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**A Caricature of Intimacy: Online Fan Communities and
Intimacy Between Strangers**

Christine A. James

Abstract

In the 1952 film *Singing in the Rain*, the song "Lucky Star" described portals being opened on earth so that fans and celebrities could co-mingle in celestial bliss. With the advent of the internet, such a portal opened wide. In the mid-1990s celebrity websites and unofficial fansites kept fans informed about their favorite celebrity's latest projects, and often created communities between fans themselves. Much more than a 1960-1970's style fan newsletter, the internet gave fans a feeling of intimacy, but a mediated intimacy. In the last two years, Twitter has provided a number of celebrities with a place to update fans and "tweet" back and forth an innumerable number of times in any given day. This accentuates the intimacy to such a level that it becomes a "caricature" – the minute-to-minute updates accentuate the illusion that the fan "knows" the celebrity, but the distance and mediation are still carefully maintained. What are the philosophical implications of such relationships between fans and celebrities? Are fangirls and fanboys merely in love with the feeling of being in love, a modern day counterexample to Plato's *Gorgias*? Should one employ an ethic of care between fans and celebrities, or should one apply an ethics of justice approach? Do fans "owe" celebrities a certain amount of distance and respect, for example, should they refrain from patronizing celebrity stalker paparazzi websites? If a fan chooses to spend years engaging in website creation and maintenance for their favorite star, does that star then owe the fan something in return, in the sense of reciprocal Kantian duties? If we return to the example of *Singing in the Rain*, it quickly becomes clear that an Aristotelian approach involving moderation of the appetites is necessary. At first, Kathy Selden disingenuously pretends she doesn't know who the star, Don Lockwood, is. The song "Lucky Star", in which she confesses the extent of her fan obsession, was cut out of the original theatrical release of the film. What makes Kathy Selden an exemplary fan is the way she moderates her desires and lives out the Golden Mean – helping Don Lockwood in saving his film *The Dueling Cavalier*, but intending to end their liaison when it becomes clear that her own career and talents would be

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misused. Fan-Celebrity relationships on the internet would benefit from this type of Aristotelian moderation.

Key Words: social networking, fandom, erotomania, de Clérambault's syndrome, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Plato, love, intimacy.

If you do a search on social networking site Twitter for any celebrity's @ replies, you'll notice that every so often, there is a set of messages from one fan. The tiny little avatar image of the sender, if only one message is sent, will remain alone. But when more than one message is sent in the span of a few hours (often the case with an enthusiastic fan), the avatar photo will have a connected photo in the lower right corner of the celebrity who the fan was tweeting, even if the celebrity never responds. If you click on the text below one of the messages, text which says "Show Conversation", all of the tweets sent by the fan will open in a drop-down, and a question will appear at the bottom: "Why are all these messages from *the fan's Twittername*?" If you click on the question, an optimistic message appears, implying that perhaps there was an actual conversation between the two parties, rather than a one-sided soliloquy professing adoration.

1. Social Networking: Portals for Mortals

This is an attempt to give a fuller answer to that immortal Twitter question, "Why are all these messages from *the fan's Twittername*?" We are all probably familiar with "stalker" fans, such as those fans who victimized Jodie Foster, Rebecca Shaeffer, and David Letterman. But the past fifteen years has added two new dimensions to the dynamics of celebrities and fans. The advent of the internet, especially the popularity of constant and immediate Tweets and status updates, and the commodification of paparazzi photos of celebrities, have created an atmosphere in which an illusion of intimacy between celebrity and fan has become not only common, but also seen as a necessary marketing tool key to the celebrity's success. In this context, the celebrity walks a fine line between revealing too much, and not sharing enough so that the "fan" can feel a sense of connection.

So too must the fan walk a fine line between being interested in the celebrity's life and upcoming projects, and going too far into a phase of feeling too much investment in the celebrity's career or personal life. In the early days of Hollywood, fan magazines and publicists had a close relationship, so much so that fan magazines would usually only print stories depicting the accepted, "studio-approved" stories about celebrities. Now, paparazzi chase celebrities in an attempt to catch them in unflattering

personal moments, to catch them in a personal situation, to create a media moment. The internet provides celebrities themselves with a direct means of communication with fans, in some cases this is beneficial to their careers, or a way for the celebrity them self to control the “lead.”

The liminal economies at work in these relationships are complex. Paparazzi and celebrities will often form a unique bond or relationship, and celebrities who give paparazzi photo opportunities will often be more willing to sell photos that are flattering to that celebrity. In turn, the fans will frequent paparazzi websites, where the number of “hits” increase the profits of the website owners. Even if the fans are not buying tabloid magazines, they inadvertently benefit the paparazzi simply by making the websites where paparazzi have sold their photos more popular and viewed, and attractive to advertisers. In terms of social networking sites like Twitter, some celebrities engage in financial relationships with the social networking site, promising to post updates regularly and mention their participation in the social networking site during interviews on television.

As the situation of fan-celebrity-mass media-social networking is so complex, any effort to derive moral obligations for the participants will be limited by what Kant would call “mixed motivations.” The situation gives mutual benefits to both the fan and the celebrity, yet increases the risk.

The relationship between fan and celebrity has been romanticized in many films, perhaps one of the most charming is “Singing in the Rain” (1951). Directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, the film features Debbie Reynolds as Kathy Selden, introduced as a normal girl in Hollywood before the days of “talkies”, films with sound. One evening she is driving her convertible, and unexpectedly, a man jumps into her car. The man is unknown to Kathy, or so we are led to believe. He is the film star, Don Lockwood, played by Gene Kelly. When Kathy pretends not to know him, Kathy is being coy. It will take another 20 minutes of the film before we know that Kathy actually knew who he was from the beginning – she’s not only been buying fan magazines so she can follow his career and social outings to Hollywood hot spots like the Brown Derby, she was also the president of his fan club. The full extent of Kathy’s fangirl status is actually not even clear from the theatrical release of the film, the scene where Debbie Reynolds sings the song “Lucky Star” was cut, and is available on special edition DVDs of the film as an outtake:

I wonder... I wonder how many girls would
consider it lucky
To be held in the strong, manly arms of Donald
Lockwood!
The glamorous star of the silver screen!
A year ago it would have scared me half to death.

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That was when I was a member of your fan club.
Fan? Me? I was the president!
Why, you know, I waited outside the grad derby
for two hours one night
Just to get a glimpse of you.
But it was worth it! You looked so dazzling in
your green knickers,
Yellow sweater, and orange beret!
I just swooned!
You see...
I was star struck.
(Words: Arthur Freed, Music: Nacio Herb Brown)

By the end of the film, Kathy and Don have fallen in love, and Kathy's voice has helped to save one of Don's films, "The Duelling Cavalier."

It's exactly this kind of romantic narrative that gets all of us in trouble, fans and celebrities alike. She's his fan, she's buying the fan magazines, she manages to charm him personally and help his career. Any possibility that she was an obsessed fan had to be downplayed for the story to work.

2. Love Inappropriate and Appropriate

There is a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate love. One example comes from Plato in the *Gorgias*. It is Gorgias's defense of Helen of Troy, being overtaken by love, that inspires the discussion of love in the dialogue:

If, however, Helen was abducted by force, it is clear that the aggressor committed a crime. Thus, it should be he, not Helen, who should be blamed. And if Helen was persuaded by love, she should also be rid of ill repute because "if love is a god, with the divine power of the gods, how could a weaker person refuse and reject him? But if love is a human sickness and a mental weakness, it must not be blamed as mistake, but claimed as misfortune (Gorgias 32)

So while Helen is not blameworthy on Gorgias' account, because love is form of sickness or mental weakness. Socrates draws a finer distinction between love that is appropriate and inappropriate, based partly on the negative effects an inappropriate love can have in one's life.

Plato notes the disadvantages to one's health and well-being that emerge from the inappropriate loves of rhetoric, pleasure, power and self. In his discussions with Callicles, Socrates notes that Callicle's own loves leave him in a position of discord with himself. The love of the truth expressed by Socrates as philosopher is held up to us as an alternative.

Does life without such love, even if misplaced an inappropriate, leave us with the "inharmonious lyre" and "no music in the chorus" that Socrates prefers? To fully understand what Socrates means, we must remember that he also loves Acibiades, mentioned in both the *Gorgias* and the *Symposium*. The *Symposium* provides us with a fuller list of benefits of love (*eros*), not the least of which is that *eros* inspires the lover to earn the admiration of his beloved. One example of earning such admiration is by showing bravery on the battlefield, since nothing shames a man more than to be seen by his beloved committing some inglorious act, such as cowardice (178d-179b). The ways in which some fans attempt to win the love of celebrities shares some characteristics with the battlefield, especially if the celebrity is someone who is criticized often for their style of comedy or dress. The fan casts himself in the role of an avenging angel, or a Don Quixote defending the never-present but still loved Dulcinea.

So to the extent that love inspires us to become our best self, love has value and worth. Love is said to create justice, moderation, courage and wisdom. In the section of the *Symposium* with Diotima, we are told that Love is beggarly, harsh and a master of artifice and deception (203d) and is delicately balanced, resourceful (204c). Love has a purpose, the attainment of immortality (207a,b). The human desire for immortality, and the need to procreate is at the root of Love's inspiration. Diotima then explains how Love illustrates how to become a Philosopher, or a Lover of wisdom. Those who become lovers of wisdom will give birth to intellectual children of greater immortality than any conceived through procreation.

3. In Love with Love

Is it possible then, that the fan-celebrity relationship is grounded in a mistaken type of love. One possibility is that fans who invest themselves in these kinds of relationships are "in love with love", or "in the love with the feeling of being in love." Browsing fan sites and fan forums for celebrities shows a variety of rewards for repeated behaviour, which then becomes a habit, and potentially an addiction that one 'needs'. Most fan forums reward participants with status levels for the number of times they post, for example. In the case of Twitter, there is the possibility of being rewarded with a Tweet reply from the celebrity, and there is the building of a community among fellow fans. Relationships develop around continued participation in the online context, with a set of rewards and benefits that perpetuate and refresh the fan's feeling of belonging, of investment in the celebrity's career. In this

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way a variety of imbalanced friendships can form – there is the illusion of friendship between fan and celebrity (*eros*), and between fans, those who are older fans, those who have met the celebrity, can dole out praise and kind words to newer fans (*philia*).

I note that these friendships are often imbalanced, because of the difference in status of the two players – in each case, there is a distinct hierarchy of fan levels and achievement, or the inherent status difference between celebrity and fan. For this reason, Aristotle and Plato would note the problematic nature of such friendships. But one should note that such friendships can rest on a genuine grounding of care and concern between the parties involved. A variety of fan communities have rallied around a fan who is undergoing a challenge in life, going beyond the call of duty and creating a sort of caricature of intimacy between strangers. These challenges range from the death of a loved one, to major surgery, to fans battling with cancer. Many fan forums have actively engaged in internet campaigns to help a fellow fan with a terminal illness get a chance to meet their celebrity, whether through private donations, communication through private channels, or sharing of tickets or information about where the celebrity will be available for a meet and greet.

4. Kantian Ethics Between Fans and Celebrities

If fans engage in relationships with each other based on ethics of care, the relationship between celebrity and fan is best conceived of as rule-bound. There is what Kant would call an inherently mutually usury relationship between celebrity and fan. The fan is arguably using the celebrity for purposes of fantasizing, or a mere hobby. The celebrity uses the fans as a means for income, popularity, visibility, and “buzz”. As such, a Kantian ethic of specific imperatives is often invoked – fans will often mention to each other that a celebrity owes them a specific Tweet or gig, especially if it has been a long time since the celebrity has been in contact. “You’re neglecting us” becomes a common message, followed by an inevitable debate about the moral obligations and intentions of the celebrity. Some fans will counter-argue that no such obligation for continued contact exists, and that it would be somehow less significant if the celebrity were to Tweet or post after such a comment, because it would indicate mixed motivations, such as guilt, rather than a sincere or pure message.

If the relationships between celebrities and fans have a Kantian duty focus on the side of the celebrities, they arguably also do on the side of fans. In the context of paparazzi and tabloid involvement in celebrity lives, fans will argue with each other over whether they “owe” celebrities a certain amount of distance and respect. For example, particular fan sites refrain from patronizing celebrity stalker paparazzi websites, and will not allow

“stalkerazzi” photos to be posted on their fan forums and message boards. The perception is that fans have a duty to respect the privacy of their chosen celebrity, and that giving money or advertising revenue to paparazzi is a violation of the fan’s duties to the celebrity.

In a sense, this culture of mutual duties evolved from a context in which fans sought to distinguish themselves from stalkers, and “stalkerazzi” provide a line at which the distinction can be clearly drawn. The good fan is one who routinely references the celebrity’s need for privacy, and their right to privacy. The rallying cry of the good fans is “We’re just fans, so we can’t really know, but it certainly is fun to see what will happen next!” Of course there are a variety of ways in which this line between good fan and stalker is crossed, whether accidentally or intentionally. One example is erotomania, in which a fan suffers from the delusion that the celebrity is not merely sending Tweets, press releases or status updates online, but that the very actions, words, gestures, or items appearing in a celebrity’s film or song are a means by which the celebrity is “speaking to” or “communicating” with the fan. These items are used as “self-referential delusions” confirming the love relationship. Another name for this disorder is de Clérambault’s Syndrome, named for French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, who was the first to study the disorder. This disorder is characterized by an unshakable belief that another person (in this case, a celebrity) is secretly in love with them (a fan). Such was the case with David Letterman’s stalker, Margaret Mary Ray, who broke into his home and rearranged his furniture, labouring under the false belief that they were in love and in a relationship.¹

The mirror image of the fan suffering from de Clérambault’s Syndrome is the celebrity who is dependent on fan sites and fan message boards as a part of their marketing to the public. Some celebrities have gone so far as to hire professionals to create fan sites for them, or to recruit large numbers of fans as “street-teams”. Members of street teams promise to post advertisements of upcoming events, whether on particular message boards, Twitter or Facebook, or advertising local events. Street teams are organized by locations, and contact information for a specific set of fans is immediately available and can be sent out to storm the internet or a specific city with information about upcoming gigs, filming, calls for extras, and so on. A co-dependency can develop between the celebrity and these “volunteers”, to the point that the celebrity may actually feel a certain ethical obligation to do specific favors for these fans. These might include prime seats for shows, free premiums (also known as swag), or financial help with website operation costs or travel to location shoots. In a way this perpetuates the mutually beneficial and mutually usury relationship, provided that the fan does not cross a line or assume too much of a relationship.

5. Aretaic Lucky Stars

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If we return to the example of *Singing in the Rain*, it quickly becomes clear that an Aristotelian approach involving moderation of the appetites is necessary. At first, Kathy Selden disingenuously pretends she doesn't know who the star, Don Lockwood, is. Her pretense is what makes her special in Don's eyes. As his friend Cosmo (Danny Kaye) notes, "She's the first girl who hasn't fallen for your lines since you were four." In a world where everyone can Tweet, everyone can take a cell phone picture, the one who doesn't is the one who gets noticed. The original script included a reference to Kathy's extreme fan-gurl past (indeed it explains why she is driving so near the corner where Don's suit is torn by a group of her fellow fans.) But of course the scene in which she admits her tendency to buy the fan magazines and her presidency of Don's fan club was cut from the film – it would have made her seem too much like a stalker, and it would have been inconsistent with the clear ethical voice she displays in the last half of the film. What makes Kathy Selden an exemplary fan is the way she moderates her desires and lives out the Golden Mean – helping Don Lockwood in saving his film *The Duelling Cavalier*, but intending to end their liaison when it becomes clear that her own career and talents would be misused. Fan-Celebrity relationships on the internet would benefit from this type of Aristotelian moderation, on the part of both the fan and the celebrity.

Notes

¹ For further information on Margaret Mary Ray, see F Bruni, 'Behind the Jokes, a Life Of Pain and Delusion; For Letterman Stalker, Mental Illness Was Family Curse and Scarring Legacy', *New York Times*, November 22, 1998.

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Christine A. James is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Valdosta State University. Her areas of research interest include philosophy of science, ethics, social theory, politics, and the philosophy of sex and love. When she was a graduate student, she ran message boards and fan sites for a comedic actor. She now visits other actor's fan sites in the guise of Jacob Marley, rattling her chains and encouraging the fangurls and fanboys to repent before it is too late.