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## **Ambassadors of the Game: Do Famous Athletes Have Special Obligations to Act Virtuously?**

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### **Abstract**

Do famous athletes have special obligations to act virtuously? A number of philosophers have investigated this question by examining whether famous athletes are subject to special role model obligations (Wellman 2003; Feezel 2005; Spurgin 2012). In this paper we will take a different approach and give a positive response to this question by arguing for the position that sport and gaming celebrities are *'ambassadors of the game'*: moral agents whose vocations as rule-followers have unique implications for their non-lusory lives. According to this idea, the actions of a game's players and other stakeholders—especially the actions of its stars—directly affect the value of the game itself, a fact which generates additional moral reasons to behave in a virtuous manner. We will begin by explaining the three main positions one may take with respect to the question: moral exceptionalism, moral generalism, and moral exemplarism. We will argue that no convincing case for moral exemplarism has thus far been made, which gives us reason to look for new ways to defend this position. We then provide our own *'ambassadors of the game'* account and argue that it gives us good reason to think that sport and game celebrities are subject to special obligations to act virtuously.

### **Keywords**

Moral exceptionalism; moral generalism; moral exemplarism; Kant; Nietzsche; Aristotle

## Introduction

Are sporting and gaming celebrities subject to special moral obligations? Before we answer this question, we may ask ourselves whether celebrities in general are subject to special moral obligations. At the intersection of talent and fame, we have three plausible kinds of basic intuitions about how celebrities ought to behave. We might think that (1) celebrities should have a free pass as regards their personal morality, or at least be given a greater degree of leniency for their moral behavior than ordinary people—perhaps because their lives are more stressful than ours, or because their talents are so special and precious—like the ‘free spirits’ described in the elitist moral philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Alternately, we might feel that (2) celebrities are exactly like the rest of us, and should not receive any special consideration whatsoever in the realm of moral action—there can be no moral exceptions, and no moral exemplars—as in the deontology of Immanuel Kant. Finally, we might believe that (3) celebrities merit a greater degree of moral scrutiny than the rest of us, on the basis of their being role models and thus setting an example for others to possibly admire and emulate, as in the virtue ethics schema of Aristotle. These intuitions give us a good canvas of the logical landscape, wherein one of the following statements *must* be true:

1. Celebrities have a LOWER level of moral duty than the rest of us (**Nietzsche**)
2. Celebrities have the SAME level of moral duty as the rest of us (**Kant**)
3. Celebrities have a HIGHER level of moral duty than the rest of us (**Aristotle**)

First, there is the position of (1) moral exceptionalism: the idea that because of a celebrity's natural or acquired talents, they ought not be judged harshly for either (1a) trifling moral offences like speeding or littering (call this *weak* moral exceptionalism), or (1b) more serious moral violations like theft or assault (call this *strong* moral exceptionalism), as this would interfere with the valuable exercise of their talents. Take the artist Paul Gauguin's dalliances with pubescent native girls while he was in Tahiti, which most deem immoral. There are nevertheless some people who take the position that the world is better off for having Gauguin's nude paintings from that era; that his vicious acts were part and parcel of his creative urges, and thus that the talent excuses the immorality in this case (eg. Williams 1981). Along these lines, in the spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche, one might claim that the morality of the herd should not dictate the actions of free spirits; that the genius of a Gauguin should not be hemmed in by the mediocrity and resentment of others. Nietzsche asserts that 'every superior human being will instinctively aspire after a secret citadel where he is *set free* from the crowd, the many, the majority, where, as its exception, he may forget the rule "man"—except in the one case in which, as a man of knowledge in the great and exceptional sense, he will be impelled by an even stronger instinct to make straight for this rule.' (Nietzsche 1973 [1886], §26, p. 39) The elite, in other words, are justified on a Nietzschean account to draft their own moral charters, and are not at all beholden to the dreary social mores of the masses which could compromise their authentic modes of being. Of course Nietzsche himself would be unlikely to think that many of today's celebrities fit with his ideas of the elite; but one inspired by this line of argument might think that it provides good reason to think that celebrities are not subject to ordinary moral standards and have special license to act immorally.

However, ‘the many, the majority’ of us have good reason to take a non-exceptionalist stance. For anyone who has seen the *Leaving Neverland* web series, and believe the testimonials therein from the people who claim to have been sexually assaulted by Michael Jackson at his Neverland Ranch while they were children, it seems clear—Jackson’s talent, great as it may have been, cannot excuse his alleged immorality.<sup>1</sup> People are people, on the (2) moral generalist account, and as such are neither above nor below anyone else in terms of the scope of their moral responsibilities: they are all beholden to the same universally applicable moral code, regardless of matters of talent. As Immanuel Kant argues, there exists a categorical imperative for each of us to uphold the moral contract and treat others with respect—as ends in themselves, not means to our own ends. Kant writes that ‘*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*’ (Kant 1998 [1875], §1, p. 15 [4:402]) No one gets a free pass in matters of morality according to this position, but neither is anyone unfairly morally burdened when taken in comparison to anyone else.

Finally, there is the position of (3) moral exemplarism: the idea that because of a celebrity’s social status, they ought to be judged *more* harshly for both (3a) serious moral violations like theft or assault (call this *weak* moral exemplarism), and also (3b) trifling moral offences like speeding or littering (call this *strong* moral exemplarism), as these behaviors are arguably likely to be imitated by some number of their fans. For example, consider the pro golfer Tiger Woods’ multiple documented extramarital affairs, which most deem immoral. Many people take the position that the world would be better off for Woods, his fans, and golf as a sport more generally, if those affairs had never occurred; and that those vicious acts taint his accomplishments on the green. They seem to think that it is worse when a famous and

admired athlete normalizes vice in this way, and that the virtuous exercise of talent calls for a relatively higher standard of moral conduct on the part of its possessors.

Along this line, Aristotle stresses the importance of a good moral education, from the very beginning of life (Aristotle 1969 [c. 350 BC], Book II, Ch. 3, §2, p. 21); and the behavior of role models plays a seminal part of our moral development on his account.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle affirms that ‘otherwise, no teacher would be needed, but everyone would be born a good or bad craftsman. It is the same, then, with the virtues.’ (Aristotle 1969 [c. 350 BC], Book II, Ch. 1, §7, p. 19) So on an Aristotelian account, we are at least partially responsible for each other’s moral education through the examples that we set—especially those in positions of social prominence, whose actions are the most salient to the largest number of people—and it is a moral failing if they knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the normalization of vicious behavior. Given this, there seems to be good reason to think that those whose fame means that they serve as examples to many other moral agents may have special reasons to act virtuously.

This survey of positions leaves us with a thorny problem: for, when considering certain cases, each of these mutually exclusive positions has plausible intuitive force. However, due to the law of non-contradiction they obviously cannot *all* be true. Therefore, if we do not want to pass judgment on the moral infractions of celebrities in an arbitrary, *ad hoc* manner, we need to examine both our intuitions and these theoretical positions more closely.

### **1. Moral Exceptionalism: The Case for Lesser Moral Responsibility**

Let us begin with the least plausible position, moral exceptionalism, which is the easiest to rule out. It is premised on the belief that celebrities are justified in having unsavory, perhaps even immoral, characters on the basis of the value of their cultural products. Often, the implicit assumption is that the vice generates, or is instrumentally connected to, the value of the expressed talent. Even if this assumption were true—even if Paul Gauguin causally *needed* a steady supply of underage muses to produce his dazzling body of artistic output—strong moral exceptionalism could never constitute the basis of a defensible moral system, for this would give absolute licence for every talented celebrity to be a moral monster. You could, for instance, defend O.J. Simpson’s alleged murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, on the basis of his record-breaking performance for the Buffalo Bills in 1973, in which he became the first football player to rush over 2,000 yards in one season. This is an obviously absurd and undesirable outcome. Weak moral exceptionalism fares little better, as it would provide theoretical justification for a multitude of sociopathic and socially irresponsible behaviors—it would be a *carte blanche* for the gifted to treat the ungifted in a morally callous fashion.

In addition to the troubling elitism motivating this position, which would result in a two-tiered morality—one for the dogma-following ‘herd’ and one for the ‘free spirits’ who are morally permitted to do whatever they feel like in the moment—there is a difficult epistemological issue lurking in the background here as well. For what criteria ought we employ to judge who belongs to the moral elite and who does not? What evidence or testimony could possibly serve to establish one’s membership to that group of the elect, and thus to whom moral exceptions ought to be applied to? We suggest that these significant epistemological hurdles give us good reason to set this position aside.

## **2. Moral Generalism: The Case for Equal Moral Responsibility**

The position that celebrities are neither morally exempt nor moral exemplars can be argued for in several different ways. It could be claimed that celebrities are just bad choices of role model and so should not be made subject to role model obligations (Feezell 2013, Wellman 2003). Alternately, it could be argued that role model obligations can only be acquired by consent; a consent which is rarely asked for and even more rarely offered (Wellman 2003). Finally, it could be objected that these obligations violate a gaming celebrity's right to privacy, and so such obligations can only be acquired through consent (Spurigin 2012).

It does seem to be the case that most celebrities did not consciously choose to be role models (Wellman 2003). Moreover, moral education is arguably more the responsibility of parents and teachers, rather than celebrities (Wellman 2003). And, arguably at least, celebrities may deserve as much privacy as the rest of us (Feezell 2005, Spurigin 2012). Thus the moral generalist theory has some intuitive force to it.

Adding to the force of these considerations, the case for equal moral responsibility also has the theoretical backing of Immanuel Kant. Recall that Kant's universally binding categorical imperative applies to all rational human beings, celebrities and non-celebrities alike. For Kant, lying is lying, no matter who's doing it: it is agent-neutral, and it is equally morally condemnable in all cases.



Nevertheless, we can raise plausible objections to the case for equal moral responsibility. Kant's theory ignores, for instance, important differences that facts regarding personal identity imply for the moral weight and expected consequences of our actions. Its weaknesses become clear when considering sample cases. For example, when Barry Bonds was caught lying about not taking steroids during his pro baseball career, his actions were considered grounds for criminal investigation and a cause for public scandal; whereas if Jane at the nearby gym was discovered to be taking steroids despite claiming otherwise, in practice no one ought to be deeply concerned. Analogously, if we cheated while playing a casual game of chess, it would be (merely) shameful, whereas if Boris Spassky cheated at chess, it would be morally outrageous and arguably criminal—partly because there are stakes with actual monetary value to be gained or lost at his level of professional play, but also partly because Spassky would take the institution of chess itself down a peg with him if he broke the rules (a position we argue for in the following sections).

Moreover, contrary to the intuitively appealing considerations given above, we could equally well argue that game celebrities *did* choose to become elite players with reasonable foreknowledge of their enhanced effects on the world, including the *mimetic* potential of their becoming role models, and that their acceptance of their role model status is therefore voluntary. We could reasonably posit that moral education is *not* solely limited to parental authority and teaching staff; that we *all* have a role to play as peers and mentors in each other's moral educations, and that celebrities have a more visible and effective role than most others in this process. Finally, we could credibly claim that game celebrities waive many of their

privacy rights as ‘part of the gig’: and that, if their privacy were of overriding value to them, they would quit the game and so cease to be a celebrity. That fact that they have not implies a tacit surrender of the typical privacy rights enjoyed by the general public.

To review: it seems clear that there exists a double standard between what we consider acceptable behavior for game celebrities and what we consider acceptable behavior for the average person, which makes the contention that both have the same moral responsibilities seem implausible. But *why* is it seemingly worse when celebrities do bad things, than when non-celebrities do the same? We examine some possible explanations for this phenomenon below.

### **3. Moral Exemplarism: The Case for Greater Moral Responsibility**

One popular line of thought is that celebrities have greater moral responsibilities because of their position as role models. Wellman, for instance, distinguishes between ‘exemplarism’—the idea that there is a mimetic causal relationship between celebrities and those who admire them, grounding a special kind of moral duty for that celebrity—and exemplar ‘skepticism’, which denies the existence of any such duty. The typical form of this skepticism can be reduced to a position of ‘generalism’ which we examined above—the idea that everybody shares an identical set of moral duties, which do not shift in light of one’s social position.

The typical argument that is given for the exemplarist position is that celebrities have the ability to influence other people and thus to influence whether they become virtuous or vicious. As a result, celebrities have a duty to serve as good role models and encourage people to become virtuous rather than vicious (Wellman 2003, p. 334). Celebrities are admired, and that admiration is linked with a desire to emulate, so people often seek to emulate celebrities. Given this, celebrities have special duties to model good forms of behavior (Wellman 2003). Of course, everyone has duties to be good example to others, but the thought here is that the reasons for celebrities to do so are stronger than they are for other people, due to their special influence on other people's behavior.

This argument has been criticized by those that think that celebrities are just bad choices of role model and so should not be made subject to role model obligations (Feezell 2013, p. 138). However, even if there is no good reason for someone to be treated as a role model, the fact that someone is treated in this way may be enough to generate the role model obligation (Wellman 2003, p. 333). This response though, has been criticized for involving a commitment to dishonesty, as celebrities must act like role models even though they know they are not good a choice of role model (Feezell 2013, p. 138). The argument takes this basic form:

P1: Celebrities have special influence over people's behavior

P2: If someone has special influence over people's behavior then they are subject to special role model obligations

C: Therefore, celebrities have special role model obligations.

We do not intend to take a stand on the plausibility of this argument or the responses that have been made to it. We do though, want to point out that whatever merits this argument from special influence has, it does not give us any reason to think that *sporting* or *gaming* celebrities in particular have such duties. If the source of such duties is one's status as a celebrity then it is an argument that will apply to all forms of celebrity, not just sporting celebrities. Perhaps some empirical evidence could be used to show that sporting celebrities tend to be more influential than other kinds of celebrity. If this were the case then this would give some reason to think that the argument from special influence is more relevant to sporting celebrities than other kinds of celebrity. However even if such evidence could be found it would not tell us anything distinctive about the obligations that one is subject to in virtue of being a sporting or gaming celebrity. Rather, it would be an account of the obligations one faces in virtue of being an influential celebrity, and it just so happens that sporting or gaming celebrities are more likely to be this kind of celebrity. This does not speak against the plausibility of the argument in any way, but it does tell us that if we want to find an argument that tells us about the special obligations one may face in virtue of being famous for sport or games then we should look elsewhere.

Is there anything distinctive about sporting and gaming celebrities that could ground special obligations that apply only to these kinds of celebrity? One suggestion made by Earl Spurgin is that public figures involuntarily acquire role model obligations that are linked to their particular field of expertise (Spurgin 2012). This means that a star baseball player has an obligation to be an appropriate role model to aspiring young baseball players. In one sense this tells us something specific about the special obligations that sporting or gaming celebrities are

subject to: they have a special responsibility to model good behavior to those who aspire to enter the same field. Again though, interesting as this argument is, it does not really tell us anything that is specific to sporting or gaming celebrities. Rather those who accept this argument are accepting that an obligation that applies generally to public figures (an obligation to be role models for aspiring young people entering the field) applies to sporting and gaming celebrities as well. This argument though would equally apply to famous novelists or actors who would have special role-model obligations to aspiring authors or actors: to model the role of a novelist or an actor appropriately. If we want to find an argument specific to those who become famous through sports and games then we must again look elsewhere. We have, thus far, argued that:

- Moral exceptionalism is off the table, for being both elitist and subjectivist;
- Moral generalism is off the table, for being unable to contend with theoretical and intuitive counterexamples to it; and
- This leaves us with moral exemplarism as the most theoretically promising position.
- Further: Wellman's moral exemplarist argument either works, or it does not;
- If Wellman's argument *does not* work, then we will need to examine other formulations of exemplarism;
- If Wellman's argument *does* work, then it works for *any* kind of celebrity;
- However, we have another, more specific target in mind: sporting and gaming celebrities;
- Therefore, regardless of the merits and demerits of Wellman's argument, we will need to examine other formulations of exemplarism.

#### **4. Fezell's Role Model View**

A more promising suggestion, for our purposes, is Feezell's claim that famous athletes acquire a narrow form of role model obligation due to their role as 'lusory objects' (Feezell 2013). The starting point of Feezell's argument is that playing a game is a freely chosen activity that has no external instrumental aim, which is ordered by arbitrarily created rules and conventions that are different from those that govern the rest of our lives (Feezell 2013, p. 145). Moreover, the activities that form part of the game only have significance within the world of the game. This means that games create a self-contained world, which is artificial in the sense that it would not exist were it not for the willingness of the participants and the spectators to accept its arbitrary rules and conventions (Feezell 2013, pp. 147-149). The meanings and narratives associated with the game are also set apart of the rest of the players' lives. As Feezell puts the point:

It is simply not like ordinary life in certain important respects. The world of play is not 'serious' when we contrast its values and activities to work, war, disease, and human suffering. We are constantly reminded that it is important to keep the playing of games 'in perspective', as if life is more than fun and games or the overcoming of artificial obstacles. On the other hand, participants often play with utmost seriousness, and the internal goods of the play world are made possible only by being serious about 'nonseriousness'. (Feezell 2013, p. 146)

Feezell claims that accepting that sports take place in a self-contained world has implications for how we should view the role of famous athletes. According to Feezell this means that we should treat these athletes as lusory objects, 'an object whose meaning or significance cannot be understood independent of the way in which the game is defined and interpreted in terms of its lusory means and lusory goals, that is, its rules and conventions.' (Feezell 2013, p. 149) In other words, the athlete is temporarily transformed into an object in the self-contained world of the game. While the game is ongoing, the player is no longer

defined by their ordinary identity and identity-conferring commitments but by the role they play in the self-contained world of that game. As Feezell puts it, 'The player who says good-bye to his wife and children and drives to the stadium becomes a lusory object when the game begins. The person who is a husband and father becomes a "center fielder," "clean-up hitter," and a "clutch player".' (Feezell 2013, p. 149)

The implication of accepting that the player of the game is a lusory object is that we should treat them in something like the way that we treat fictional characters: thus, we should not seek to connect the player in their role as a lusory object with the life of the person away from the self-contained world of the game. Indeed, Feezell thinks that it would be more appropriate to refer to players by their on-field nicknames than by their real names as this would make clear the delineation between the person and the lusory object (Feezell 2013, p. 150). What this means for the question of whether athletes have duties to be role models is that they only have such duties within the self-contained world of the game. So famous players *do* have obligations to model appropriate behavior in the world of the game by following its rules and norms, and displaying sportspersonship. However, their status as a role model within the world of the game does bring with it any special obligations outside of this world. Below is a summary of Feezell's role model view:

- Games create self-contained worlds ordered by arbitrary rules and conventions;
- Within this world, athletes are simply lusory objects;
- Upshot: we should not seek to connect the lusory object to the person's non-game life;
- Therefore: any special moral duties celebrity players have would be restricted to the self-contained world of the game: the 'magic circle'.

However, there is a strong sense in which ‘objectification’—lusory or otherwise—is morally problematic. Players are *people*, of course, and not *objects* as Feezell’s terminology implies, even temporarily. More specifically, players are people who have contractually circumscribed the acceptable range of professional actions they might permissibly partake in, to those prescribed by their chosen game’s ruleset. And their actions in that game’s arena can be parsed as comprehensible within the context of that game, without making the conceptual move of completely separating players from the reality of their non-lusory lives (which often can, and does, intrude—if only psychologically).

For a *reductio ad absurdum* of Feezell’s ‘player as lusory object’ argument, consider his own proposed separation of the ‘Charlie Hustle’ baseball persona from the person who is Pete Rose. One of these entities, he claims, belongs in the Hall of Fame, and the other in prison or at least suffering well-deserved public disapprobation in perpetuity. But how are we to square this psychological circle using only the resources of Feezell’s account? Surely, we cannot. For in an important sense, our personal lives are obviously *not* vitiated or suspended by our participation in a game. Further thought experiments demonstrate the weaknesses of his model:

A: Charlie Hustle passionately and tenderly kisses an infielder between innings. After the game, Pete Rose is confronted about this incident in the stadium parking lot by his disgruntled wife. He replies to her: “Darling, it wasn’t me... It was merely the lusory object known as Charlie Hustle! I suggest you read the work of Randolph Feezell before we discuss this matter further.”

B: A toddler named Pete Rose Jr. crawls onto the baseball field during the third inning of the game, murmuring ‘Dada... Dada’ and reaches out for Charlie Hustle’s pantleg. Charlie Hustle regards the infant with a blank stare of nonrecognition and confusion until a game official removes the child from the field.



*Reductio A* and *reductio B* demonstrate, in their own ways, the odd consequences of treating a ‘person’ and a ‘lusory object’ as non-equivalent entities. The fact that the scenarios depicted therein seem deeply unconvincing—because in an important sense, neither husbandhood nor fatherhood are ever truly vitiated, or even suspended, by gameplay—would seem to indicate that Feezell’s account is lacking in its explanatory power. Now, it could be objected that neither of the interactions outlined in scenarios A or B constitute felicitous moves in the game of baseball—and thus that they are ‘illusory’ in a certain sense, and ought to be discounted. While this is true in a strict sense, it is equally true that the events depicted in A and B certainly count as events which could constitute episodes in a holistic *life*. Events present themselves as chronologically discrete occurrences, typically resulting in a psychologically coherent string of experienced phenomena for the person moving through them. Insisting on a strong distinction between our lusory and non-lusory personas foists an unnecessary and inappropriate schism on game players, solely in service of Feezell’s terminology.

Were we to repair Feezell’s schema, we feel it would be germane to focus on ‘lusory acts’ rather than ‘lusory objects’. People perform lusory acts when they play games, and non-lusory acts when they do not, but always remain the *same people* regardless of context—in the interest of metaphysical and psychological parsimony. For even in the world of acting, where disappearing into a role is considered a virtue, we do not posit that the actor playing the character ‘King Lear’ in Shakespeare’s play *King Lear* becomes the person King Lear and thereby ceases to be themselves. That would be mad. Thus we must look elsewhere for a game-specific form of moral exemplarism.

## 5. Game Ambassadorship as a Species of Moral Exemplarism

We will argue that in order to understand the nature of gaming ambassadorship we need to examine the unique nature of their vocation *as players*. A game celebrity, by definition, rises to prominence by *following rules*. In particular, they owe their prominence to following the rules of the game which has made them famous.<sup>3</sup> There are two related points to make here. First, you are unlikely to get very far in any game if you systematically ignore the rules. When a game is operating as it should, rule breakers will be caught, punished and, in extreme cases, banned from taking part in future iterations of the game. Of course there are exceptional cases in which some game players are able to break the rules for years before they are caught, Lance Armstrong being an obvious example.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, failure to follow the rules of the game means that a player's rise to fame is generally much less likely to occur, all other things being equal.

The second, deeper point is that games depend for their very existence upon people agreeing to follow a certain set of rules. Consider for instance, Bernard Suits' famous definition of games:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (Suits 2014 [1978], p. 43)

According to Suits' view, games only come into existence when people accept a set of arbitrary rules which prohibit the use of more efficient means to reach a goal. Without these rules there would be no games, and therefore no game celebrities. Even if we do not accept this

constitutive account of rules, it seems reasonable to think that any institutionalized game of the sort by which people tend to achieve celebrity status in contemporary societies depend upon such a set of standardized rules.

This is perhaps why it may seem logically as well as morally offensive when we see game celebrities get caught for cheating at their game, behaving unlawfully outside of it, or acting in a socially inappropriate manner; for their acts run counter to the essential ingredients of their success. Thus there exists a reasonable intuition that game celebrities have greater responsibility to exhibit ‘rule obedience’ than standard players, both within and without their chosen games.<sup>5</sup>

We witness this dynamic of ambassadorship at work in other fields: what the Pope does and says as a representative of the Catholic Church greatly affects the social capital of that institution; the opinion of a well-regarded stockbroker can make or break the financial future of a company; and morally compromised politicians are considered embarrassments to their parties—arguably even to the profession of politics more generally. So, if game celebrities are invested in the institutions of their chosen games (and they ought to be, given the depth of their interrelationships with them), then they have good (self-preserving) motivation to behave as well as they possibly can, both inside and outside of the game.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a non-celebrity may lack the power to affect the reputation of the game they play, and thus have a more circumscribed version of this moral duty of ‘ambassadorship’, if any at all.

Now, owing to the fact that game celebrities become celebrities *specifically through* rule-following, we posit that we have an especially good reason, as stakeholders in the game’s

institution, to feel betrayed when we see them breaking rules *outside* of the game. For, if game celebrities break non-trivial rules *outside* the game, where rules presumably matter the most, then why wouldn't they break rules *inside* the game as well, where (on many accounts) the rules are trivial by definition? In such instances, the moral character of the player is immediately called into question, and rightly so. A fraudster or adulterer, we may infer, would not balk at in-game cheating as well, if the opportunity presented itself—given the premise that exhibitions of intralusory vice carry less moral weight than exhibitions of extralusory vice. For what should we assume that Diego Maradona would do with Gyges' invisibility-granting ring, given that he shamelessly pulled off the 'Hand of God' cheat in front of a packed stadium? This merits some reflection.

Our positive proposal regarding moral duties of ambassadorship for game celebrities has the merits of being rather simple and unassuming:

- Game celebrities have a foot in both worlds, intralusory and extralusory, where actions in one sphere directly affect their reputation in the other;
- Exhibitions of intralusory excellence may enhance a player's extralusory reach by making them a celebrity: if it does, this generates a moral duty of Ambassadorship;
- The actions of those with Ambassador duties, whether intralusory or extralusory, directly affect the perceived value of the game they play.

Of course, our proposal must face a standard range of predictable objections before we can hope to convince the reader of its full range of merits.

## **6. A Standard Range of Predictable Objections to Game Ambassadorship Duties**

One might object, for instance: 'Why is there a necessary connection between the intralusory and extralusory actions of game celebrities? Isn't it *possible* that a person who is morally degenerate *outside* of the game could be completely moral and rules-obedient *inside* the game?' Our answer: Yes, but that would not be *likely*: as it would take a rather strangely compartmentalized human mind to be a Marquis de Sade in the streets and an Immanuel Kant on the soccer pitch. And since the damage or prestige that an ambassador brings to their game is predicated on public perception of their actions, rather than metaphysical causality, *optics* are what really count here. These, we reason, are all the plausible grounds that we require to defend our claims from an objection from this angle.

Or, one could reasonably ask, 'What about celebrity artists? Why don't we chide them as harshly for their bad behavior and self-indulgent actions as we might *game* ambassadors?' Our account has an answer for this as well: simply put, artists are *not* made famous by rule-following. In fact, a rule-following artist is normally a *bad artist*. Artists are employed in a creative field: we do not necessarily expect good moral behavior from them, but rather the virtues of inventiveness and ingenuity. We *expect* that artists will break the rules, early and often: there is no standard of behavior on which we might found a duty of ambassadorship for them. So while we might experience moral outrage toward artists who behave in an immoral fashion, that outrage is not at all logically relatable to the nature of their *profession*.

'That being said,' one might continue, 'what about accountants? They're also from a rule-following profession. So why don't we consider them to be 'ambassadors of accounting' when they're caught stealing from their company's funds, and judge them more harshly on that basis?' Our answer is that we *might*, if (1) they were famous, and if (2) the value of accounting

as a practice could be brought low by their actions. However, there are no world cultures that we are aware of that celebrate accounting and accountants to anywhere near the degree that the stars of sports and games become socially elevated—so this is contingently not the case. Nevertheless, we *could* imagine a hypothetical culture wherein hotshot accountants were carried out on the adoring shoulders of their fans after a tough day of number-crunching. It is just not an extremely *close* possible world to contemplate.

Secondly, the value of accounting largely hinges on its *instrumental* payoff: the fruits made possible by its performance. So the fact that someone does the job poorly or unethically does not threaten our instrumental valuation of the activity. Games, on the other hand, are *all process, no product*. This means that if the value of the process is botched by unethical behavior, there is no further value of a product to fall back upon. So the immoral actions of game celebrities are deleterious to the institutions of their games in a way that it is both contingently and conceptually unique among other rule-following professions.

There is also a concern for *authenticity* underlying our position: we assert that celebrity players have a uniquely voluntary, uncoerced *intentional* relationship to the rules. They have rationally signed off on obeying these, and have self-identified with them via the intralusory acts that made them famous players (as opposed to infamous cheats). This is why it can be fairly claimed that game celebrities *represent* the games they play. *Generally speaking*, if you do not follow the rules you cannot succeed at the game. There is an institution of rule-obedience for game players just as there is an intuition of promising for moral agents in the work of Kant. If there is no stable institution—if cheating becomes the norm rather than an outlier behavior—then the game would break down entirely, and therefore there could not be any celebrities *of*

that game: every win would be dubiously suspect, and we could not reliably attribute value to any of its intralusory actions. It would be a reasonable concern for the spectators, or the potential players, of a badly-ambassadored game institution to ask, for example: 'Why watch cycling if all the riders are doped up?' or 'Why try to break my way into pro boxing if all the matches are fixed in advance?' These kinds of concerns demonstrate the deleterious effect of an accumulation of instances of bad ambassadorship on the institution of a sport. We can safely assume that spectator interest in a sport, as well as the interest of its potential players, largely relies on that sports' representative athletes acting in good faith, in accordance with the rulesets of their sports.

Consider Lance Armstrong: his success relied on the rules of cycling remaining a stable institution, even if he himself was not actively following them. It would have been self-defeating for him to behave immorally *if* he reasonably expected that his behavior would permanently damage or destroy the institution that enabled his success in the first place. His cheating was *parasitic* on his expectation of not getting caught, combined with his underlying belief that even if he was caught, the sport of cycling would be strong enough as an institution to weather the resultant scandal.

By this logic, our position indicates that Maradona's 'Hand of God' cheat makes soccer itself *worse*—it is *stain* on the institution of the game. By acting in bad faith and betraying the rules, Maradona betrayed the moral expectations of the fans who supported his team in the match, and also the aspirations of an indeterminate number of potential players who viewed him as an ambassador of the game. It is a testament to the enduring strength of previous acts

of dedicated ambassadorship of better players and better people than Maradona that interest in soccer largely continued unabated after that scandal.

It should be noted that fans, too, can be ambassadors of the game, but to a far lesser extent—they, too, are committed to the value of rule-governed practices and can be reasonably expected to be rule-observant in other spheres of their lives.<sup>7</sup> We can plausibly extend the duty of ambassadorship even further, to other stakeholders in the institution of the game, such as club managers and referees. For it would be very odd, to say the least, if such figures were completely unconcerned with how their actions reflected on their game of choice.

In summary: if a game celebrity's behavior gives others good reason to believe that they are not acting in good faith regarding a ruleset that they have taken an implicit vow to observe, then that is a *pro tanto* good reason for those others not to join or support that practice. This, in turn, generates additional reasons for the game celebrity not to act in bad faith—they have, in other words, a duty of ambassadorship. All of this indicates that the actions of game celebrities therefore do carry additional moral weight when compared to those of non-celebrities, or celebrities of non-rule following professions.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that moral exemplarism of the game ambassador type is reasonably justified in the specific case of game celebrities. A role of prominence is voluntary: it requires active collusion and cooperation at every step; as does the implicit acceptance of the increased ethical responsibility which accompanies such a role. No one forces a player to play a game; no



one forces a player to play that game well enough to win it; and no one forces a player to win enough of those games to become a celebrity. However, choosing to do all of these things makes a player's actions more notable, impactful, and socially relevant than if they refrained from doing so. Therefore it is not unreasonable to claim that, at the highest levels of game celebrity, additional moral duties of ambassadorship appear for the player in relation to the institution of their game.

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<sup>1</sup> See Archer and Matheson (2019) for a discussion of the ethics of admiring immoral artists.

<sup>2</sup> See Zagzebski (2017) for a contemporary account of the importance of moral exemplars in moral education and for a moral theory built upon admiration for exemplars.

<sup>3</sup> Of course these will not be the only rules they have followed on the way to stardom. They are also likely to have obeyed cultural norms and the laws of their countries. This prompts the reasonable objection: "Doesn't every kind of celebrity rise to prominence through a similar type of rule-following?", which will be addressed elsewhere, but must at least be flagged at this point.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the Lance Armstrong case and whether or not it should be considered cheating see Eric Moore (Moore 2017), and a response by Jon Pike and Sean Cordell (Pike and Cordell 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The proposed chain of duty starts with (1) the voluntary acceptance of and adherence to the ruleset of a game by a player, resulting in (2) the felicitous performance of *lusory acts* by that player, which can lead to (3) intralusory successes. Once a critical mass of the right kind of intralusory successes have been achieved by a player, (4) that player rises to game celebrity status, which (5) broadens and deepens their powers of social influence, which thereby (6) generates *de facto* game ambassadorship duties.

<sup>6</sup> Naturally, this duty extends *beyond* the furtherance of rational self-interest, and relates to the interests of others who are similarly invested in the game's institution. A crude analogy: when I backwash into my own drink, this is not necessarily an instance of a moral failure. However, when I backwash into our *shared* drink in exactly the same fashion, I have reduced your enjoyment of our mutually-held resource as a direct result of my activity, and can rightly be held morally accountable for doing so. In sport culture, this can result in a kind of 'tragedy of the football pitch commons', wherein misambassadors can easily denigrate the reputation of their game, to the disbenefit of all invested stakeholders.

<sup>7</sup> Our account helps explain the phenomenon of moral repugnance toward 'soccer hooligans': for it seems that it ought to be fundamentally out of character for anyone with a true appreciation for the rules of the sport to behave with such recklessness and disregard for social and legal rules outside of it. We might justifiably call hooligans *pseudo-fans* on our schema—for hooligans do not primarily value the game of soccer, but the occasions to brawl that it incidentally provides.