

From Celebrities to Ordinary Citizen. Limits of the Legitimacy of Social Punishment



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Abstract: Public discourse and academic debate on the permissibility of social punishment range from strong endorsement to categorical rejection. This paper defends a moderate view: social punishment practices such as shaming, canceling, or deplatforming may be legitimate, but only under certain conditions. It focuses on one key criterion: the social status of the wrongdoer and asks whether celebrities and non-celebrities should be treated differently. I argue that the epistemic power of celebrities justifies greater exposure to social punishment, whereas non-celebrities should generally be subject only to private punishment. The paper outlines the normative implications of this distinction. Due to the subject of this paper and given that it is a work in political philosophy, the method used here is reflective equilibrium.

Keywords: Social punishment; epistemic power; celebrities; public shaming; deplatforming.

I. Introduction

Let me begin by considering two cases. The first one relates to the ban on Donald Trump's social media accounts.¹ In January 2021, United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., was attacked by a group of supporters of President Donald Trump. This happened because Trump and his supporters made false claims of election fraud in the 2020 US presidential election. The attackers believed that Trump was the winner of the election. In a series of posts on various social media platforms, Trump encouraged his followers not to accept the result of the election, which his opponent, Joe Biden, had won. In consequence, the main social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, Twitch, decided to suspend his accounts (Sitaraman 2023, 500).

The second case that I would like to consider concerns the reaction of Twitter users to a series of racist posts published by Justine Sacco, who had previously been an unknown employee of an American corporation. In December 2013, during a plane trip to Cape Town,

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Sacco posted on her Twitter account 'Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just Kidding. I'm white!'. Prior to this incident, Sacco's account was followed by 170 people, but after this message was posted, she became the number one worldwide trend on Twitter. The response of Twitter users was the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet and thousands of angry tweets posted in response to her joke. As a result, her employer decided to terminate her employment, and she reportedly suffered long-term psychological harm (Ronson 2015, 85–102).

The two presented cases are examples of two different types of social punishment practices, meaning non-legal forms of response to violations of moral norms that happen between people outside of their institutional roles (Radzik et al. 2020, 11). In the case of Trump, deplatforming was applied (Sitaraman 2023, 500) and in the case of Sacco, public shaming was applied (Ronson 2015, 85–102). These two cases serve as paradigmatic cases of non-legal forms of punishing individuals of two different social standings – one is a well-known politician, and the other is an ordinary citizen.

This paper seeks to address a key question: what criteria should guide our assessment of the legitimacy of social punishment practices? It focuses on one particular criterion: the social status of the individual who committed the wrongdoing. More specifically, in this paper I will ask whether social punishment practices should be applied differently to celebrities compared to non-celebrities, and how this difference should be understood. In other words, how should we assess the punishments described above of Justine Sacco and Donald Trump?

I begin by introducing the concept of social punishment. In the next section, I present how the role of celebrities, especially their duties, is understood. I then introduce the concept of epistemic power and argue that celebrities possess it to a considerable degree. I examine the legitimacy of social punishment with regard to the social status of the person being sanctioned, providing a classification of such persons into (a) celebrities, (b) quasi-celebrities, and (c) non-celebrities. I argue that only celebrities and quasi-celebrities in qualified cases can be subjected to social punishment practices. In the following section, I propose that outside of these cases private punishment should be applied. I conclude with final remarks. Due to the subject of this paper and given that it is a work in political philosophy, the method used here is reflective equilibrium. In brief, reflective equilibrium is the mutual adjustment of principles and judgments in light of relevant arguments and theories (Knight 2025).

II. Deplatforming, Public Shaming, and other Social Punishment Practices

Typically, when discussing the issue of punishment, the first thing that comes to mind is legal punishment imposed by state authorities in a formal procedure. However, social punishment should be distinguished from these more familiar and more extensively

researched forms of punishment. The most comprehensive account of social punishment was proposed by Linda Radzik, particularly in her book *The Ethics of Social Punishment: The Enforcement of Morality in Everyday Life* (Radzik et al. 2020). This paper relies on Radzik's account of social punishment. She defines social punishment as "non-legal forms of authorized, intentional, reprobative, reactive harming between people who are not acting within hierarchically-structured institutional roles" (Radzik et al. 2020, 11).

Radzik claims that people of equal social status (e.g., friends, family members, colleagues, or people from the same community) are entitled to engage in certain punitive practices. Radzik bases her definition of social punishment on the definition of punishment provided by David Boonin (Boonin 2008), and she also draws on classical notions of informal punishment by society developed by John Locke and John Stuart Mill. She gives five conditions for social punishment to occur, which are: (a) the harm condition, (b) the reaction condition, (c) the reprobation condition, (d) the intention condition, and (e) the authorization condition. According to Radzik's account, the authorization condition (e) means that social punishment occurs in everyday relations among social equals, where authority is symmetrical (e.g., between friends), rather than in institutional roles, as in the case of legal punishment. The intention condition (d) requires that the punishment be intentional, rather than a mere side effect of some other action. The reprobation condition (c) holds that, for an action to count as a form of social punishment, it must express moral disapproval. The reaction condition (b) requires that social punishment be a response to a perceived wrongdoing and that it be directed at the individual who is the wrongdoer. Finally, with the harm condition (a), the relevant harm need not be limited to the deprivation or restriction of a right. It may also consist in hard treatment, exposure to the critical gaze of others, or damage to one's reputation (Radzik et al. 2020, 11–20).

Social punishment consists of various practices, the most frequently discussed in the literature being deplatforming, canceling, and public shaming. At the beginning of this paper, I introduced two cases. I identified the suspension of Donald Trump's social media accounts in 2021 as an instance of deplatforming. By contrast, I argued that the condemnation of Justine Sacco for racism constituted a case of public shaming. Canceling is a form of boycotting that consists in the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products associated with the person, etc.) from individuals who have said or done something regarded as morally reprehensible or highly problematic (Ng 2020, 623). For this reason, by definition, canceling applies only to widely recognized figures, since it presupposes the withdrawal of support. Consequently, it cannot apply to private individuals and will therefore not be considered in this article.

Deplatforming is the practice of excluding a particular individual from access to a platform through which they could express their views (Veber 2024, 971). The reason for such exclusion is the moral condemnation of that person's actions or beliefs. A platform may include not only social media (X, formerly Twitter; YouTube; Facebook; Reddit; Twitch), but also any forum in which invited speakers express their views, such as spaces

associated with a particular university (e.g., a public lecture at this university) or particular traditional media (radio broadcasts, television programs, or newspaper articles) (Veber 2024, 971). The described sanction is imposed and enforced by the person or body that controls access to the given platform (Sitaraman 2023, 532–533). This may include a social media platform administrator, a festival organizer, an editor-in-chief of a journal, or a university rector.²

The literature contains three slightly different definitions of the practice of public shaming. The first holds that it is an action that involves expressing moral disapproval toward a person who has violated moral norms (Billingham & Parr 2020a, 727), for instance by posting a racist comment on their social media. The second account maintains that shaming must be a stigmatizing action directed at a particular individual who has violated a moral norm. The person in question must be portrayed as inferior to a “normal” member of the community (Adkins 2019, 2). The third position, in turn, equates shaming with especially malicious forms of public criticism, such as highly personalized, abusive, and vitriolic attacks that humiliate their targets (Billingham & Parr 2020a, 727). Despite these differences in how shaming is conceptualized, one feature remains constant: it must contain an element of publicity. If it does not occur before an audience, either directly or online, there must at least be a sense that it could be made public (Adkins 2019, 2). Moreover, an important element of shaming is the action through which it is expressed, rather than mere inaction. In this sense, shaming has a distinctly active character and cannot be expressed simply by refraining from acting.

Public discourse, as well as academic debate on the permissibility of social punishment, encompasses a very broad spectrum of positions: from views that affirm social sanctioning practices as potential instruments of justice (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg 2022, 89–90) to views that categorically reject them as incompatible with fundamental values such as freedom and equality (Frye 2022, 19). In this context, a more moderate position appears to be the most reasonable and plausible: namely, the view that social punishment practices may be legitimate, but only under certain conditions. Framing the issue in this way leads naturally to a crucial question: what guidelines should be used to assess the legitimacy of social sanctions in a particular case? In contrast to legal punishment, social punishment lacks clear guidelines as to what counts as a punishable act (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg 2022, 95), although the literature does propose several possible criteria that seem relevant here. Examples include the relationship between the punisher and the punished, the nature and severity of the wrongdoing, and the legitimate

² It might be difficult to find as social equals, for example, a social media platform administrator and an individual user, or a university rector and an academic teacher. There is a significant asymmetry in their resources and power. However, I think that in this context, “social equals” should be understood broadly as people who do not act in state-related institutional roles that can impose legal punishment. By using the term “social equals” in this broader sense, I do not claim that these actors are equal in wealth, influence, or power. I rather emphasize that they interact outside the system of state-backed legal punishment and within privately or institutionally defined frameworks. Moreover, in the case of deplatforming, exclusion from a given platform occurs as a result of social responses such as criticism for a norm violation.

interests of victims and communities (Radzik et al. 2020, 47). Billingham and Parr introduce other criteria for the moral justification of punishment for moral wrongdoing: proportionality, necessity, respect for privacy, non-abusiveness, and reintegration (Billingham & Parr 2020b, 5–10). Of course, there are other possible criteria that come to mind, such as whether the person has already faced any form of penalty (for example, a legal one) or the person's awareness of the facts relevant to the case.

However, this paper focuses on one particular criterion that appears to be relevant in this context: the social status of the individual who committed the wrongdoing. Whether the wrongdoer is a celebrity attracting significant public and media attention, or a non-celebrity with no real public presence, may affect how the harmfulness of the situation is assessed. This paper seeks to explore and develop that intuition.

III. Celebrities and Their Duties

To clarify my idea of the criterion for assessing the legitimacy of social punishment – namely, the social status of the individual who committed the wrongdoing – and to explain why celebrities should be treated differently from non-celebrities, it is necessary to define these terms. Various accounts of celebrity have been proposed in the literature, ranging from relatively narrow to broad definitions. For example, Daniel Boorstin defines a celebrity as “a person well-known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin 1962, 57). Alternatively, celebrity is “a quality or status characterized by a capacity to attract attention, generating some ‘surplus value’ or benefit derived from the fact of being well known (highly visible) in itself in at least one public arena” (Van Krieken 2019, 10).

It seems that a common feature of these definitions is that a celebrity is someone who is known beyond the circle of those with whom they have direct contact (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 760). This intuition is well captured by Antoine Lilti. According to him, the “celebrated individual is not known simply to his family, his colleagues, his neighbors, his peers or his customers, but to a vast group of people with whom he has no direct contact, who have never met him and will never meet him, but who frequently encounter his public image” (Lilti 2017, 6). Following the account of Alfred Archer and colleagues (Archer et al. 2020, 28), I understand celebrity as an individual whose life is subject to high levels of public attention in ways that go beyond their specific talents, expertise, or professional role. I also maintain that celebrities are known to a vast group of people with whom they have no direct contact, as Lilti (2017, 6) argues. On the basis of this definition, a celebrity is not limited to people who are “well-known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin 1962, 57) but also includes individuals whose fame derives primarily from media visibility rather than from recognized achievements or expertise, such as members of the Kardashian family, Paris Hilton, or Addison Rae. A celebrity may also be a well-known politician who holds public office, such as Emmanuel Macron or Ursula von der Leyen, as well as prominent figures in the cultural sphere, including actors,

film directors, and writers such as Angelina Jolie, Quentin Tarantino, or J. K. Rowling.

It is relatively uncontroversial that celebrities exert significant influence over large audiences (Wellman 2003, 335). Some argue that their influence gives them special moral duties towards society (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 762; Croce, Liberti, & Vaccarezza 2025, 135–162). A common argument for attributing special moral duties to celebrities is that they bear the duties of role models. Such duties consist in serving as positive moral examples for others (Osman & Harrison 2025). Although, to some extent, all individuals may have a responsibility to set a good example, the influence of celebrities provides strong grounds for holding them to high standards in this respect. Given their public visibility and impact on audiences, celebrities can be seen as having a particular responsibility to function as moral exemplars and to encourage virtuous rather than harmful attitudes and behavior (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 762; Wellman 2003, 335).

Another argument for the special obligations of celebrities can be called the salience magnets argument. On this view, celebrities are highly visible figures who attract and concentrate collective attention. Because many social problems are coordination problems, societies benefit from central points that help individuals align their behavior with that of others (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 763). In large modern societies, people often lack direct information about what others are doing or what norms are being followed. Celebrities, due to their exceptional visibility, provide publicly observable signals that many people might notice at the same time. When a celebrity behaves a certain way, audiences are aware not only of the behavior itself but also that countless others are observing it as well. This shared awareness makes certain norms more salient and easier to coordinate around (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 763).

However, the strongest argument for the claim that celebrities are subject to special obligations is that they possess a high level of epistemic power, that is, the power to influence what others believe and know (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 762). In this paper, I employ this argument to justify my proposed account of the legitimacy of social punishment, which differentiates between wrongdoers based on their social status. The relevant criterion for this distinction is the degree of epistemic power possessed by the individual.

IV. What is Epistemic Power?

Some people's voices are heard more than others, especially when they belong to socially dominant groups and are highly visible in the media. Some individuals are treated as authorities not only on their own experiences but also on the experiences of others who are different from them. Others are regarded as unqualified to describe even their own experiences. These are manifestations of epistemic injustice, understood as a form of injustice done to someone in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007).

Closely related to the notion of epistemic injustice is the concept of epistemic

power, developed within social epistemology. Epistemic power can constitute a form of epistemic injustice. Archer and colleagues (Archer et al. 2020) define epistemic power as follows: “A person has epistemic power to the extent she is able to influence what people think, believe, and know, and to the extent she is able to enable and disable others from exerting epistemic influence” (Archer et al. 2020, 29). It is difficult to identify another group that is as visible in the media and attracts as much attention as celebrities, whose lives are subject to high levels of public interest that extend beyond their specific talents, expertise, or professional roles. Celebrities are situated within structured testimonial networks that allow them to reach and influence far larger audiences than the credibility of their claims would typically warrant.

Epistemic power refers to a type of power possessed by an epistemic agent. Almost everyone has some epistemic power, but some have much more than others. A teacher possesses epistemic power over her students, a mother has epistemic power over her child, and a famous influencer possesses epistemic power over his followers. Epistemic power is described in two aspects, related to the abilities possessed by the subject in question. It involves, first, the capacity to shape what other people think, believe, or know. Second, it involves the capacity to either grant or restrict other people’s ability to exercise such epistemic influence themselves (Archer et al. 2020, 28–29). An example of exercising these two abilities is the relation between a teacher and her students. This teacher can influence what students believe, think, or know. She can also increase student’s epistemic power by praising her student’s mathematical skills, leading others to believe that student when they provide answers, even if they are occasionally wrong (Archer et al. 2020). Epistemic power can be possessed not only by individuals but also by institutions, such as universities (Lechner et al. 2026).

There are various sources of epistemic power, and some of them are entirely legitimate (Archer et al. 2020, 29). For example, a professor who specializes in the topic of gender and law possesses detailed knowledge in this area and is likely able to explain it in a clear and systematic way. Moreover, as a university employee, she holds a distinctive status as an expert in her field. However, if she were to publicly express her views, for instance on the topic of speedway racing, while relying on her academic title and the platform provided by the university, she would be exercising her epistemic power beyond the scope of her competence. The following risk arises: individuals may occupy institutional positions that grant epistemic power despite lacking the relevant expertise (Archer et al. 2020, 29).

Archer and colleagues (2020) identify two primary sources of epistemic power: perceived credibility and attention. The literature suggests that celebrities are often regarded as more credible than warranted, even on topics outside their areas of expertise. For example, after Angelina Jolie published an editorial about her preventive mastectomy, there was a significant increase in the number of women seeking genetic testing for breast cancer risk (Desai & Jena 2016). Studies also indicate that some parents consider

celebrities to be credible sources on issues such as vaccine safety, even though medical professionals remain the most trusted source of information (Freed et al. 2011). Moreover, Oprah Winfrey's public support substantially increased votes for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential primary, which also shows that celebrity endorsements can shape political behavior (Garthwaite & Moore 2012). Aside from more typical celebrity cases, there are also academics who enjoy a high degree of perceived credibility and are well known outside the academic community because of their media engagement. Academic titles carry a degree of implicit credibility even beyond one's specific domain of competence, so their perceived credibility can be even higher than that of celebrities. The degree to which a person is perceived as credible affects the extent of their epistemic power. The more credible someone is perceived to be, the greater their power to influence what people think, believe, and know, as well as whose voices can exert epistemic influence.

When it comes to attention as a source of epistemic power, it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that celebrities are often the focus of public attention. By attracting large audiences, they gain a platform that allows their testimony to be widely heard, enables them to direct public attention toward issues or voices, and even shape the political agenda. Although some politicians and experts also receive attention, their epistemic power is typically grounded in decision-making authority or relevant expertise. In contrast, celebrities often receive significant attention regardless of expertise, which gives them epistemic influence without a corresponding epistemic justification (Archer et al. 2020, 31). In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Arnold Schwarzenegger recorded a video of himself smoking one of his trademark cigars while explaining the collective benefits of individual self-isolation (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 761). By presenting an attractive vision of what quarantine could look like, he used attention as a source of epistemic power, hoping that his followers would emulate his behavior. Schwarzenegger's self-isolation clip was viewed several million times due to the attention he attracts (Archer, Alfano, & Dennis 2024, 761).

V. Epistemic Power as a Criterion for Differentiating Social Responsibility

The most important justification for treating social punishment applied to celebrities differently from that applied to non-celebrities is that, due to their epistemic power, celebrities have a greater potential to cause harm through morally repugnant behavior. A similar thought appears in recent legal discussions, where it is argued that those who abuse their epistemic power to spread false information should face criminal, and not merely social, punishment (Mamak 2026, 6–11). We can imagine a case in which a well-known person publicly makes a harmful statement: for example, by expressing hostility toward a vulnerable group or rejecting a medical procedure. If such a statement were made by an unknown individual, it would likely have little impact. However, because

of their epistemic power, a celebrity can influence a large audience, whose members may take their claims seriously and act on them. Celebrities can influence what others believe, set agendas, and help establish a shared common ground. Due to their visibility and the attention they attract, they are often vocal about issues in which they lack expertise, which can be potentially harmful (Archer & Sie 2023, 340–342). The level of attention celebrities receive can also contribute to epistemic injustice and to the harms associated with it (Smith & Archer 2020). Based on the idea of epistemic power, I treat this as both the main justification for my division and as its normative criterion, since I classify individuals into these categories according to the degree of epistemic power they possess. This does not mean that one could not argue that there are other reasons to impose certain bans on members of particular institutions, for example, a university to impose a ban on a student, in light of those institutions' special obligations. However, I maintain that such additional considerations fall outside the scope of this paper, which focuses exclusively on epistemic power as the relevant basis for differentiating the permissibility of social punishment.

Due to celebrities' significant visibility in public debate, they express their views in various situations, for example by giving interviews, publishing books, hosting live sessions, and doing streams, and gossip portals track their activities. Whereas social punishment imposed on ordinary people may be based on only fragmentary information, such as a single comment, the views and actions of celebrities are relatively easy to access (Archer & Sie 2023, 343). The status of celebrities requires them to consciously manage their image, including dealing with the negative consequences of such exposure. Through their visibility in public debate, celebrities may, at least to some extent, relinquish aspects of their privacy. Rebecca Wallbank (Wallbank 2025) claims that celebrities are unreliable narrators, because social media allows them to control the narrative and their image, so the messages they send are often misleading or even deceptive. People's trust in celebrities is precisely a result of "epistemic recklessness." Users are aware that celebrities' content can be unreliable, yet despite this knowledge, many of them still base their beliefs on such content (Wallbank 2025).

Epistemic power therefore provides both the justification for my distinction and its normative criterion. I classify individuals into three categories according to the degree of epistemic power they possess:

- (a) celebrities;
- (b) quasi-celebrities;
- (c) non-celebrities.

In the first group (a), I include individuals whose status as celebrities is, in general, unquestionable. They are the ones known for their media statements, the ones newspapers write about, and whose actions are analyzed on social media. It does not matter whether this concerns a politician's statement about the new state budget or a celebrity's new plastic surgery. These are individuals whose public visibility and media presence give them significant epistemic power.

The crucial factor in being a celebrity is a certain form of epistemic power and the source from which it derives. The source of this epistemic power is not entirely legitimate: for example, it is not grounded solely in expertise in a particular field, since such expertise would grant epistemic authority only within that field. For the purposes of this paper, the sources of celebrities' epistemic power are attention and perceived credibility. They may also possess epistemic power from legitimate sources: for instance, a speedway driver may be an expert in speedway racing. However, if that person is famous and attracts considerable attention, they also possess a degree of epistemic power that may create a risk of harm. This epistemic power is not entirely legitimate because it derives from attention, perceived credibility, or both. Thus, even if a celebrity is an expert in a particular field, the high level of attention they receive, extending beyond their specific talents, expertise, or professional role. Their recognition by large audiences with whom they have no direct contact, means that they could be subject to social punishment practices if they commit a moral wrong, provided that the other criteria mentioned at the beginning of this paper are also met.

It is, of course, fairly uncontroversial that celebrities have a sphere of private life and may, in certain contexts, function as non-celebrities, for example in matters concerning their family life. Nevertheless, I argue that this does not undermine the legitimacy of socially punishing them for morally reprehensible behavior. For instance, if it were revealed that a famous actress had used violence against her child, the fact that this matter concerns her private life would not provide a good reason against social punishment. According to the framework I propose, celebrities do not possess any sphere that is categorically exempt from the application of social punishment.

Some individuals become famous by accident and gain attention only temporarily, especially due to a negative event, for example, by being the victim of a crime, a tragic accident, or public shaming, as in the case of Justine Sacco. Such individuals may indeed be known to large groups of people with whom they have no direct contact, and they may attract attention beyond their expertise. However, if their fame is merely temporary, they do not possess epistemic power. If, after the tragic event, they attempt to return to a normal life and do not engage in public events, issue public statements, or try to set public agendas, they remain in category (c): non-celebrities.

The second group, category (b), includes individuals who are not celebrities, as a rule, but who function as such in certain contexts. By "context" I mean a specific social group, for example a professional community. Given that epistemic resources are also distributed within social groups, the issue of epistemic power is definitely applicable here. Within its hierarchy, some individuals play more important roles than others and are subject to high levels of attention within that group, as well as being known to large numbers of people with whom they have no direct contact. They possess a higher degree of epistemic power in this particular community: they attract attention and are perceived as credible. Examples include a university professor, as opposed to a lower-ranking

administrative employee or a student, or the head of a hospital department, as opposed to a staff nurse.

According to this view, a given individual functions as a celebrity only within a particular context, while outside it they remain a non-celebrity. In these specific contexts of particular communities, the person is known by a large group of people, even though they may be completely unknown outside them. They occupy institutional roles and positions that grant them a significant degree of epistemic power. I propose that, within these contexts, they should be treated as celebrities for the purposes of applying social punishment (i) by an authorized group or (ii) in connection with the function they perform.

For example, one can imagine that the aforementioned professor tells a racist joke during their class in connection with the performance of their function, in which case members of the university community, as the authorized group, may apply certain punishment practices toward them. Due to the special role they play in this particular community, I argue that they should be treated as celebrities only within it when assessing the legitimacy of social punishment practices. Consequently, social punishment should not be applied to them for wrongdoing related to their private life, except by the authorized group. For instance, the aforementioned professor may be subjected to shaming for a sexual scandal not taking place within the university context only by the entitled group, namely the academic community, rather than publicly on social media. However, if such a sexual scandal were to occur in the course of performing their professional function, for example, with a student, it could be publicly condemned.

In the third group (c), I include individuals whose status as non-celebrities is, in principle, unquestioned. The key characteristic of this group is that they possess very little or no epistemic power. Therefore, they do not participate in the public sphere, for instance, in discussions or on social media, from a position of authority. They are generally known mainly within their close social circles. It is to these individuals that the protection of privacy, in the context of the processing and distribution of personal data, applies most strongly, in contrast to persons performing important public roles (Sartor 2014, 5–6). Quite often, when non-celebrities are accidentally and unintentionally thrust into the public eye, they must face the negative consequences of this situation.

The category of non-celebrities includes most ordinary citizens. A widely discussed example of the negative consequences of a non-celebrity's accidental appearance online is the so-called "dog poop girl" incident (Billingham & Parr 2020b, 371–390). In 2005, a young woman in South Korea refused to clean up after her dog, which had defecated in a subway train. Another passenger photographed the woman and the incident, and the images were posted on a popular Korean website and widely disseminated. She was later identified, and her personal data were published online, as a result of which she was publicly shamed (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 216).

These individuals possess epistemic power only within their close circles of friends

and family. They have no lasting influence on public opinion and no recognized authority in public discourse or within their communities, in contrast to quasi-celebrities. They often face disproportionate consequences after being publicized (Billingham & Parr 2020b, 371–390).

The cases of Donald Trump and Justine Sacco clearly illustrate the difference in epistemic power between celebrities and non-celebrities. Trump possesses enormous epistemic power: he is a globally recognized political figure whose speeches, interviews, and online statements reach millions of people and actively shape public debates. Even when they are controversial, his words influence what people think and believe, and their impact is further amplified by extensive media coverage and political commentary. Justine Sacco, by contrast, was a private individual who possessed little epistemic power. Her tweet was not supported by any recognized status or reputation; it reached a wide audience only because it went “viral” due to the outrage it provoked. She had no lasting influence on public opinion and no recognized authority in public discourse (Ronson 2015, 85–102). The university professor, who illustrates the category of quasi-celebrities, also possesses significant epistemic power, but primarily within the academic environment. Through lectures, publications, and academic presentations, a professor can shape which ideas are regarded as credible and valuable within a given discipline. As a result, even if a professor is not widely known outside the university, within his community he possesses considerable epistemic power. It is precisely this that justifies treating him as a quasi-celebrity: his words and actions in the academic context have the potential to produce real epistemic consequences for others.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper – namely, whether there is a fundamental difference between the legitimization of the social punishment of Donald Trump and Justine Sacco – my answer is affirmative. Accordingly, considering their epistemic power, I argue that (a) celebrities who have committed a morally reprehensible act may legitimately be subject to social punishment, provided that other relevant criteria, which I do not discuss in this paper, are also satisfied. Regarding category (b), quasi-celebrities, I propose that social punishment may be applied to them in the same way as to celebrities only if at least one of the following two conditions is met:

- (i) the punishment is imposed by an authorized group, or
- (ii) the punishment is imposed in connection with the function they perform.

By contrast, social punishment should not be applied to (c) non-celebrities. This does not mean that they cannot be punished by members of society outside the legal system, a point that is discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper.

VI. Private Punishment as a Response

The question that arises is whether any form of non-legal punishment of non-celebrities should be prohibited. What if a private person commits a moral wrong for

which we would like to punish them? An answer to these questions may be provided by so-called private punishment. This is an idea introduced by Linda Radzik, which she distinguishes both from the legal punishment and social punishment. The most important difference between social punishment and private punishment concerns the role of the audience. Social punishment is imposed publicly or in such a way that information about it can easily reach a wide audience. By contrast, private punishment is imposed in a private setting or even secretly (Radzik et al. 2020, 66–68). An example of such punishment is gossip or private shaming.

Radzik defines gossip as private, informal, evaluative communication about persons who are absent (Radzik 2016, 187). This understanding excludes discussions about celebrities in published forms, since they are neither private nor informal and are moreover accessible to the celebrities themselves. According to this view, gossip may be justified, but probably not as a tool for administering justice. When criticism is expressed in a private manner, as in the case of gossip, the wrongdoer may preserve their public face. As a social practice, gossip may also have positive functions, such as emotional release, the strengthening of social bonds, and the encouragement of moral reflection (Radzik 2016, 197–202).

Returning to the example of Justine Sacco, one can imagine a reaction that would take the form of private shaming in her case. For instance, her coworkers or family members could have criticized her for the racist comment on Twitter. She might have received a phone call from a disgusted cousin who condemned her behavior, or messages from a colleague saying that they did not expect such behavior from her and were deeply disappointed.

Radzik prefers the use of private punishment to social punishment in situations where both private and social punishment could be applied and argues that there are good reasons to adopt a principle that gives priority to private punishment (Pettigrove 2020, 119). This follows from her opposition to shaming (especially on social media) as a first response to a person's wrongdoing (Radzik et al. 2020, 66–68). She identifies several advantages of private punishment. First, it seems to involve a lower risk of unjust punishment, since the accused can more easily present their perspective on the matter. Second, private sanctions avoid many of the mechanisms that can lead to escalation in the form of the issue spreading “virally.” Third, they may also be more effective in motivating reparation, because punishment takes place within a close social circle, whose pressure is often particularly strongly felt by the person at whom it is directed. Finally, private sanctions create fewer obstacles to the wrongdoer's reintegration into the community (Radzik et al. 2020, 66–68).

Practices aimed at sanctioning moral wrongdoing may have significant negative consequences for an individual's professional life. Individuals may experience psychological harms such as distress, humiliation, embarrassment, and shame (Billingham & Parr 2020b, 371). Social punishment practices can also inflict reputational harm by

exposing a wrongdoer to the shaming gaze of an audience following the violation of social norms (Aitchison et al. 2021, 2–27). I believe that the possibility of harm is a reason to refrain from social punishment practices when there is a more suitable option. In the case of quasi-celebrities outside qualified contexts and in the case of non-celebrities, such an option is private punishment.

Of course, in cases of moral wrongdoing by celebrities, they may also be subjected to private punishment. For example, Donald Trump might receive a phone call from a distant cousin who condemns his behavior. I believe that, in the case of celebrities, this is not an appropriate response for three reasons. First, private punishment may be insufficient, because it does not reduce epistemic power in the way that social punishment does. Second, private punishment may be disproportionately lenient in the case of celebrities. Third, private individuals typically face more disproportionate consequences from social punishment than celebrities do (Ronson 2015, 85–102). I agree with Radzik that private punishment involves a lower risk of unjust punishment, avoids many of the mechanisms that can lead to escalation, and creates fewer obstacles to the wrongdoer's reintegration into the community. Because quasi-celebrities outside qualified cases and non-celebrities possess relatively little epistemic power, the risk of harm to others is lower.

VII. Conclusions

Not all instances of the application of social punishment are justified. Some are wrong, irresponsible, and disproportionately harmful to the person who becomes their target. However, there is no doubt that social punishment is a part of social reality. Today, it has gained additional significance in connection with the development of social media (Billingham & Parr 2020b, 371). In this paper, I argue for the permissibility of applying social punishment in certain cases. However, I maintain that it may be applied only when certain criteria are met, and my proposal concerns one of these criteria.

In this paper I propose a threshold for the legitimacy of applying social punishment practices, given the social status of the wrongdoer and the degree of epistemic power they possess. Because celebrities possess a large amount of epistemic power, social punishment practices are legitimate primarily in their case (provided other criteria not discussed in this paper are met). Therefore, I propose that only category (a), celebrities, should be subjected to social punishment, and category (b), quasi-celebrities, only if at least one of the following two conditions is met: (i) the punishment is imposed by an authorized group, or (ii) the punishment is imposed in connection with the function they perform. In all other cases, that is, (b) quasi-celebrities outside these qualified contexts and (c) non-celebrities in all cases, I propose the use of private punishment.

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