Karma Police, Arrest This Artist![1] – On Cancel Culture and "Deplatforming"

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Alexandra King's PHIL 321 course *Topics in Moral Philosophy: Ethical Issues in Art*. The assignment asked students to write a 2,500 word paper engaging with the course texts which were on various ethical issues in art. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In this paper, I argue that cancellation may actually be an effective method for "punishing" immoral artists if we aim to "deplatform" them through cancellation, or in other words, aim to remove their ability to influence and reach individuals on a widescale. I first describe my conception of cancellation, platforms, and immoral artists before explaining why it is untrue that cancellation fails to accomplish our goals and why "deplatforming" will set a precedent for artists, decreasing harms caused by those in the public eye.

There has been discussion on how one ought to "punish" an artist who has behaved immorally, especially one within the public eye. In his 2021 book, *Drawing the Line*, Erich Hatala Matthes argues that our current aims with "cancelling" immoral artists fall short of their desired effects. I disagree with Matthes on this point and argue in favour of an approach to cancellation centered around deplatforming – removing the ability for immoral artists to spread their views to a wide scope of individuals. In this paper, I will begin by explaining what cancellation entails, proceeding to then outline Matthes' view on cancelling artists. I will then explain my argument by elaborating on what it means to "deplatform," before continuing to describe the ways that, in my view, it may accomplish the desired effect of cancellation. Following this, I will anticipate and respond to

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[1] Yorke, Thom. Lyrics to "Karma Police." Performed by Radiohead, Capitol Records 1997.

objections before concluding that cancelling *can* be beneficial in the case of aiming to "deplatform" immoral artists.

Cancellation, in relation to the arts, has been characterized by calls for boycotting and ostracization of immoral artists. Matthes explains that the attitude towards canceled artists holds that the artists shall not be "listened to/watched/read/etc., because of their immoral behaviour, as if the media conglomerate of morality pulled their content" (Matthes, 77). At its core, cancellation has to do with effectively "excommunicating" the artist from the public sphere and from our conscious awareness, through shunning or simply by avoiding engaging with them or their work. Thus, when an artist's immorality is revealed, there comes an immediate desire to "cancel" them as a condemnation of sorts for their reprehensible behaviour. With this understanding, Matthes proceeds to outline why cancellation will not be successful in achieving our aims.

In order to explore these shortcomings, Matthes begins by shifting focus to what we want to accomplish with the act of cancelling, the main reasons being: preventing future harms, solving systemic issues, and expressing disapproval of the artist's behaviour. Matthes then explains why he rejects each of these reasons, beginning with future harms. For this point, Matthes' rejection is twofold: first, it will be ineffective when considering deceased artists, as they will not exist in order to be able to harm in the future, and second, while possibly effective in cases of abusers, we cannot prevent future harms caused by racist or sexist artists through cancellation. This point leads to his second rejection, that cancellation will not prevent problems such as racism, sexism, etc., since these issues are *systemic* and thus baked into our institutions, and solutions cannot be found through the cancellation of an artist. Finally, Matthes rejects that cancellation is the best method of expressing disapproval because it can easily lead to what is described by philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò as "elite capture," in which advocacy for vulnerable groups is exploited for the use of those in power – a superficial "Band-Aid" to appease the masses. He states that we should not be *honouring* these artists and instead should be fighting for systemic change by protesting institutions, thereby concluding that cancellation will not do that which we desire.

Matthes' conclusion is ultimately one with which I take issue. While I grant that it is an imperfect system at times, I argue that we ought to do more than merely attempt to avoid *honouring* immoral artists. In my view, our aims when cancelling should be centered around an attempt to *deplatform* the immoral artist in question. I will proceed to explain what I mean by "deplatforming."

First, I will elaborate on that which entails a "platform." Those in the public eye (e.g., actors, singers, directors, influential visual artists, etc), have fans which enable them to create their work (i.e., by funding them through their support, giving them fame, etc.). Thus, they are given platforms: their name (or reputation) and their words have *weight* and reach individuals on a *widescale*. Whether on social media, merely making a public statement through a magazine, or what they as individuals represent, the words and actions of those in the public eye reach further than that of those *without* platforms.

Alongside their words, some artists have platforms merely by virtue of their reputations. They do not require social media or the press to have *influence*, but still are able to access opportunities because of the weight their identity carries. So, individuals in the public eye have platforms (whether through their reputations or the wide scope of their words), and in my view, when we aim to cancel an immoral artist, we should aim to *deplatform* – to remove their ability to spread their immoral views or engage in immoral actions on such a widescale.

I will motivate my view by presenting an argument for deplatforming:

1. Individuals in the public eye have influence on those who admire them.
2. If an artist has demonstrated that they are immoral or predatory as part of their *public persona*, their views will influence their admirers.
3. If an artist is influencing their admirers with immoral views/predatory behaviour online using their platform, it would be morally *good* if they did not have their platform.

Therefore:

4. If an artist has demonstrated they are immoral or predatory as part of their public persona, it would be morally good to deplatform them.

The first premise is an assumption that is simple enough to accept, fans are often inspired by their idols such as by replicating their outfits, adopting their habits, etc. While this is an empirical claim, I take it to be sufficiently evident so as not to warrant copious justification, so I will proceed with the acceptance of this premise. The second premise is also straightforward, but I will first take a short digression and explain what I mean by "publicly demonstrated" immoral behaviour.

The reason why I make this clarification is that, while determining predatory behaviour is quite straightforward, the conditions needed to satisfy an immoral artist worthy of cancellation seem more difficult to assign. For example, if an artist has been spending several years creating a series of films about the importance of diversity in which they amplify marginalized voices, donate

proceeds to charities, and tweet important links to petitions and social injustices, do we have a duty to eliminate their influence if it is discovered that in middle school, they tweeted a homophobic joke? The point at which one must draw the line seems difficult to determine. Therefore, I argue the focus should be removed from the artist's moral character and shifted onto their *influence*.

An artist's moral, or immoral, character is equivalent to any other individual's immoral character when this behaviour is contained privately. Thus, the burden should be placed on dealing with artists that *use* their platform in order to spread these immoral views, rather than those who are reformed one-time offenders. Consider an artist who is extremely homophobic but keeps their bigoted views completely internal and engages in acts of allyship, donating to LGBTQ+ charities and speaking out against homophobia. This artist's *moral* character is still tainted by their bigoted beliefs, but in order to warrant *cancellation* their immorality must be a part of their *public persona*, otherwise there seems to be little reason to cancel them in the first place (unless one wishes to cancel every "bad" person, which would be quite difficult). Deplatforming ought to follow as a *consequence* or as a *punishment* once immoral behaviour has been revealed.

Returning to my argument, my second premise is straightforward, as if an individual has influence over their fans, their immoral views will also thereby influence their fans. I do not anticipate hesitations to the acceptance of the third premise, since, if an artist is influencing others to hold immoral views, it *would be good* if they lost the ability to do this. Thus, I reach my conclusion, it would be morally good if artists with *publicly demonstrated* immoral or predatory behaviour are deplatformed.

It is not within the scope of this paper to define what exactly entails an immoral artist, but I will provide my brief thoughts, though this not a straight-forward task. Since attempting to draw a line at a certain number of immoral instances or a certain number of years after which one's past becomes forgivable seems potentially arbitrary, I argue there are *elements* one should search for when evaluating an artist's immorality. These elements are severity, persistence, and remorse (though this list is non-exhaustive). Severity is rather self-evident, but I will use an example to illustrate my point. Actor Mark Wahlberg's past of physical and verbal assaults of various people of colour is, I hope rather clearly, more severe than someone who has tweeted a slightly racist joke in their teen years. Thus, an element of our determination of immorality should keep severity in mind

as a consideration.[2] Persistence addresses the issue of whether the person has "changed." If they once held these beliefs in the distant past but have *truly* reformed, this may decrease the degree to which we perceive their wronging as having been. Finally, remorse can take the form of the perceived sincerity of their apology, their willingness to be educated on their wrongdoing, their reparations, etc. These factors may, of course, all be subject to case-by-case considerations.

To contrast this with another element of my view, a predatory artist is just as Matthes outlines. Predatory behaviour, whether sexual or physical abuse, or exploitation, goes *beyond* ignorant comments, and it is *necessary* to cancel an artist in this case because they are granted access to opportunities to engage in abuse *because* of the fame and power their reputation brings. Without a platform granted to them by their names, they carry no such similar weight and will be given fewer opportunities to engage in wrongdoing by abusing their power. Once again, I cannot singlehandedly determine the criteria for evaluating an artist's behaviour, but I hope this provides some guidelines.

Some may wonder *how* exactly we should go about deplatforming these immoral artists. I believe this solution is twofold: a collective *disengaging* and *discrediting*. Firstly, with regards to disengaging, I acknowledge Matthes' point that since the "defining feature of an ethical art consumer is the ability to thoughtfully evaluate the relationship between an artist's immoral behaviour and their art" (Matthes, 95), then if the ability to engage with the work is stripped from us, we are not able to "exercise [our] own moral agency" (Matthes, 95). I grant him this and thereby argue that we should not focus on *censorship*, but rather we ought to *choose* to disengage in order to impact the way artists exert their influence. If the artist has no audience, there is no reason to present their work on a wider scale. For example, consider a famous painter who is deeply racist and a sexual abuser. Would it matter if everyone chose to close their eyes when they come across his paintings if he still has an army of fans to whom he can spread his bigotry? Or consider an instance in which this abuser's fans unfollow and ignore him, eliminating his influence, resulting in organizations having no desire to work with him (since he has little to no fame associated to his name anymore), thereby devaluing his credibility. Rather than censoring his creations, the aim will shift to forming an environment in which his creations *hold no worth*, setting a precedent

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[2] I recognize the shortcomings of such an element, caused by potentially relative notions of severity. While not in the scope of this paper, with regards to severity I urge for careful evaluation and considerations of common sense, while also noting each instance on a case-by-case basis.

that this behaviour is not tolerated because it will result in losing one's ability to influence.

In order to achieve the discrediting aspect, we ought to decrease the weight behind the words of immoral artists, and the respect associated to their name. This occurs both as a consequence of disengaging, as well as with a shift in mindset: both removing the value one gives to the words of this artist as well as the importance of their identity itself, through an acknowledgement of their wrongdoing. With both a collective disengagement and discrediting, the artist has far less influence and thereby makes a much less severe impact. My ultimate point is this: if immoral artists are in positions in which their reputations and their words have influence, when we cancel them, we ought to aim to limit their ability to influence in order to set the precedent that fame is *incompatible* with immorality. Thus, rather than accepting abuse and exploitation as being built into the world of fame, we allow for more morally *good* behaviour in the public eye to be brought into the spotlight.

My view is not without flaw, and I anticipate that there may be some objections, the biggest of which I understand to be that some may find my view to be quite similar to Matthes' presentation of the "preventing future harms" aim of cancellation, which he has already "rejected." With this objection I do not entirely disagree, since I acknowledge that my view aims to prevent future harms *through* deplatforming. But, to demonstrate how deplatforming will address the flaws found in the preventing future harms approach, I will address Matthes' two rejections. Firstly, with regards to the objection from deceased artists, one may bring up, how can we remove the weight carried by these artist's names when there is no platform to remove? In response to this, I admit that deplatforming may not be directly applicable to deceased artists, since they have no ability to spread their views more than they already have. That being said, the collective disengaging and discrediting alters the way they are remembered, tarnishing their legacies. Since with deceased artists the only remaining concern is the honour and respect associated with their name, we can address this through deplatforming, ridding them of the influence of their *reputations* and adding nuance to the way we remember them. Secondly, through deplatforming we *can* prevent future harms of racist or sexist artists, since their ability to spread such harmful views will be diminished through the loss of their platform. While this will not eliminate racism or homophobia, completely eradicating the world of any bigotry is highly inconceivable, and admittedly not attainable through cancellation. This does not mean that cancellation cannot work to prevent *any* harms, and by deplatforming,

an immoral artist's scope of harm is greatly decreased. Therefore, I maintain that by shifting focus to deplatforming, cancellation can benefit us by reducing the influence of immoral artists and cultivating an environment in which abuse and bigotry are not tolerated; through deplatforming, fame and immoral behaviour become demonstrably incompatible.

To conclude, while Matthes attempts to assert that cancelling immoral artists will not have a meaningful impact, I have argued why this would not be the case if we shift our aim to deplatforming the artists in question. Thus, by deplatforming immoral artists, we are able to reduce the impact their immoral beliefs and actions have, resulting in a precedent set for future artists in which their morally wrong actions cost them their fame.

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