintaining his fame, this would make his overall set of motivations a morally blameworthy one, thereby making his apology a morally substandard one. In other words, caring more about maintaining one's fame results in the moral blameworthiness of that motivation polluting one's whole set of motivations for apologizing.

This is because when a person cares more about something, they are willing to sacrifice other cares and interests for the sake of that thing. This is often good. For example, because I care more about my daughter than my career, I am willing to sacrifice advancing my career for the sake of my daughter (e.g., by opting to spend more time with her than writing papers). But sometimes it is bad. For example, a person who cares more about being famous is willing to sacrifice other cares and interests for the sake of becoming and remaining famous. This can mean neglecting earlier relationships to focus on developing ones that are more conducive to increasing one's fame, focusing on how one appears to the world rather than developing one's physical and psychological health, and so on. It also means that when a celebrity's positive status is threatened by their own wrongs that the celebrity will—if it presents itself as the best option in a particular context—not choose to her express her remorse or desire to make amends through an apology. It might be that a more deceptive apology that tries to excuse them or that casts aspersions on the character of the victim is the best option to maintain their fame.

Even if the celebrity provides an overall good seeming apology, the fact they care more about maintaining their fame therefore means that the good parts of this apology are incidental. The celebrity might easily have chosen another course of action. The good seeming apology is just the one that seemed like the best way to get what they care about most: maintaining their fame.<sup>7</sup> Caring more about maintaining one's fame undermines the moral goodness of an apology by polluting the overall set of motivations that give rise to the apology. So, having some good motivations for apologizing does not mean that one's overall set of motivations for apologizing is good.

To be good, this set of motivations must have a particular structure—namely, one in which an apologizer's *primary* motivations should be things like expressing remorse, rectifying one's wrong, and making amends. An apologizer might still have a morally good overall set of motivations even if they have *secondary* motivations that are not directly focused on expressing remorse, rectifying their wrong, and making amends, but these will rather be potential bonuses that arise from apologizing, and not the main thing the apology seeks to achieve. The celebrity who cares more about maintaining their fame, however, will have maintaining their fame as their primary motivation for apologizing. And so, their apology will not be a morally good one.

This is true even if the celebrity wants to maintain her fame to do morally good things—such as spreading awareness about vaccines, climate change, or world hunger. Even though maintaining one's fame is not the end itself, the apologizer is still not properly focused on things like rectifying their wrong and making amends. A morally good apology requires such focus from the apologizer. While some consequentialists might hold that such an apology is a morally good action (given its morally good consequences), it still would not be a good apology *qua* apology.<sup>8</sup>

## 6 | MORAL DANGER #1: NARRATIVE SETTING

In this and the next section, I consider moral dangers that arise from celebrity apologies being publicly given. In Section 8, I consider a moral danger unique to fan-targeted and publicly given celebrity apologies. This third moral danger is important because, as I discuss, it can further exacerbate the first two moral dangers. I will now argue that publicly given celebrity apologies can be morally dangerous because they can set the public narrative around the celebrity's behavior in a way that is favorable to them.<sup>9</sup>

Consider first how celebrities do not just have epistemic power. They sometimes have *agenda setting power*. Because of all the attention paid to the things he said before and during his Presidency, Trump had the power to *set the agenda* about what got spoken about regardless of whether he was loved or hated. Through being able to have strong influence over what gets talked about in the news and in politics, Trump was able to influence who heard him and potentially who might become a fan or a hater. As his one-time press secretary said, “Whatever [Trump] tweets is going to drive the news” (cited in Archer et al., 2020).

Archer et al. (2020, p. 31) consider agenda setting power to be part of epistemic power, but there is good reason to consider it a distinct power. While epistemic power is influenced by the emotions and attitudes of the audience, agenda setting power is not. For example, Trump had agenda setting power over people whether they loved or hated him. Indeed, agenda setting power does not depend on how much we are likely to believe a celebrity or the extent to which she can enable or disable others from exerting epistemic influence. Whereas whether a celebrity has positive or negative epistemic power with respect to a person rather depends on how this person is emotionally and attitudinally orientated toward the celebrity—for example, whether they are fans, haters, potential fans, potential haters, or somewhere in-between. While epistemic power and agenda setting power are distinct, positive epistemic power and agenda setting power can be used in tandem to greater effect. One might frame what people think about while also lending credibility to that framing.

This pairing of positive epistemic power and agenda setting power is especially useful for celebrities in responding to their own wrongs. This pairing can lead to what I will call *narrative setting power*. This is related to but important different from agenda setting power. Agenda setting power is the power to determine, or help to determine, *what* gets talked about. Narrative setting power is the power to determine, or help to determine, *how* something gets talked about. For example, a boss has the power to set the agenda about what gets talked about in their workplace—for example, what projects must be worked on. But just because the boss can set the agenda about what gets talked about, it does not mean they can influence how their workers think about those things—for example, how important the project is. Of course, a boss can also have narrative setting power. They might be charismatic or have persuasive arguments

in favor of their view, and so workers can come to share the boss's attitude about, for example, the importance of the project.

Sometimes narrative setting power can be used to deny a celebrity's wrongdoing, and in turn, even if only implicitly, to disparage the accusers. For example, a celebrity might appeal to the common idea that accusers are motivated purely for financial reasons or emotional reasons, such as jealousy. But it can also be used in a celebrity apology. An apologizer might try to frame the narrative around their wrong in a way they hope is favorable to them.

Kevin Spacey's apology to Anthony Rapp provides an instructive example of how a celebrity's narrative setting power can misfire. Rapp accused Spacey of making a sexual advance when Rapp was 14. After issuing his conditional apology to Rapp ("if I did behave then as he describes, I owe him the sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior"; Spacey, 2017), Spacey went to announce that he was a gay man, something that had been widely speculated about but never confirmed by Spacey. This seems like a clear attempt to use his "apology" to set the narrative around his (possible) wrong in a way that favors him. I take the suggestion to be that Spacey's behavior (if it happened) was the result of having lived as a closeted gay man and the surrounding societal pressures with respect to homosexuality that were much stronger when Spacey is alleged to have propositioned Rapp. Spacey's apology failed in part because it was at best a conditional apology (and perhaps more accurately a conditional acknowledgement of a duty to apologize), and also in part because his narrative setting power misfired.

However, narrative setting power does not always misfire in this way. Consider, for example, Louis CK's apology. In and of itself, his apology appears to be morally good: it appears humble, appropriately remorseful, it identifies the wrongs, it suggests he cares about the effect his wrongs have on his victims, and so on.<sup>10</sup> But it could also be that this apology is deliberately trying to hit all the right notes to *appear* as if it is a morally good apology. CK may not use the language of epistemic power, but he implicitly admits to having such power. He also seems to have focused on elements that are more likely to get one's apology accepted—namely, ones that focus on the victim and the suffering they have undergone, on how mortified one is from having made the victim suffer, and outlining what steps one has taken, or will take, to make amends (see Cerulo & Ruane, 2014).

While CK's apology focuses on the victim, there is perhaps also a subtle framing about *his* redemption: *he* feels really bad, and *he* has seen the error of his ways. Of course, his apology still bears many of the hallmarks of a morally good apology. It is certainly hard for an apology not to mention the wrongdoer's change of heart, as this is something that a morally good apology requires. But the fact he—a celebrity with access to public relations experts that can help him intensify his narrative setting power—manages to provide such an apology that makes him look so favorable is something that should give us pause. Again, perhaps his apology is a bit *too good*. And perhaps by appearing so good, by typical evaluative standards of a morally good apology, we are lured into accepting how CK's apology construes him and his victims, and in particular on him as a person who is trying to redeem himself.

This is somewhat speculative, of course. When narrative setting power is used well, we are unlikely to be aware of its effects. We might not immediately realize that we are focusing more on the wrongdoer's hoped for redemption than on the victim and the wrongs they have suffered. In some cases, the celebrity's narrative setting power might even help them misconstrue the extent of the wrong, the extent to which they truly want to redeem themselves, and so on. We may learn a slightly twisted version of events that helps the celebrity appear better than they are. Narrative setting power is morally dangerous because it means those who have it *can* establish an inaccurate

impression of the wrong and of themselves in social imagination, even if they do not actually exercise that power. The lesson we learn from this is that because celebrities often have narrative setting power, we have reason to be suspicious of publicly given celebrity apologies.

## 7 | MORAL DANGER #2: NARRATIVE DISEMPOWERMENT

A second moral danger with publicly given celebrity apologies is what I call *narrative disempowerment*—that is, hindering or removing a person's control over their own life narrative. Being wronged is one kind of narrative disempowerment. A person becomes a victim, and it is often then hard to avoid being seen and seeing oneself *as a victim*. While we cannot have total control over our life narratives, an important source of meaningfulness in life is the control we can exercise about how our life narratives go (Fischer, 2009); narrative disempowerment therefore lessens the meaningfulness of a person's life. Through apologizing in way that subtly sets the narrative around the wrong in a way that favors the wrongdoer, a wrongdoer further narratively disempowers the victim, who now has even less control over how she and others understand her life story. I consider two forms of narrative disempowerment in what follows.

The first form arises because celebrities typically have greater narrative setting power than their victims. Even if a celebrity does not set the narrative in her favor, the fact *she could* means the celebrity possesses the power in this situation. It is thanks *to the celebrity* that a victim's side of the story might be heard and believed. It is not because of the victim's testimony in and of itself. So even when a celebrity does not set the public narrative surrounding the wrong in her favor, the fact the celebrity helps to establish the public narrative about, and the public record of, the wrong still involves narratively disempowering the victim. The victim has to hope for the celebrity's co-operation *or else* they will not be able to combat the celebrity's narrative setting power. Because of the celebrity's greater narrative setting power, the victim's power to set the narrative around what has happened to them is always at risk of being undermined.

The second form of narrative disempowerment arises because a celebrity apology can place more emphasis on the celebrity, even when it is an otherwise good apology. The celebrity's apology will likely draw more attention to the wrongdoer than the victim. The victim, then, becomes a supporting character in their own story.<sup>11</sup> A celebrity apology can draw more attention to the celebrity so that, even if the account is accurate and fair—and even focuses on the victim to a significant extent—the celebrity is still its practical focus and may then become the person we sympathize with more.

The second form of narrative disempowerment is wrongful because victims are no longer protagonists in their own story, and instead must see the story of their lives as inherently connected to the person who wronged them.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the first form is wrongful because victims have had their power to determine their life story reduced. The lesson we learn from this is that even a morally good publicly given celebrity apology can be morally dangerous, because even such an apology can further harm victims.

## 8 | MORAL DANGER #3: BARRIER TO MORAL REDEMPTION

The final moral danger I consider is that being primarily motivated to maintain one's fame can stop celebrities achieving moral redemption, and instead lead the celebrity toward mere public

redemption. Moreover, through being a barrier to moral redemption, it can further exacerbate the first two moral dangers.

As I discussed in Section 5, celebrities can be motivated to apologize to their fans and in public because this will help them maintain their fame. When a celebrity is only motivated for this reason, their apology is morally substandard because this motivation, when considered alone, is a self-serving one. One reason why acting only for such a self-serving reason leads to a morally substandard apology is that a morally good apology requires humility (Bennett, *Forthcoming*; Radzik, 2009). But when a celebrity apologizes only to maintain their fame, this shows a lack of humility: the celebrity is putting themselves above the victim by aiming to save their own positive celebrity status over seeking reconciliation with the victim.

Failing to be appropriately humble is not just a failure of an apology. It is also something that blocks moral redemption. Even if we accept Radzik's view that apology is not necessary for moral redemption, apologies still serve a communicative function that is necessary for moral redemption. To merit reconciliation and thus be morally redeemed, a wrongdoer must communicate their moral transformation, among other things. Part of this transformation is being appropriately humble as a consequence of having acted wrongly. The problem is that only being motivated to apologize to maintain one's fame demonstrates a complete lack of humility because it means a wrongdoer favors maintaining their fame—that is, their positive celebrity status—and its associated powers over meriting reconciliation with their victims. Such a wrongdoer does not merit reconciliation. As long as they care more about maintaining their own fame, moral redemption is closed off to them. However, the wrongdoer can gain public redemption—that is, they can appear to be redeemed in the eyes of their fans and the public. With public redemption, a celebrity maintains her fame. Apologizing with just this motivation is therefore morally dangerous *for the celebrity*.

Of course, as I also discussed in Section 5, we often act for multiple reasons. A celebrity might be motivated to apologize to maintain her fame *and* for other reasons. If the other reasons are morally commendable ones, this can sometimes undermine the badness of being motivated to maintain one's fame. However, as I argued in Section 5, the moral valence of one's overall set of motivations for a particular action depends on how the motivations that make up that set are structured. The upshot is that just because a celebrity has some morally commendable motivations for apologizing does not mean their apology is a morally good one.

Likewise, the fact that a celebrity has some morally commendable motivations for apologizing does not make them appropriately humble. If a celebrity cares more about maintaining their fame, they care more about themselves than they do about, for example, rectifying the harm they have brought upon the victim. This is not what an appropriately humble person would do. Celebrities therefore do not avoid this moral danger just by having some morally commendable motivations for apologizing. It matters what importance they give to those motivations; it matters what they care about more. When celebrities care more about maintaining their fame, any apology that they issue will be morally substandard, and they will be blocked from moral redemption.

Being motivated to apologize to maintain one's fame is morally dangerous when this motivation arises from caring more about maintaining one's fame. There is a lesson for celebrities here: they should be wary of placing too much importance on their fame, and of becoming seduced and consumed by their fame. There is also a lesson for others: when a celebrity cares more about their own fame, they have greater motivation to use their apology to set the public narrative in their favor, as this will help them maintain their fans and thus their fame; celebrities will also care less about narratively disempowering the victims. If what ultimately matters

to them is that they maintain their fame, a celebrity can easily silence the morally good reasons they have to apologize to, and make amends with, their victims.

When a celebrity's primary motivation for apologizing is that it will maintain their fame, this is not only morally dangerous in its own right (as it will block the celebrity from moral redemption), but it is also morally dangerous because it makes them more likely to not care about the first two moral dangers of publicly apologizing to their victims. So, when celebrities care about their fame more than anything else, this is also morally dangerous for their victims and us.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I first considered three explanations for why celebrities apologize to their fans and in public. I then identified three moral dangers with celebrity apologies. I then drew out four lessons about the practice of celebrity apologies. First, we should not trust celebrity apologies so easily. Second, even a good celebrity apology can still further harm victims. Third, celebrities should be wary of placing too much importance on their fame, as doing so can block their moral redemption. Fourth, the third moral danger also leads to celebrities being more likely to exacerbate the first two moral dangers.

There are wider lessons to learn from this discussion. I focus on three points here. First, these problems do not imply that we should ignore or completely reject celebrity apologies. Rather, they highlight that it is harder for celebrities *given their social position and associated powers* to give good public apologies and achieve moral redemption. One way to improve celebrity apologies might be for celebrities to enter into dialogue and negotiate with their victims, as Radzik and others propose (see Section 2). So, rather than seeing their apology as a monologue that draws a line under their earlier wrong, a celebrity should take their initial apology to be just one part of an overall process. Importantly, this requires more than just giving multiple apologies, as Will Smith did for slapping Chris Rock. And this might require only giving a private apology, such as the one Roman Polanski gave Samantha Geimer. Of course, private apologies just to victims will not have the same fan-appeasing function as publicly given fan-targeted apologies. Such apologies might also have their own moral dangers.

Second, while I have focused on well-known celebrity apologies and people who are arguably superstars, fame and celebrity are features of many areas of life. For example, small towns have local celebrities, and academic disciplines have superstars. Indeed, the advent of social media has made it easier for anyone to become a celebrity. This might be a domain specific fame, such as a famous academic tweeter. Such "micro-influencers" will have a small but still perhaps excessive epistemic power. This is something they might wield responsibly, but we must still question whether this is appropriate for anyone to have. Just as Archer et al. (2020) investigate the effect that celebrity epistemic power has on democracy, we might also investigate the effect that academic celebrity epistemic power has on academia and other areas of life.

Third, people are often motivated, at least in part, to apologize for their behavior because they wish to maintain their social position and associated powers. While I focused on being motivated to maintain one's fame in Sections 5 and 8, it is likely that any apology that is primarily or solely motivated by a person's desire to maintain her social position and associated powers will block that person achieving moral redemption. So, being primarily motivated to apologize to maintain one's social position is morally dangerous. This suggests that a condition on a morally good apology is that one is *not* primarily motivated to maintain one's social position, and

perhaps one must even be willing to lose one's social position to an appropriate extent. If that is correct, celebrities ought to be willing to cease being famous if they actually wish to achieve moral redemption. Of course, being willing does not amount to not at all caring about continuing to be famous.

Each of these points merits further investigation. Philosophical investigations into fame not only help to illuminate a crucial aspect of contemporary life, but also help to shed light on other structurally similar social phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> There are questions about Polanski's apology and with such private celebrity apologies, more generally, that I lack the space to delve into here.
- <sup>2</sup> See Wellman (2003) and Spurgin (2012) for further discussion of Barkley's claim.
- <sup>3</sup> See Minelle (2020). See also Archer et al. (Forthcoming).
- <sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Thacker (2021).
- <sup>5</sup> See also MacLachlan (2019, p. 24).
- <sup>6</sup> For more on this feeling of betrayal in the context of immoral artists, see Dederer (2017).
- <sup>7</sup> Such a celebrity apology can therefore be considered an abuse of moral talk and perhaps even a form of moral grandstanding—that is, the use of moral talk for boosting one's social status (Tosi & Warmke, 2016, 2020). The connection between celebrity apologies and grandstanding warrants further investigation that I lack the space to undertake here.
- <sup>8</sup> Another way to put this is that such an apology would not be a morally worthy one. For example, according to Arpaly (2003), an action is morally worthy to the extent it is performed for right-making reasons. One might hold, then, that among the right-making reasons for a morally worthy apology is that it is appropriately focused on things like rectifying one's wrongs and making amends. For other views of moral worth, see, e.g., Markovits (2010) and Sliwa (2016). Thanks to an anonymous referee for identifying this connection.
- <sup>9</sup> MacLachlan (2019) makes a similar point in a slightly different way. Her focus is on the role of apologies after #metoo and the role of gender with respect to epistemic credibility. While my point is different (as it applies to celebrities rather than just male public figures), it is important to note that there are likely other factors that might affect agenda setting and epistemic power beyond celebrity, such as gender, race, and class. See also MacLachlan (2014, p. 25).
- <sup>10</sup> Although many people disagreed at the time it was released; see Theixos (2018, p. 273) for an overview.



- <sup>11</sup> Samantha Geimer (2013) claims that the media story around Polanski's crime ended up making her a supporting character in her own story.
- <sup>12</sup> For more on the various ways that an apology can illicitly focus more attention on the apologizer rather than the victim, see MacLachlan (2019, pp. 25–27).
- <sup>13</sup> Acknowledgements.

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