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Talent, Skill, and Celebrity

Catherine M. Robb & Alfred Archer¹

Abstract

A commonly raised criticism against celebrity culture is that it celebrates people who become famous without any connection to their skills, talents or achievements. A culture in which people become famous simply for being famous is criticized for being shallow and inauthentic. In this paper we offer a defense of celebrity by arguing against this criticism. We begin by outlining what we call the *Talent Argument*: celebrity is a negative cultural phenomenon because it creates and sustains fame without any connection to the accomplishments that arise from an expression of talent or skill. By appealing to the metaphysics of talent and skill, we argue against the Talent Argument and propose that being a celebrity requires the skills that are necessary to acquire and maintain one's status as a celebrity. A celebrity is more likely to be talented and successful in their expression of these skills, and even celebrities who are 'famous for being famous' will often display talents and skills that give rise to their fame. This means that those who critique celebrity culture should not do so by appealing to the Talent Argument. We show how our account of celebrity, talent and skill works to reject both the strong version of the Talent Argument, as well as a weaker and more plausible version of the argument we call the *Valuable Talents* argument. We conclude by noting that our analysis has demonstrated the need to explore more closely the kinds of skills that are necessary to cultivate celebrity status. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of what a celebrity is, and the values that are attached to celebrity culture.

Keywords: celebrity, fame, talent, skill.

1. Introduction

Celebrities play an increasingly important role in social life. Their public visibility and renown give them the potential to capture attention, shape public discourse, influence ethical and political decision-making, and achieve financial success. Often celebrities become famous because of their achievements, skills and talents. For example, author J.K. Rowling rose to fame due to her highly successful series of *Harry Potter* novels; singer-songwriter Taylor Swift has achieved celebrity status for her musical talents; and tennis player Serena Williams' fame followed winning numerous grand slams. Even though a celebrity's fame may originate from their success or talents, a celebrity draws attention that goes beyond their reason for being famous. A celebrity is characterized by the ability to generate what Robert van Krieken (2012, 10) has called a "surplus value," because of their ability to capture and direct attention which goes beyond the reason for their fame. J.K. Rowling's fame has given rise to scrutiny over her political views, Taylor Swift's fame has resulted in fascination with her private life, and Serena Williams' fame has provided a platform for her work in fashion and political activism.

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While a celebrity's fame is often tied to their achievements or talents, cultural commentators note a rise in celebrity culture; public interest and admiration of celebrities merely because they are celebrities. This celebrity culture is epitomized by people who become famous without any connection to their skills, talents or achievements, or where their original reason for being famous is no longer relevant for their status as a celebrity. For example, British journalist and broadcaster Piers Morgan has complained that Britain has become "a nation obsessed with talentless, pointless celebrity" (Morgan 2003). Melanie Cantor, a celebrity talent agent, similarly claims that "[e]veryone feels they have the right to fame because they know that talent is no longer required" and that "no one considers skill to be a prerequisite" (Cantor 2008). A celebrity's fame is thought to arise because their lives are (either voluntarily or involuntary) opened up as an object of public entertainment. Former White House intern Monica Lewinski's fame, for instance, was generated by the media hype surrounding her affair with President Bill Clinton, and the Kardashian family's fame originated from participation in their reality television show. As marketing and branding consultant Eli Portnoy claims, the Kardashians are the epitome of "talentless celebrities, or celebrity for celebrity's sake" (Associated Press 2017). In these cases, celebrities are considered to be 'famous for being famous,' or as American historian Daniel Boorstin has claimed, celebrities are merely "well-known for their well-knownness" (1962, 57).

The culture in which people become 'famous for being famous' is often ridiculed by critics as "inauthentic," "shallow" and "superficial" (Elliot and Boyd 2018), and as a mere "media fabrication" (Boorstin 1962). One of the main reasons cited for this negative assessment of celebrity is that their fame is devoid of any connection to successful achievements, talents or skill. In this way, being a celebrity is often contrasted with being famous: the public renown of fame requires a connection to one's accomplishments and skills (Boorstin 1962), yet being a celebrity is characterized as "fame emptied of content" (Elliot and Boyd 2018). We call this argument against celebrity culture the *Talent Argument*: celebrity is a negative cultural phenomenon because it creates and sustains fame without any connection to the accomplishments that arise from an expression of talent or skill.

In this paper, we offer a defense of celebrity by arguing against the Talent Argument. In the next section, we explain the Talent Argument in more detail, outlining three different ways in which the argument can be characterized: (i) the argument from desert, (ii) the consequences argument, and (iii) the vanity argument. In Section Three, we appeal to the metaphysics of talent and skill to argue against the Talent Argument. Given what a talent is and the way that skills are developed, we propose that being a celebrity requires the skills that are necessary to acquire and maintain one's status as a celebrity. A celebrity is more likely to be talented and successful in their expression of these skills. In Section Four we argue that those who critique celebrity culture cannot do so by appealing to the Talent Argument. Celebrities who are 'famous for being famous' will often display talents and skills that give rise to their fame. We show how our account of celebrity, talent and skill works to reject all three versions of the Talent Argument, as well as a weaker and more plausible version of the argument we call the *Valuable Talents* argument.

Finally, in Section Five we conclude that our analysis of the Talent Argument has demonstrated the need to explore more closely the kinds of skills that are necessary to cultivate celebrity status. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of what a celebrity is, and the values that are attached to celebrity culture. Importantly, we have shown that while we may critique celebrity culture for a number of important social and ethical reasons, we should not do so by claiming that a celebrity's fame is necessarily devoid of talent or skill.

2. The Talent Argument

The starting point for the Talent Argument against celebrity is the distinction between those who become famous by achieving great things and expressing their talents, and those who become famous simply for being famous. In Boorstin's (1962, ch.2) critique of celebrity culture, he argued that the rise of photography and cinema had created the manufacture of fame. While previously, only truly great individuals became famous, now celebrities can be manufactured by publicists, film studios and record labels. According to Boorstin, people used to worship heroes, those who "embody popular virtues" and whom we admire because "they reveal and elevate ourselves" (Boorstin 1962, 50). As philosopher Angie Hobbs explains, this understanding of the connection between fame, virtuous character and celebrated achievements goes back to antiquity: "the only way for an Ancient Greek to obtain glory or fame, was to do something of notable benefit to society, which was going to get talked about or discussed" (Hobbs 2011).

However, since the rise of mass media (particularly image-based media), the connection between fame, character and achievement has been replaced by the worship of celebrity, "a person who is known for his well-knownness" (Boorstin 1962, 57). Celebrities do not become famous by possessing great virtues or through their impressive accomplishments, but are created to satisfy our demand for human greatness. This is a problem according to Boorstin, as our celebration of heroes has the capacity to inspire us to expand our horizons and improve ourselves. By worshipping celebrities, though, we are simply celebrating better known versions of ourselves, as "they are nothing but ourselves in a magnifying mirror" (Boorstin 1962, 61). Rather than expanding our horizon, celebrities populate it with people like those we already know. When we imitate celebrities, we are simply imitating ourselves.

According to some theorists, this shows that fame and celebrity are not the same. Lawrence Friedman, for example, claims that to be famous is to be "well-known," while being a celebrity involves "high visibility" (1999, 28). On Friedman's account, someone may be famous without being a celebrity. He gives the example of previous Emperors of Japan who, he claims, were more well-known than anyone else in the country but who were rarely seen in public. Others draw the distinction between fame and celebrity in different ways. Elliot and Boyd contrast the two in the following way: "if fame was about the cultivation of talent, artistry and originality, celebrity embraces instead the inauthentic, performance, pastiche and parody" (2018, 22). Fame involves possessing special talents, yet "celebrity might be described as fame emptied of content, or artistry"

(ibid., 4). However the distinction is drawn, a common theme is that celebrities are those whose lives are well-known by the public, but who may not possess any special talents that are worthy of fame. Some celebrities even admit that they do not have a talent that is worthy of being celebrated. For example, in an interview with British celebrity Jodie Marsh, she stated that “there’s no point to me. I’ve got no talent. I just want to make as much money as I can, as easy as I can and have as much fun as I can doing it” (Morgan 2003).

The Talent Argument, then, objects to celebrity culture as creating and sustaining fame without any connection to great achievements or talents. Celebrity culture is one in which the connection between fame and talent has been decoupled. As journalist Amy Argetsinger has claimed, celebrity is a kind of “fame that is increasingly disconnected from the star’s success in the field for which he or she is ostensibly famous” (Argetsinger 2009). But what exactly would be wrong with celebrity being disconnected from talent? This objection to celebrity can be developed in three different ways. The first version of the argument is what we call the *Argument from Desert*. Celebrities, we might think, are those that have achieved widespread public attention and admiration they do not deserve. If we think that only those who have achieved great things or who possess great talents deserve to be well-known, then we should accept that celebrities who have not accomplished anything of note and possess no special talents do not deserve to be well-known. This may be thought to show that there is something wrong with a society in which fame is not connected to talent.

As it stands, though, this argument is not plausible. There is no reason to think that it is wrong for someone to possess something that they do not deserve. In fact, as Feldman and Skow (2019) point out, someone may even be entitled to something that they do not deserve. They support this claim with the example of a grandparent with two grandchildren, one virtuous and the other vicious. The virtuous grandchild deserves at least as much inheritance as the vicious grandchild. However, if the grandparent leaves all their inheritance to the vicious grandchild, then that grandchild is entitled to the entire inheritance. The grandparent is entitled to choose to do what they want with their inheritance and if this is what they choose then their wishes should be respected. Here, it is right to make sure that the vicious grandchild receives the whole inheritance, even though they may not deserve it. Similarly, if people choose to pay attention to the talentless, then they are entitled to do so. If this is the case, then they do not seem to do anything wrong by paying attention to celebrities, and there is nothing wrong with the celebrity possessing their fame as a result.

A more plausible version of the desert argument would be to focus on Boorstin’s claim that celebrities do not expand our horizon but rather “populate our horizon with men and women we already know” (1962, 61). Boorstin suggests that by paying attention to celebrities we make it harder to notice the genuinely great and talented. We are limited in what we can attend to and not everyone in a society can be well-known. If we devote significant amounts of public attention towards the talentless then we run the risk of overlooking those who are talented and are worth celebrating. This is a problem, as there is good reason to think that the talented are deserving of admiration. Michael Zimmerman, for example, argues that while we may not have a duty to possess any non-moral virtues, there is “a requirement to *admire* them when they are displayed” (1999, 11). And so, a

society that celebrates the talentless may fail to celebrate and admire those who possess talents and virtues of various kinds. In doing so, it would violate a duty to admire the talented and virtuous who deserve our attention.

The second version of the Talent Argument we call the *Consequences Argument*: celebrating the talentless has negative consequences. The starting point for this argument can be found in Boorstin's claim that celebrating great individuals has the capacity to inspire us and extend our horizons. One way of understanding this claim is that admiration, celebration and interest in the virtuous or talented can inspire us to emulate them. According to several psychological studies, admiring someone often leads to a desire to emulate them (see Algoe & Haidt 2009; Thrash & Elliot 2004; van de Ven et al. 2019). If the people we admire possess no talents, then when we emulate them we will be trying to become like those who possess no talents. Admiration has also been claimed to lead people to defer to those they admire (Velleman 2009) and to promote the values that they view the admired person as possessing (Archer 2019). Again, admiring the talentless will lead us to defer to and promote the values of people who have no talents. This may be a bad thing in itself, however, it appears even worse if we think that we may be admiring these people at the expense of the talented. If our admiration were directed instead towards the talented then this would lead us to try to become more talented ourselves, to defer to those with special skills and to promote the values that they possess. Disconnecting admiration from talent, then, gives rise to negative consequences for society.

The final version of the Talent Argument we call the *Vanity Argument*. The core idea of this argument can be found in Elliot and Page's claim that "celebrity, at both the institutional and individual levels, is a shallow, superficial, decorative or inauthentic cultural form or figure" (2018, 7). If celebrities are considered to be talentless, superficial and inauthentic in this way, then there is good reason to think that they possess the vice of vanity. According to Aristotle (2009, 39), empty vanity is the vice of desiring honour where it is not deserved. Celebrities are therefore those who seek to be well-known but not as a result of possessing any special talents or having achieved great things. This means that a celebrity's fame would be grounded in empty vanity and receiving honour where it is not deserved. Similarly, the public who celebrate such people may also be said to possess a vice, as they admire those who are not worthy of admiration. A virtuous person is someone who has the appropriate emotional responses to other people, and so would only admire those who are admirable rather than those who are vain and talentless.

We have outlined three versions of the Talent Argument. Disconnecting fame and talent may lead us to fail to celebrate those who deserve it, have negative consequences for society, and be a sign of vice. These three versions of the argument are not in competition with each other and should instead be seen as mutually reinforcing. All three versions rest on the same assumption: that celebrities are famous for reasons that have nothing to do with their talent, skills, or achievement.

Before we proceed it is worth clarifying the limitations of this argument. The claim that celebrity culture decouples fame from talents, skills, and achievements does not rule out the possibility that some celebrities may be talented, skillful, or have achieved great things. Rather, the claim is that celebrity status is not linked to these

worthy attributes. Someone may gain initial fame because of a talent they possess, such as being an excellent footballer. But when they become a celebrity, the focus will move beyond the footballer's sporting abilities and onto their private life: what clothes they wear, what car they drive, and who they are dating. Similarly, people who are famous purely for being famous, may also possess some special talent. Perhaps they are incredibly skilled at doing Sudoku puzzles or baking bread. But this is not the reason why they are in the public eye. The point then is not that celebrity culture is one in which everyone in the public eye is devoid of talent. Rather, celebrity culture is one in which being in the public eye is not closely connected to the possession of skills, talents, or achievements. However, as we will argue in the next section, being a celebrity is closely connected to the possession of certain skills and talents.

3. Talents and Skills

Our objection to the Talent Argument is that being a celebrity does have the potential to involve talent, even if there is no other reason for a celebrity's fame. For our objection to hold, we need to offer an account of what a talent is, and the way in which celebrities can be considered as talented. According to Robb (2021), a talent is a kind of ability for the excellent development and maintenance of a particular skill, denoting the way in which that skill is successfully, reliably, and excellently developed and expressed under an appropriate set of conditions. For example, gymnast Simone Biles is talented in virtue of the fact that she has the ability to excellently develop and maintain a skill for gymnastics, and successfully and reliably expresses that skill when she intends to do so, and when under the right circumstances. This account allows for the fact that Biles is still a talented gymnast even though in some cases she might not have the intention to excellently express her skill, for instance, if she is not feeling well and decides to perform with less intensity. Biles is also still talented even if she has the intention to excellently express her skill, but the circumstances get in the way (for instance, if she is performing on faulty equipment, or as was the case in the 2020 Olympics, she gets a case of the 'twisties' during a routine).

The key feature of what makes Biles a 'talented' gymnast as opposed to merely a 'skilled' one, is that she develops, maintains and expresses her skill for gymnastics *excellently*. What counts as 'excellent' skill development will depend on the domain of the skill, so that for example, the excellent development involved in being a skilled gymnast will differ from the excellent development involved in playing the piano. Across all skill domains, however, one consistent marker of excellent skill development is the way in which the skill comes 'naturally' to those who are talented, with less effort, practice and support needed to reach the same standard of skill when compared to those who are 'non-talented.' A talented person will usually need to practice less, put in less effort, and be given less support from teachers or coaches to reach the same level of skill as someone who is non-talented.

This does not mean that Biles will necessarily practice less than a non-talented gymnast. The opposite seems to be true; we value Biles' success partly because we know she invests time and effort into honing and practicing her skill. But for someone who is less talented than Biles, to reach the same level of skill they will need to invest more time, effort and practice. What might take Biles one year to perfect, may take the non-talented or less-talented gymnast two or three. In this way, determining whether someone is talented is comparative: someone can be more or less talented than someone else, and counts as talented only in comparison to others (Robb 2021, 8090-1).

The excellent skill development that comes with being talented also has to be differentiated from the performance of what is often called 'fluke success' (ibid., 8094). It might be the case that someone achieves success at a particular skill without the practice or development that would often be considered necessary for performing that skill. For example, even though someone may never have practiced the skills involved in playing basketball, they might throw a basketball towards a basketball hoop, and score. Even though this would be a successful throw, this does not indicate any skill or talent for playing basketball. Instead, it would count as an unskilled instance of lucky success. A talent is not this kind of fluke success but involves the excellent and reliable development of a particular skill set.

Ruling out fluke success as part of what makes a 'talent' also tracks the way in which skills are understood to involve intentional action. On one influential account of what skills are, Ellen Fridland (2014) characterizes skills as an ability to put one's knowledge into action in a way that demonstrates "strategic control" over that action. This strategic control is explained as the "exact, nuanced ways" in which someone skilled "modifies, adjusts, revises and guides" her actions, in response "to both expected and unpredictable environmental circumstances" (ibid., 2730-1). This means that a skill is not something that just happens to someone because of luck, but is the demonstration of control over one's action in response to different conditions. For example, part of what makes Biles a skilled gymnast is the way in which she can control her body to perform certain actions on different sets of apparatus, at different times, and in different physical environments. This kind of control can be developed, maintained, and improved through practice (ibid., 2732), and is also something at which one can be better or worse than others.

Given this explanation of what talents and skills are, the 'talent' of being a celebrity would be the ability to excellently develop and maintain the set of skills that are necessary to acquire and sustain celebrity status. An account of celebrity as a talent would therefore need to meet three desiderata, explaining: (i) what counts as the relevant skills that constitute the skill-domain of 'being a celebrity,' (ii) what counts as the excellent development and maintenance of those skills in comparison to others, and (iii) how to differentiate celebrity status that comes from 'fluke success' as opposed to excellent skill development.

The question of whether being a celebrity involves skill is not explicitly discussed in the celebrity studies literature. However, in the analyses on celebrity experience and culture there are a few implicit suggestions for what might count as the relevant set of skills. We suggest that these skills can be broadly

characterized as interpersonal skills and come in three different varieties: (i) cultural literacy, (ii) the development of para-social relationships with one's fans, and (iii) coping strategies for the negative effects of fame. In what follows, we will explain each of these three celebrity-skills.

To begin with, Chris Rojek claims that the development of celebrity culture is broadly constituted by what he calls “cultural literacy” (2012, 33). This literacy involves the ability to create and continuously achieve high visibility in the public eye, making use of different skills that function together in the name of public relations (see also Driessens 2013, 543). These skills include: “brand management” or “impression management,” which is the ability to shape the way one's public image is received and shared by others; “exposure management,” which is the ability to determine the appropriate type and amount of exposure that one's public image receives; and “social transformation,” which is the ability to transform one's public image in anticipation of the public's values and desires (Rojek 2012, 27-34). This means that the success of achieving celebrity status depends on how someone shapes and shares their public image, and the extent to which they can continuously transform this image to generate public attention and interest. As Sharon Marcus argues, “celebrity culture is a drama involving three equally powerful groups: media producers, members of the public and celebrities themselves” (2019, 3). To maintain one's fame, celebrities need to constantly navigate the interaction between these three groups.

There is also a very clear marker for what counts as the *excellent* development and maintenance of this cultural literacy, and so who counts as talented. Those who are talented at developing and sharing their public image in a way that generates high visibility will become celebrities. Those who are more talented at exposure management and social transformation will continue to be celebrities for a longer period of time and generate higher amounts of public interest than those that are less talented. A talent is characterized as *excellent* skill development and maintenance, requiring less support and effort to acquire and express a skill than those who are non-talented. And so, talented celebrities will find that these skills come naturally to them, requiring less support from others, and allowing them to expend less effort in developing and utilizing these skills.

In many cases, it is clear that celebrities have been given or have hired for themselves public relations advisors to manage their public image. The prevalence of these intermediaries might lead some to think that celebrities who make use of them are not expressing the relevant cultural literacy required to be a celebrity, but instead it is the intermediary that uses their own skills on behalf of the celebrity. We offer two responses to this criticism. First, the fact that some celebrities rely heavily on public relations managers does not rule out that other celebrities may manage their public image more independently using their own cultural literacy. On this point, Rojek explains that while some celebrities may employ intermediaries to manage their public image, there are other celebrities who are able to do so themselves or with comparably less support (2012, 30). Rojek gives the contrasting examples of Jade Goody, a British reality television personality, whose celebrity status was carefully constructed and managed by third-party advisors, as opposed to current social media influencers, who construct their own public brand with very little resources and often no support from public relation

intermediaries (ibid, 32-3). Although public relations managers are often used to generate and sustain celebrity status, a talented celebrity will be one who is more likely to demonstrate their own cultural literacy and require less support from these intermediaries.

The second response to the criticism that celebrities rely on skilled intermediaries rather than exhibiting their own cultural literacy, is that even if a celebrity does utilize public relations managers, there are important skills involved in negotiating and implementing the advice that is given. Intermediaries and managers may offer advice, put a celebrity in contact with the right people, or stage events on behalf of the celebrity, but there is skill involved in judging whether to trust and follow the advice that is given, and how to implement and actualize the public image that is being created for them. Skilled celebrities will be ones that have the discernment to judge whether the given advice will work to promote their public image, and will be able to implement that advice successfully. The latter might be particularly challenging for a celebrity whose public persona is far removed from who they are in their private life. It takes skill for a celebrity to successfully negotiate how to integrate their public persona with their private life, navigating potential experiences of alienation, estrangement and isolation (see Giles 2000).

This means that in many cases, even if a celebrity is surrounded by managers, intermediaries and advisors, there is still good reason to consider them as displaying their own cultural literacy. For example, celebrity socialite Paris Hilton explains that her celebrity status was self-made, something for which she demonstrated natural ability: “When I started my career, there was no social media [...]. I didn’t have a stylist. I didn’t have a publicist. I did this all on my own [...].” (Simonetti 2022). Even though Hilton was advised by managers, she often ignored this advice and independently made successful decisions that would go on to generate her celebrity status. For instance, against her managers’ advice Hilton decided to take the lead role in the reality television show *The Simple Life*, which ended up being highly successful and creating a brand identity that Hilton would capitalize on for the rest of her career. Hilton also attributes her celebrity status to her ability to reshape and rebrand her public image, and to set trends. As she describes, she has “always been a person who sees into the future” and was “always ahead of [her] time” (ibid.). This has been exemplified by Hilton’s highly successful foray into crypto currency, releasing her own collection of autobiographical NFTs on the platform Origin Protocol, for which she is an advisor as well as investor (Akhtaar 2022). Paris Hilton is better at being a celebrity than most others, demonstrated by the extent and longevity of her celebrity status. Being a celebrity comes naturally to Hilton and involves interpersonal skills that are honed and revised given her cultural environment.

In her study into the nature of Grace Jones’ celebrity status, Hannah Yelin (2021) has similarly described being a celebrity as the ability to generate high visibility through social transformation, adapting and refining one’s public image as a result of public expectation and cultural values. This social transformation is not merely a result of media interference or public relations intermediaries. Instead, Grace Jones is considered as having “deliberate” and “self-directed” agency over the construction of her public image (2021, 120). Yelin

considers Jones as exhibiting an ability to “perform” being a celebrity, involving a “deliberately constructed set of actions and behaviours” (ibid., 121). Jones seems to be particularly skilled at these actions and behaviours, staging self-made dramatic events in the public eye, and transforming her public image in order to be relatable to a variety of different audiences. Importantly, Jones is attributed as constructing her celebrity status by herself, in a way that came easily and naturally to her, and with little support from public relations managers. This points to Jones being a talented celebrity, developing and maintaining her cultural literacy to generate long-lasting high visibility in the public eye, in a way that out-performs others’ attempts to do so.

Another way in which celebrities utilize interpersonal skills to develop and maintain their celebrity status is to foster a sense of connection with their audiences (Barron 2015, 26; Dyer 1982). If celebrities do this successfully, then they will cultivate ‘para-social’ relationships with their fans (Horton and Wohl 1956).² This kind of relationship is one in which members of the public form a non-reciprocal attachment to a celebrity they do not know, believing that they do indeed know the celebrity intimately based on interactions with the celebrity’s public persona. As Rojek claims, this para-social relationship rests on “presumed intimacy between the presenter and the audience” (2012, 125). This intimacy is formed, Rojek argues, due to the celebrity’s ability to represent and mirror the values of the public, so that their fans will recognize themselves in the celebrity’s public persona and consider themselves to be emotionally connected to the celebrity (ibid., 128, 134). One way in which this recognition plays out is through the example of chat show hosts, such as Oprah Winfrey and Graham Norton, who brand themselves as being ‘one of the people,’ and successfully develop a connection with strangers in their audience. Being able to present oneself in this way is a skill: it requires practice, to say the right things, wear the right clothes, gesture and behave in the right way; it is sensitive to context, depending on one’s audience and cultural environment; and it is an ability that someone can be better at than others, with some celebrities getting it wrong and receiving public backlash, whilst others succeed and receive public admiration.

Fostering and developing para-social relationships with one’s fans is not only the domain of chat-show hosts. Successful celebrities will usually be ones that develop close connections with their fans, who consider themselves to be emotionally attached and intimately invested in the celebrity’s life. A good example of this is pop-singer Britney Spears’s fan base, who call themselves ‘The Britney Army’ and are emotionally invested in the well-being of Spears, especially during her thirteen years living under conservatorship (Hopkins 2022). The ‘army’ protested the conservatorship on her behalf, generated awareness through social media, and raised funds to finance court documents and rallies. Importantly, these fans do not know Spears personally, yet their dedicated support for Spears’s well-being comes from their para-social emotional relationship between fan and celebrity.

² For an exploration of the ethical issues arising from para-social relationships, see Medelli’s (2022) contribution to this special issue.

Many celebrities have similarly dedicated fan bases, such as Lady Gaga’s ‘Little Monsters,’ Taylor Swift’s ‘Swifties,’ Meryl Streep’s ‘Streepers,’ and Eminem’s ‘Stans.’ This kind of dedication and intimate connection from fans cultivates and maintains the celebrity status of a celebrity. It creates loyalty amongst fans and generates continuous public visibility. By developing a para-social relationship with one’s fans, celebrities often have more control over their public image and the way it is exposed in the media. As a result, cultivating para-social relationships is an important way to develop and maintain celebrity status. Celebrities who are more skilled at doing so, cultivating the illusion of close intimacy, recognizability and emotional connection with the public, are more likely to generate high visibility and maintain their celebrity status. A celebrity who can develop these para-social relationships more successfully than others demonstrates a talent for the skills involved in fostering these relationships.³

Being a celebrity is also constituted by skills that are necessary to cope with the negative effects of being famous. Due to being in the public eye, celebrities are often subject to media and public animosity. In a study conducted by Ouvrein et al. (2021), it is shown that celebrities are often the victims of media aggression and bullying, and need to develop their own coping mechanisms to deal with this, such as developing a ‘thick skin’ and ‘positive thinking.’ Whilst it may seem as if these coping strategies involve character traits or virtues that just come with a person’s personality, the psychology literature increasingly understands the ability to cope with negative social interactions as a set of skills that can be developed, practiced and honed through attention and revision (Duhacheck 2005; Fiske & Yamamoto 2005; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck 2006). Positive thinking is considered as a skill that can be learnt, practiced and maintained (Scheier & Carver 1993; Sergeant & Mongrain 2014), and having a ‘thick skin’ is considered to be constituted by a set of interpersonal skills, such as assertiveness and self-confidence, that can be learnt and practiced (Duckworth 2016). For a celebrity to maintain their celebrity status, they will often need to develop and maintain these interpersonal skills, and there are some celebrities who are better at doing so than others.

In this section we have suggested that being a celebrity is constituted by a set of interpersonal skills that are necessary for developing and maintaining celebrity status. This means that a celebrity can be considered as ‘talented’ at ‘being a celebrity’ if they develop and express these skills excellently in comparison to others. Our explanation of the talents that constitute being a celebrity has also met the three explanatory desiderata we set out above. First, we described the skills that constitute the skill-domain of ‘being a celebrity’: (i) cultural literacy, being able to shape and transform one’s public image and carefully manage the exposure of that image, (ii) developing para-social relationships with one’s fans, and (iii) developing coping strategies to manage the negative effects of fame. Second, there is a clear indicator for what counts as excellent development and maintenance of these interpersonal skills in comparison to others: those who are better at developing and

³ See for example the study by Click, Lee & Holladay (2013), analyzing the exemplary way in which Lady Gaga fosters an “intense” relationship with her fans.

maintaining these skills will become celebrities and maintain the longevity of their celebrity status. When it comes to coping with the negative effects of fame, those who are better at developing and maintaining successful coping strategies will be more likely to sustain their celebrity status by continuously generating exposure of their public image. Importantly, those who are ‘talented’ at being a celebrity will develop and maintain these interpersonal skills without the need for as much effort or support from public relations intermediaries in comparison to those who are non-talented.

Finally, given the way in which these interpersonal skills are characterized, it is possible to differentiate celebrity status that originates from lucky success as opposed to an expression of skill. While it is possible for someone to achieve instant fame, perhaps by winning a television talent contest or posting a viral video on social media, this would not count as a skilled development and maintenance of one’s celebrity status. The skills involved in being a celebrity are intentional and honed with experience and practice in response to one’s changing cultural environment. Achieving celebrity status through lucky success is of course possible. However, to maintain the longevity of this celebrity status requires a skillful demonstration of cultural literacy, the development of para-social relationships and social coping strategies. This is not to say that *all* celebrities are talented at developing and maintaining their celebrity status. A celebrity is talented at ‘being a celebrity’ to the extent that they excellently develop and maintain the relevant skills that are necessary to become a celebrity and sustain that celebrity status. Some celebrities may be more skilled than others, and some celebrities may not have any of these skills and so employ third party intermediaries who can do the work for them. But those celebrities who find the skills that constitute ‘being a celebrity’ come naturally to them, cannot be considered as ‘talentless’ as the Talent Argument objects. Instead, the interpersonal skills that are necessary to develop and maintain celebrity status are ones at which celebrities may be very talented.

4. Rejecting the Talent Argument

We have argued that being a celebrity is not disconnected from talent in the way that the Talent Argument assumes. Critics who condemn celebrity culture as being one in which fame and talent are disconnected rest their arguments on a mistaken assumption that ‘being a celebrity’ is something at which someone cannot be talented. Instead, in order to succeed as a celebrity one will need to be talented at developing and maintaining the necessary interpersonal skills required for creating and sustaining their celebrity status, even if there is no other reason for their fame. As we suggested in Section Two, the Talent Argument has three different versions. In this section, we will highlight how our explanation of the skills and talents that constitute being a celebrity works to reject all three versions of the Talent Argument.

The first variety of the Talent Argument is the *Argument from Desert*: because celebrity is not connected to talent, celebrities do not deserve the widespread public attention and admiration that they receive because of their fame, and they detract from the attention that should be bestowed upon those who are talented.

However, we have argued that being a celebrity does involve skill and talent, and as such, a successful celebrity who is able to develop and sustain their celebrity status using these skills is worthy of public attention. This is not just because the celebrity exhibits a successful talent or skill, but because the skills that constitute ‘being a celebrity’ are valuable themselves, especially in a cultural environment in which success is measured by the commodification and marketing of services and resources. Understanding and predicting one’s cultural environment and using this to make visible and shape one’s public image is a skill that many consider to be worthy of admiration and financial reward.

For example, even though journalist Jenni Murray considers glamour model Katie Price’s fame to be grounded in the immoral objectification of the female body, Murray does admire Price’s ability to sustain her status as a celebrity. Murray writes that as Price’s modelling career was coming to an end, she had to find novel ways to stay in the public eye and provide a living for herself and her children. Price is described as “hard-working” with “masses of canny intelligence” and a “determination to pick herself up and dust herself down” (Murray 2012). Here Murray implies that Price’s celebrity status is maintained as a result of her coping strategies to deal with the negative effects of her fame, and her cultural ‘intelligence’ that enables her to find new trends and create novel ways to raise her public profile. Similarly, reality television celebrity Patti Stanger has claimed that she and other reality television stars deserve more respect, not just for their work on television programs, but for their ability to create a public image and sustain their celebrity status. Stanger claims that to be a celebrity “[y]ou have to wow the crowd. And that isn’t easy. Fame is time and work. You have to have a work ethic” (Entis 2016).

And so not only do some celebrities deserve their fame because they demonstrate a skill and perhaps even a talent for ‘being a celebrity,’ but the skills that constitute ‘being a celebrity’ are themselves worthy of admiration. This brings us to the second variety of the Talent Argument, the *Consequences Argument*: celebrating people in a way that is not connected to their talents has bad consequences, as this will come at the expense of those who truly deserve our attention and admiration. This is particularly worrying because admiration, as explained in Section Two, leads to a desire to emulate, defer to, and promote the values of those we admire. Those who admire the non-talented will therefore be likely to emulate, defer to, and promote the values of the talented. There is good reason to think that this would lead to bad consequences for society. However, as we have argued, being a celebrity does have the potential to involve being talented at a set of skills that are necessary for developing and sustaining one’s celebrity status. And these skills are valuable and admirable, constituted by an understanding of cultural trends and values, social skills that allow for a connection with others even if they do not know you, and coping strategies that help when faced with negative social challenges. Emulating and promoting the value of those who possess these interpersonal skills can be seen as providing positive value for society, which is why these skills are often included in educational curricula (see Hirsch 1988).

The third variety of the Talent Argument is the *Vanity Argument*: celebrities who seek fame without being talented or achieving great success worthy of that fame, possess the vice of vanity. Similarly, those who

celebrate such people may also be said to possess a vice, as they give attention and admiration to those who do not deserve it. However, as we have argued, being a successful celebrity requires that one be skilled at being a celebrity, and this means that their celebrity status is indeed worthy of attention and admiration. Given that the cultivation and expression of our skills and talents is usually considered to be prudentially and socially valuable (Robb 2021, 8085-6), the manifestation and expression of a talent for ‘being a celebrity’ is not a vice but a positive expression of one’s skills and abilities. In this way, seeking fame might just be the appropriate expression of a certain set of skills which lend themselves to ‘being a celebrity.’

All three versions of the Talent Argument are grounded on the assumption that celebrity is unconnected to talent. However, as we have argued, successful celebrities may indeed likely be talented at ‘being a celebrity,’ cultivating and expressing their skills for cultural literacy, the development of para-social relationships with the public, and utilizing coping strategies for the negative effects of fame. So, if we are to critique celebrity and the rise of celebrity culture, we cannot do so by using the Talent Argument, assuming that there is no connection between celebrity and talent.

In response to our objection, critics of celebrity culture might put forward a weaker, but perhaps more plausible version of Talent Argument, which we call the *Valuable Talents* argument. This argument is one which accepts that being a celebrity may require talent, but that this talent is for skills and abilities that are not valuable or worth celebrating. When we give our attention and admiration to celebrities in virtue of their talents, this means that we would be celebrating a talent for ‘being a celebrity,’ which is just to give attention to and admire a talent for personal branding and marketing, and public relations.

This argument is made possible by the fact that talents by themselves are not considered valuable just in virtue of being talents. As Robb claims, it is possible “to be talented at a skill that is itself immoral or used for ethically dubious ends” (2021, 8099). The main idea behind the argument is that even if celebrities are talented, talents by themselves are not valuable. What makes a talent valuable is the content of the skill, and the way in which the skills are used and expressed. And according to the Valuable Talents argument, the talent or skill for ‘being a celebrity’ is not valuable.

The argument has two versions. First, it could be claimed that the skills involved in a talent for being a celebrity are not worthy of celebration because they are immoral or ethically dubious, and as such, we ought not to promote the development or expression of these skills. However, as we have already explained above, the skills involved in being a celebrity are by themselves considered valuable, and worthy of promotion and celebration. Of course, sometimes a skill can be used for immoral ends, for example, when a celebrity uses their para-social bonds with their fans to promote slander or harmful behavior. However, this does not mean that the skill itself is immoral, but rather that the development of these skills is used to promote acts or behaviors that are considered immoral.

It could be argued in response to this that the skills involved in being a celebrity may be *more likely* to be used for immoral ends than other skills, and so ought not to be developed or celebrated. However, this is

not the case. When it comes to the immorality of skill development and expression, any skill has the potential to be used for divisive ends, but this does not mean that the skill itself is unethical. For example, a skill for archery may be used to win the Olympic gold medal or to harm another human being, and a skill for acting can be used to create unique theatrical art, or to maliciously deceive those around you. The skills involved in being a celebrity can be used for immoral ends, perhaps manipulating the public's trust or promoting social polarization, but they are also likely to promote social cohesion and social well-being. This can be seen in the example of celebrities who use their cultural literacy and ability to develop para-social bonds as a way to foster valuable forms of community for their fans, such as Britney Spears during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hess 2020) and Lady Gaga's message of self-acceptance amongst her 'Little Monsters' (Click, Lee & Holladay 2013).

It is also important to note that this version of the argument cannot be the claim that being a celebrity lends itself to be used for immoral ends. Instead, the argument is that the *skills* involved in cultivating and sustaining one's celebrity status are more likely to be used for immoral ends. The former argument is not a critique of the skills and talents involved in being a celebrity, but a critique of celebrity culture more generally. It might be that being a celebrity or celebrity culture can be critiqued for various reasons, but the claim that celebrities are talentless should not be one of them.

The second version of the Valuable Talents argument is the claim that even if the skills involved in a talent for being a celebrity are worthy of celebration and promotion, they detract attention from the celebration and promotion of skills that are *more* valuable. As Josh Halberstrom has argued, a desire for fame is not wrong in itself, but it becomes wrong when this desire is pursued at the expense of other more important values (1984, 99). This might happen for two reasons. First, it might be that a celebrity is so focused on cultivating their celebrity status that they neglect the (more valuable) reason that made them famous in the first place. For example, celebrity musicians may be so concerned with gaining public support that they write music that is more accessible or 'likeable' to a general public audience yet lacks the distinctive musical integrity and style that was representative of their original musical talent. This critique has been made of, for example, Duke Ellington, Bob Dylan, and Lucian Pavarotti (Nicolay 2017). In these examples, the celebrity's musical talent is considered more valuable than their talent for being a celebrity, and so it is undesirable when the talent for being a celebrity overshadows and is prioritized over the original more valuable talent for creating great music.

The further reason why celebrating and promoting the skills involved in being a celebrity may detract from more valuable skills, is due to the public's attention being limited. The public can only give attention and admiration to so many people: as information theorists have argued, an age of informational abundance makes attention a scarce resource (Simon 1971; Davenport & Beck 2001). In the age of the internet and social media, there are plenty of people whose lives we could attend to. If we choose to give our attention and admiration to those who are only talented or skilled at being a celebrity, then this detracts our attention and admiration from those whose skills and talents are deemed to be more valuable. While there may be nothing intrinsically wrong

with paying attention to those with a talent for celebrity, this may become problematic if it comes at the expense of celebrating the lives of those with more valuable talents.

There are two ways to respond to this version of the Valuable Talents argument. First, as we have already argued, the skills involved in being a celebrity are valuable in their own right. Similarly, we have also argued that is valuable to admire and pay attention to celebrities who develop and demonstrate these skills. For example, Lady Gaga’s skill to shape her public persona and enable para-social bonds with fans has created a social community for those who do not fit into mainstream culture (Click, Lee & Holladay 2013), and many celebrities use their cultural literacy to bring awareness to ethical issues and promote social justice (see McCurdy 2012; Bennett 2011; Duvall & Heckemeyer 2018).

Although the skills involved in developing and sustaining one’s celebrity status are valuable and can be used for valuable ends, it is another question entirely whether these skills are *less* valuable than others. To answer this question, we would need to compare the value of different and sometimes competing skills, and to do this, we would first need to decide on a scale of measurement that would be used to compare these competing values. As the literature on value comparison makes clear, this is a complex and controversial issue, and it is often the case that many values are incomparable or incommensurable (Chang 1998). Would we measure the value of a skill by the financial rewards it brings, or the way it might work to promote social justice? Perhaps a skill is valuable just in virtue of the personal flourishing it brings the skilled agent, or the way in which the skill demonstrates genius and creativity? To claim that the skills involved in being a celebrity are less valuable than other skills, would involve a comparative evaluation of not only the value of the skills themselves and the way that they are used to promote the good, but the way that this value is measured.

This means that the most plausible version of the Valuable Talents argument does not negate the value of the skills and talents that constitute being a celebrity, but critiques way in which celebrity status is valued and promoted in comparison to other aspects of our social culture. This argument is no longer about talents and skills, but it is a comparative social critique questioning the value of celebrity culture in comparison to other aspects of our society that are deemed to be more worthy of celebration and promotion. It may be that being a celebrity, or celebrity culture more generally, can be criticized for a variety of reasons, but what we argue here is that these reasons should not rest on the assumption that being a celebrity does not involve talent or skill, and that these talents and skills are not valuable in their own right.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have defended celebrity culture against the Talent Argument, which criticizes celebrity culture for disconnecting fame from talent. As such, it is argued that celebrities do not deserve their fame (the Argument from Desert), that paying attention to and admiring celebrities gives rise to negative social consequences (the Consequences Argument), and that being a celebrity is a vice (the Argument from Vice).

However, we have argued that there is a connection between talent and celebrity, constituted by a distinct set of skills: (i) cultural literacy, (ii) the development of para-social relationships, and (iii) the use of coping strategies to manage the negative effects of fame. A celebrity is a talented celebrity insofar as they excellently develop and maintain the relevant skills that are necessary to become a celebrity and sustain that celebrity status. This means celebrity culture should not be critiqued on the assumption that it has no connection to achievement, skill, or talent.

We have also responded to the weaker yet more plausible version of the Talent Argument, which we have called the Valuable Talents argument. This argument accepts that being a celebrity involves skills and talents but claims that these skills and talents should not be celebrated or promoted because they (i) are not valuable, or (ii) detract from the celebration and promotion of more valuable skills and talents. We have shown that the skills that constitute being a celebrity are valuable and worthy of celebration and promotion. However, to claim that the skills that constitute being a celebrity are *less* valuable than other skills, is just to critique the way that celebrity status is valued and promoted in comparison to other aspects of our social culture. This is no longer an argument negating celebrity on the basis of valuable skills and talents, but to question and critique celebrity culture in general.

There are other reasons why celebrity culture can be criticized that do not rest on a claim that celebrities are talentless. For example, celebrity culture has been considered to promote simplistic and reductive assessments of people (Archer and Matheson 2021), to decouple epistemic power and expertise (Archer et al 2020), to have damaging psychological effects for the celebrities involved (Lilti 2017, ch.5), and to legitimate capitalist ideology (Dubord 1983; Marshall 1997). While we don't have the space to explore these criticisms here, it is worth noting that our rejection of the Talent Argument does not undermine any of these alternative arguments. Being a celebrity involves skills for which some celebrities are more talented than others, but we still might have good reason to reject celebrity culture for other reasons. As our analysis has highlighted, before we accept these reasons, we need to explore more closely the kinds of skills that are involved in becoming and continuing to be a celebrity. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of what a celebrity is, the values attached to celebrity culture, and the connection between celebrity and fame.

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