

Extract from *The Big Questions*, by Lou Marinoff
 Bloomsbury, NY & London, 2003

Reissued in the USA as *Therapy for the Sane*, Bloomsbury, NY, 2004

Chapter 4 If You're Offended, Are You Harmed?

“A trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us.” – Blaise Pascal

“What’s on trial here today is political correctness. Now, political correctness is the idea that assumes that the worst thing we can do is offend somebody. Well, a lot of people were offended when Galileo suggested that the earth was revolving around the sun. A lot of people were offended by Picasso because in his portraits the eyes weren’t where they were supposed to be. A lot of people were offended by Rosa Parks when she wouldn’t sit in the back of an Alabama bus just because of the color of her skin. You see, everybody’s offended by something. A joke, a TV show, a song, an idea ... somebody’s going to be offended by something. And offending is very different from hurting ... Political correctness tries to protect us from ourselves, but what do we have to give up for it? We give up our sense of humor, our sense of romance, our sense of play. We give up the courage to be different, to think different.” – 12 Angry Kids

Too many people experience needless dis-ease due to a handful of fundamental confusions. With increasing frequency in recent times, people have confused privileges with rights, objectivity with subjectivity, wishing with willing, wanting with needing, price with worth, affluence with fulfillment, reality with appearance, and sameness with equality. Not to mention disease with dis-ease! In this vein, people cause themselves and others a lot of unnecessary suffering by ignoring the distinction between offense and harm. The costs of this ignorance, both personal and societal, have been monumental. Before we get to the troubles this mistaken equivalency causes us, we must first clarify just what “harm” and “offense” are, and thus make clear the difference between them. If you can learn not to confuse the two, and learn how not to take offense, you might just spare yourself a lot of dis-ease, and maybe even harm. I am very serious about this: the confusion of offense with harm is itself a potentially harmful mistake, with dire consequences awaiting those who persist in making the error.

What is Harm?

Suppose you’re riding the subway and somebody big and heavy accidentally steps on your foot. Suppose your foot is actually injured in the process – perhaps some small bones are broken. This is a harm; namely, a physical injury to your person.

Now, further suppose that you need healthy feet to do your work; perhaps you are a letter-carrier, or a dancer. With a broken foot, you are temporarily prevented from earning your living. This is a collateral harm; namely, an obstacle to the fulfillment of your normal duties or interests, which disappears only when your injury disappears.

If the person who stepped on your foot says “I’m sorry,” you certainly have the power to accept the apology. However, the apology and your acceptance of it do not reverse the harm to your foot, or the collateral harm to your career.

In America, the person who stepped on your foot might be liable for your medical costs as well as your loss of income, at least in a civil court. If they had planned to step on your foot, or had been hired by someone else to step on your foot, then (although the harms done to you are just the same as if it had been an accident) the perpetrator could be charged with a crime – some kind of assault, most likely.

So there is a difference between intentional versus unintentional harm. Either way, your foot is still injured. But whether it occurred by accident or on purpose makes a moral difference to you, as well as a legal difference to the system. A friend may harm you unintentionally, and you’d probably remain friends. A friend who harms you intentionally – well, that person is not really your friend at all.

Not all harms are caused by other people. Your foot could be injured by a dog, or a shark, or if you are struck by lightning, for example. You can’t sue or press charges against a thunderstorm, of course, even though it may have harmed you. Forces of nature act impartially.

In any event, harm is done actively to an unwilling victim who does not have a chance to accept or reject the act, and who does not condone it. That is, victims of harm do not seek to be harmed. If someone tries to harm you, you may or may not be able to defend yourself. If someone apologizes for stepping on your foot, you can forgive them — but your foot will still hurt. The physical harm is done, and apologizing doesn’t undo it.

What is Offense?

Now suppose you’re on the subway – with healthy feet – and you notice one of your fellow travelers staring at your toes protruding from your sandals. This seems a bit odd or threatening to you (a stare is a threat among adult primates), or at the very least rude, so you ask “What are you staring at?”

“Your feet,” comes the answer. “They are the ugliest feet I’ve ever seen; I can hardly believe my eyes!” You feel provoked, angry and upset; you are experiencing dis-ease. You’ve been offended.

You have not, however, been harmed. Your feet are just fine, and there isn’t any collateral harm either. You can still walk or dance, go about your daily life, perform your work unimpeded.

Now I have some news for you: Those who are offended play an active role in being offended. Offense is merely offered to someone, who must then decide whether to accept the insult or not. If someone tries to offend you, you always have the option to refuse to take offense, provided

you know how to exercise it. You cannot be offended without your own consent. (But you can be harmed without your consent. See the difference?) Thus, in a civil society, if we say something that unintentionally offends someone, we can always apologize by saying “No offense intended” – and the other person can answer “None taken.” If someone apologizes for staring at your feet, you can forgive them and feel no insult. And if an offense is offered but not accepted, there is no offense, no harm and, furthermore, no dis-ease.

And Never the Twain Shall Meet

Then there’s the possibility of someone first stepping on your foot and then saying your feet are ugly. We would say they are “adding insult to injury.” The very phrase indicates there is a significant difference between the two.

To sum up: harm is a one-way street, while offense runs both ways. You can be harmed against your will, but never offended against your will. That is a powerful distinction. And I urge you to consider the benefits of drawing it as often as necessary. You can maximize your ease by refusing to take offense, or maximize your dis-ease by seeking it at every possible turn. The Roman Stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, knew this very well. He had learned it from his teacher, the freed slave and great philosopher Epictetus. “We are not disturbed by things, but by the views we take of them.”

“Take away your opinion, and there is taken away the complaint ‘I have been offended.’ Take away the complaint ‘I have been offended’ and the offense is gone.” — Marcus Aurelius

The Costs of Confusion

As Americans and others have collectively lost sight of the distinction between offense and harm – taking every proffered offense as a definite harm — the costs are mounting. The courts are clogged with frivolous but lucrative lawsuits, rewarding people for perpetuating this confusion. School children stage murderous attacks on their classmates and teachers in response to perceived slights. Society has muzzled, and even prosecuted, artists, scholars, political activists and scientists simply because their work wasn’t to everyone’s taste, infringing the civil liberties our nation is predicated upon and depriving the culture of everything from scholarly advances to entertainment to insight into our national character.

The rise of “political correctness” in the universities, which has now spread to corporations and governments, the justice system and the military, has robbed us of our common sense and ability to seek and speak truths for fear of stepping on someone else’s metaphorical toes. What may have begun as an exercise in instilling civic virtues such as politeness, which creates ease, has mutated into a totalitarian regime of thought-control, which creates dis-ease. We’re banning books, inflating grades, censoring scholars, refusing to make vital moral distinctions. Just as with personal issues, social and political dis-eases cannot begin to be eased until they are correctly identified. And they

can never be correctly identified if people are afraid to know or speak the truth about their causes.

What's Wrong with Kids Today

Let's look at one extreme example of this phenomenon in more detail: The increase in horrific acts of violence committed by schoolchildren. Typically, the perpetrators – including children of the affluent, from “good” homes – appear to be retaliating for having been taunted or rejected by their peers. Some slight – a word or gesture or casual rejection – is met with lethal force. That is, offense is offered, then it is accepted, next it is confused with harm, and finally the imaginary “harm” leads to drastic retaliation. It's not really any different from the gang-related homicides in American inner cities, where as little as a single act of “dissing” (disrespecting) someone is punishable by violent death.

Thomas Hobbes, who devoted his long philosophical life to the study of human conflict and its resolution, wrote, in 1651, that people will resort to violence “for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.” In other words, they will kill merely for being “dissed.”

Centuries later, in 1914, Sigmund Freud noted the same tendency, and attributed it to the Id, the chaotic or infantile domain of unconscious mind. According to Freud, the Id is like that ancient tyrant Draco, who sought to eliminate criminals once and for all by punishing every crime by death. (Even these “Draconian” measures didn't work.) Freud thought that the Id, hard-wired into everybody's unconscious, makes us all wishful Dracos. Thus, if someone accidentally steps on your foot, or says something unkind about your mother, your unconscious Freudian urge is to kill him.

“In our unconscious impulses we daily and hourly get rid of anyone who stands in our way, of anyone who has offended or injured us ... Indeed, our unconscious will murder even for trifles; like the ancient Athenian code of Draco, it knows no other punishment for crime than death.” – Sigmund Freud

Notice how Hobbes and Freud used that same word, “trifles,” to describe the pettiness of some offenses which, when accepted instead of refused, become pretexts for violent or lethal retaliation. Duels used to be fought for this reason too. Officers sitting together at the same table could hardly get through a meal without offending one another. To salvage his honor, an officer and gentleman was not allowed to refuse an offense. Instead, he had to “demand satisfaction,” which meant dueling – often to the death. The world lost at least one mathematical genius in this way: Galois, the inventor of Group Theory. The custom of dueling was first abolished by the French army. Gallic peoples can be notoriously thin-skinned, and the French were losing more officers (and mathematical geniuses) in duels than in battles. Contemporary democracies are losing lives as well as productivity over the same trifles. George Santayana famously said “Those who cannot remember the past are

condemned to repeat it.” Unfortunately, he was right.

The current epidemic of juvenile violence was anticipated by William Golding in his novel *Lord of the Flies*, in which a group of young English schoolboys, supposedly well brought-up and fully civilized, is shipwrecked on a tropical island. Without adult supervision—and discipline, love, and social structure—they quickly degenerate into a tribe of murderous savages.

Golding reinforces Hobbes’s and Freud’s points: That civilization is only a thin veneer over animalistic human nature. If you strip away this veneer, or allow it to wear away through neglect, what you expose is a self-centered and rapacious animal that will kill its own kind for no more than looking at it the wrong way – or for failing to share its beliefs.

When *Lord of the Flies* was made into a movie in 1963, director Peter Block thought he would have a hard time coaxing his schoolboy actors to abandon their civility, forget their table manners, and behave as savages. He needn’t have worried: they required very little instruction or encouragement. The director later wrote: “My experience showed me that the only falsification in Golding’s fable is the length of time the descent to savagery takes . . . the complete catastrophe could occur within a long weekend.”

The failure to make a second vital distinction, between what is thinkable and what is doable, is also causing problems here. If Hobbes, Freud and Golding are right, then people will always—whether consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously—think about doing heinous things to others in retaliation for mere insults. In a free society, we don’t and shouldn’t wish to control people’s thoughts or speech. So the imperative becomes to encourage people to *think* freely, including harboring thoughts about what they would like to do to others, while discouraging them from acting on those thoughts. In other words, you should be free to think as you please, and free to speak as you please, but not free to act as you please.

We’re missing the larger point if we blame juvenile violence only on vitriolic role models, vile television, vulgar movies, vicious popular music and so on, without taking into account the confusion of offense with harm. Our children must be taught, early and often, that they will experience all kinds of dis-eases in life, including taunting, rejection, and the many other forms of social cruelty which are daily inflicted on kids by other kids, in the playground and the schoolyard (not to mention by adults on adults in the wider world). Children must also learn the corollary: that no mere insult is a justifiable cause for violent retaliation. We must help them cultivate an internal sense of their own moral worthiness, so that no one can possibly offend them with words. When we do the exact opposite, and try to restrict speech and even thought for fear of offending someone (because we mistakenly think it’s harmful), we end up rendering people completely defenseless against any “unsanctioned” thoughts or words. In other words, we cripple their capacity to be autonomous and dignified human beings. That’s bad news.

Children must be taught to heed the line between subjectivity and objectivity, so that what somebody else thinks of them, or calls them, is far less important than what they are to themselves, and to those who really count in their lives. If they have a sense of their own intrinsic human worth,

which needs to be reinforced when they are young, then nobody can diminish that worth by name-calling or any other kind of offense. They need to know that the only one who can devalue their worth is themselves, by sinking to the level of those who would offend them. This is all part of what I call “moral self-defense” (MSD), and it’s the same thing the rest of us grown ups need to practice to avoid the dis-ease of mistaking offense for harm. I’ll go into more detail shortly.

When Offense Becomes Harm

It is important to note that under certain conditions, offense *can* become harmful. If you take offense on a daily basis, you may not be able to mobilize sufficient moral self-defense, and eventually the repeated offenses can have a cumulative harmful effect. That’s especially true to the emotionally vulnerable, such as children. Take, for example, a child whose parents continually call him “stupid.” To call a child stupid once is offensive; to repeat that on a daily basis is harmful. Why? The child needs to believe (for a time) that his parents know best, so he will probably behave in accord with their description and expectations of him, at least until he grows up and accepts responsibility for describing himself. (Some people never do, and usually need psychological help.) The child who is repeatedly told he is “stupid” may then behave as though he *were* stupid. Such deliberate underachievement, caused by the acceptance of repeated offence by one who is unable to defend himself, is obviously harmful to the child’s better interests.

Adults can be verbally abused too, and “anger management” programs are not enough to prevent such abuse. Men and women alike could benefit from instruction in moral self-defense, learning how not to provoke, and how not to be provoked in the first place. Then there would be less anger to manage, all around. Both sexes need to understand each other’s triggers much better than they do, if they wish to prevent offense from escalating into harm. (For more on the sexes, see chapter eight.)

Fortunately, with some philosophical help, adults at least can develop a greater capacity for moral self defense, and learn how not to take offense even when offense is insistently or forcefully offered. Children need this too. Yet there has hardly been any demand for moral self-defense instruction in schools or corporations. That’s a pity; they are desperately needed. An hour of MSD is worth a planeload of grief counselors.

We must to be able to tolerate a certain amount of offensiveness in our daily lives, but the emotionally vulnerable need to be able to remove themselves from the offender or the offending stimulus if too frequent or intense, lest it becomes harmful.

Cases of Offense versus Harm in Higher Education

You might suppose that the higher education system would be the ideal place for designing curricula to reverse the harms done by confusion of offense with harm, but that’s not the case. In fact, it’s the opposite. The universities themselves are largely responsible (and morally culpable) of perpetuating this confusion. They have taught and therefore spread this confusion to the whole of

society: professionals and laypersons of all kinds, in every stratum. Let me give you a couple of illustrations.

The cases share a common theme, namely the question race relations in an increasingly diverse cultural mosaic. What holds true in America also holds true in the wider world: For social ease to replace dis-ease, greater emphasis has to be placed on humanity, which unites people, and not ethnicity or other factors which divide them. The lessons here are for the whole global village, not just for America. As populations become more diverse all over the world, it is increasingly vital to personal flourishing and world peace that people perceive and conceive of one another as unique human beings, and not merely as representatives of this or that race or tribe. For ease to replace dis-ease, humanity must take precedence over ethnicity.

Alicia's Case: Grade Inflation and Dehumanization

This case comes from one of my philosophy courses at City College in New York. I had graded a quiz, and one of the students, Alicia, asked to see me after class.

“Did I really earn an A on this quiz?” Alicia asked, “or did you just inflate my grade to make me feel better?” Considering the quality of her work, I thought this was an odd question.

“In my courses,” I replied, “students get grades they earn. Your work merited an A, so I gave you an A.”

To my surprise, upon hearing this, she actually burst into tears: out of gratitude for having her excellence recognized on its own merits. Then she explained to me that she had transferred from another well-known university in Manhattan, where she had been repeatedly offended (but not yet harmed) by the university's widespread practice of inflating grades for “visible minorities,” lately known as “diverse” students. Only then did I understand what she had been driving at with her original question.

I saw before me an intelligent and highly-motivated student who wanted to earn good grades on the bases of her ability and effort. That she happened to be a female of color was irrelevant to her understanding of the rudiments of philosophy. Like all teachers, philosophers are supposed to awaken ideas in the mind. Ideas and minds have no race, ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, age, nor any other property of physical bodies and collective identities. Alicia was offended by the system's categorization of her as a black female affirmative action statistic, supposedly needing her grades inflated so she would be “competitive” and “feel good” about herself. Accepting an offer of counterfeit grades would have stigmatized her in her own eyes. Alicia needed to be free of the past, and that could happen only if she were free to succeed on her own terms.

So Alicia did the prudent thing, by finding professors who treated her as a human being—not as a statistic or a political project—and who encouraged her to manifest her own excellence. She was able to escape the offending stimulus of grade inflation, before it became harmful to her and society alike.

Yes, harmful. Why? For two reasons. First: We are all students in life, and the only way to

make genuine progress is to honestly assess what we have learned and what we have yet to learn. If you possess a university degree that says you can read and write at a given level, have mastered a given body of knowledge, and are therefore qualified to pursue a given career, it had better be true. Otherwise, there are no more standards of professional performance. Academic degrees can be faked, but professional performances cannot. Second, it is both offensive and harmful to be treated with bias of any kind, either negative or positive. Depriving people of their entitlements such as civil rights is dehumanizing, therefore offensive and harmful. But providing people with unmerited rewards also dehumanizes them, and is likewise offensive and harmful.

“No bird soars too high, if she soars with her own wings.” – William Blake

George’s Case: Too Much Diversity, Not Enough Humanity

A male student named George attended one of my philosophy forums at a Manhattan bookstore. He was furious. Why? Because of the way he was being treated at his university. George happened to be part African-American, part Latino and part American Indian. It seemed that just about every club, agency and organization on campus wanted to “help” George by awarding him this or that special scholarship for “minorities” or “diverse” students. The problem was that no-one seemed to care very much about *George*. They cared a great deal that, in their terms, he was a multi-purpose statistic: based on his race or ethnicity or heritage, they could shower him with special awards. But the more they did this, the angrier George became. You see, nobody ever asked him about his academic interests. What had he studied? What did he want study? Isn’t it odd that these questions were irrelevant to their concerns? They treated George as a means to their end (i.e. their statistical agenda), and not as an end in himself (i.e. as a good student worthy of assistance). This violated Kant’s fundamental criterion of human dignity. No wonder George was angry.

He eventually transferred to another university, into an academic program that actually cared about his academic interests. He also became fulfilled as a student, and his dis-ease abated.

What’s the connection with offense and harm? It’s this: The system feared that George would be offended (and therefore, it supposed, harmed) if insufficient attention was paid to George’s diverse heritage. But the system’s way of alleviating its fear of offense actually harmed George’s real interests as a student, and therefore also harmed society’s larger interests in seeing George succeed as a student.

“Now I say: man and generally any rational animal exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will ...” — Immanuel Kant

Refusing to Take Offense

It is one’s very sense of dignity and integrity as a human being that is at risk from perpetual offense, more so than one’s ego, image, security or identity. At the biological level, where emotions

are primal, we are programmed to react strongly to offense via the ancient and powerful mechanisms of “fight or flight.” At the psychological level, where emotions manifest as feelings and interact with primitive thoughts, it is the psyche itself that can be metaphorically wounded by offenses to infantile attachments (insulting your mother), egocentric perspective (insulting you), group identity (insulting your race or tribe), or deepest insecurities (insulting your religion or relationship with God). Here the conditioned response is retaliation or revenge.

At the philosophical level, however, reason and interpretation combine with will and imagination to rule over both biology and psychology, and neither genetic programming nor behavioral conditioning need hold sway. The higher powers of the mind encounter offense – and deflect it, or make light of it, or keep it at bay with humor or principle. This is where you need to be able to discover the good in ill – and transcend both. Those who have fought their way through to this domain find little to their distaste. Whatever offends them never harms them. It is this free and open mind that forms the foundation of human dignity.

The good news is that, at least once we’re past our formative years, we can refuse most of life’s offenses with relative ease. In the civilized world, if you don’t like a book, you can stop reading it. If you don’t like a TV program, you can change the channel. If you don’t like your professor, you can take a different course. In the civilized world, if you really dislike your spouse, neighbors, job, political party, country, or religion, you can change them too. We have fought long and hard to gain and preserve that much personal liberty. There’s an argument to be made (though not right here) that we may even have too much liberty for our own good – but that’s another story. In any event, with so much liberty, there is not really much excuse for taking offense—unless you prefer dis-ease to ease.

Laughter Used to be Available over the Counter

Whether or not they are frequent or intense enough to be harmful, the world is full of provocations. The only part of this scenario you can reliably control is your response. How you respond to proffered offenses depends on your experience of life, as well as your attitudes and habits, which in turn depend on your philosophy. If your current *modus operandi* isn’t working for you, the philosophy you are living by may need a tune-up. By changing your philosophy, then, you can also change the way you respond to provocation. You can even diminish the likelihood that others will attempt to provoke you.

Responses to offense vary across a broad spectrum, from culture to culture and from person to person. The worst option is violence, which “pays back” offense with harm. Another option is tit-for-tat: exchanging insult for insult. You can also use humor to defuse the situation. You can be cynical or caustic, retaliating in a way that often goes right over the head of your offender.

Too many people have failed to learn to defend themselves against proffered offense, and they seem to exist in a perpetual state of being offended, or are at least constantly prepared to be offended. A lot of them appear utterly humorless. Many do not love themselves or the world very much. They experience continuous dis-ease. Instead of becoming happy themselves, they want happy

people to share their dis-ease. So they invent rules for controlling what people are allowed to say and even think, with a constant eye on not allowing anyone to offend anyone else, thereby protecting (they think) themselves as well. Ultimately this creates a counterproductive system that not only interferes with personal liberty, but also inhibits free-flowing love of life and the healing nature of humor. It's essentially a Soviet-style system, with centrally-planned thinking rather than a centrally-planned economy. Only one thing is certain about this system: it produces more dis-ease than ease for all concerned.

It is wiser for you to deflect trifles, perhaps subtly turning the tables in the process. My favorite example of this kind involves the conductor Herbert von Karajan. One day Von Karajan was walking briskly along a downtown city street, and another man was walking just as briskly along an intersecting street. They were on a collision course, but were unable to see one another approaching because a large corner office building obstructed their views. They literally collided at the corner, and both of them bounced back at the shock and surprise of the collision.

“Imbecile!” exclaimed the man to Von Karajan.

At this, Von Karajan simply doffed his hat as if in greeting and replied “Von Karajan.”

This anecdote illustrates an intermediate level of moral self-defense. I call it “Social Judo” when I teach it in workshops. Instead of taking offense and retaliating by similar name-calling or worse, Von Karajan did two surprising things. First, he reflected the intended offense back to the offender. As if he were a duck shedding water, it never actually touched him. Second, he transmuted a potential quarrel into a humorous episode — the opposite of offense being not more offense, but laughter. People who can laugh at themselves, and make others laugh, are not only happier in general, but are also much more difficult to offend. Now if Von Karajan were called an “imbecile” on a regular basis, everywhere he went, he would sooner or later tire of doffing his hat, because the continuous stream of offense would wear down even his capacity to defend himself. But as it stood, he struck just the right chord. That's hardly surprising for a great conductor, but you can do it too.

It Takes Wisdom to Play Shakespeare's Fool

If you have ever wondered why the industry of stand-up comedy is flourishing in America (and worldwide) as never before, consider it in this light. Many if not most stand-up comics bring humor to bear on touchy issues involving sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and politics—while ordinary people feel themselves no longer at liberty to discuss these issues freely in the media, in universities or in the workplace. So now we have to hire comedians to exercise our freedom of expression for us. And that's no laughing matter.

This was also the role that Shakespeare's fools performed so aptly in his plays, as have court jesters done from time immemorial. Even such “fools” are never completely immune from censure: Offering potentially offensive humor to entrenched powers, and provoking laughter instead of wrath, is an artful but dangerous game — as the tragic careers of pioneering stand-up comics like Lenny Bruce richly illustrate. But as our culture of conformity grows, it also needs ever-wiser fools to

balance its stultifying self-righteousness. Thus it sanctions nightly episodes of extreme non-conformity, for the sake of entertainment. Some of the most politically incorrect people on the planet, such as David Letterman and Jay Leno, are staples of late-night TV. Enjoying the temporary immunity of the court jester, their job is to good-naturedly butcher everybody's sacred cows. But you'd better not repeat any of their jokes on the job or in the classroom, in case someone takes "offense" today at something millions of viewers laughed at yesterday. You could be out of a job, as was the poor guy who repeated a Seinfeld joke to a secretary at his office. One reporter described it this way:

"Let an employee make sexual jokes at work, and you could lose millions of dollars in a lawsuit. Fire an employee for making sexual jokes at work, and you could lose millions of dollars in a lawsuit. Dinged if you do, and dinged if you don't."

Or we can pre-empt this whole Catch-22 scenario by distinguishing between offense and harm, and teaching moral self-defense to maintain the distinction. That's much less costly, and much more fun, for all concerned.

"This fellow's wise enough to play the fool ..." – William Shakespeare

Everybody Offends Somebody Sometime

My apologies to the late Dean Martin, and his theme song "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime." In life, everybody offends somebody sometime too. That is to say, people may decide to take offense at you. Are you male, female, hermaphroditic, androgynous, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or celibate? Whatever your sex and sexual orientation, you can always find support for it, and opposition to it, in the world. Why accept offense at opinions that are opposed to yours? People who cannot accept your sex or sexual orientation clearly cannot accept their own, so perhaps they malign yours. Don't make their problem your own. Is your skin pigmentation black, white, brown, yellow, red, or some other shade? Whatever your skin color, you can always find some people who are biased in your favor because of it, and others who are biased in your disfavor because of it. Why accept offense at remarks that seek to diminish your humanity based on your pigmentation? People who make such remarks diminish their own humanity. Don't make their problem your own. Similarly, others may not share your tastes in art, music, food, fashion, politics or religion. If they seek to elevate themselves by lowering you, to make themselves feel superior by making you feel inferior, they will succeed only if you sink to the occasion by accepting their offense. Don't make their problem your own.

There is no point in taking offense – as long as prejudices remain verbal, they harm only the interests of the person who harbors them. The best defense lies in refusing to take offense. The worst defense lies in seeking to be offended at every turn. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

Advanced Moral Self-Defense

If the elementary lesson of this chapter is that offense and harm are two different things, and the intermediate lesson is to learn to refuse to accept offense, we've come now to the advanced lessons: accepting harm without being offended, and turning harm into help. Taking to heart the first two lessons will be enough to alleviate much dis-ease in most people's lives, and this last component will not be for everyone. But we can all seek inspiration from it if nothing else, and it just might prove invaluable for you one day.

We'll look at applying this lesson in political, civil and personal arenas, through the examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. — and Jackie Mason. I want to acknowledge and thank my former student and current friend Joseph Brown, for his insight on this theme. Some years ago I was leading a classroom discussion on the philosophy of non-violent resistance to oppression. Joseph realized that Gandhi and King had gone much further down the road of successfully differentiating offense and harm than we had discussed. Far beyond refusing to confuse the two, or simply refusing to take offense, Joseph observed they had actually accepted harms without taking offense, thereby going so far as to draw progress toward the common good out of harms done personally to them.

Gandhi and King both trace their approaches to Henry David Thoreau who, in the 19th century, endured arrest rather than paying a poll tax that he deemed irrelevant to his labors and an affront to his principles. He spent a night in jail before his friends got him released by paying it for him the next day. Being nothing if not dramatic, Thoreau wrote that in an unjust society, the proper place for a just man was prison. Both Gandhi and King later took this directly to heart, and each spent considerably more time in jail (to great political effect).

“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.”
– Henry David Thoreau

Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi managed to convince the British to give up colonizing India and grant Indians political independence – without holding office, raising an army, or firing a single shot. He deplored violence, and went on several hunger strikes in order to quell it in the ranks of his own followers. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance is known as *satyagraha*, or “a firm and unflinching adherence to truth.” What truth? That people who oppress others are morally wrong to do so, but need to learn (or be taught) that they are wrong. Oppression is both an offense and a harm; it offends one's humanity, and harms a host of human interests.

Gandhi's enlightened form of resistance consisted in turning those who were oppressed into moral mirrors of a sort. By absorbing offense and harm without retaliation or hatred – even, in fact, with love — the oppressed reflected the image of wrong-doing back to their oppressors, teaching

them to (eventually) realize the error of their ways and abandon the oppression, of their own free will, out of their own moral conviction. When oppressors are met instead with violent resistance, oppressors inevitably become that much more convinced of the righteousness of their cause and their right to self-defense, which only more deeply entrenches the oppression.

As it was, the British ultimately gave up India, the “Jewel in the Crown” of their vast empire, swayed by nothing more (or less!) than the spiritual fortitude and moral conviction of a man who owned no property, held no office, commanded no army. Gandhi and his followers endured insult and injury alike, without taking offense or returning harm themselves. By the purity of their thoughts and deeds, they attained an unprecedented political victory.

“This *ahimsa* [non-harm] is the basis of the search for truth ... It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Martin Luther King Jr.

In a similar way, adapting Thoreau’s philosophy and Gandhi’s practices to the American south, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the demise of segregation in the USA and helped secure civil rights for African-Americans. By marching peaceably in protest, King and his followers attracted offense in the form of verbal abuse, and harm in the form of beatings, arrests and other brutality. Still, they remained steadfast in refusing to retaliate against or hate their oppressors. And just as the British gradually learned that their colonial occupation of India was a moral wrong, Americans came to know that their denial of civil rights to people of color was a moral wrong.

“Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.” — Martin Luther King

It must be noted that this approach will not work in every situation, for it relies on activating the moral sensibilities of the oppressors. Where morality is entirely lacking, resisters find no ground in which to plant the seeds of moral awareness. The British and Americans alike had more than enough Christian morality and Enlightenment philosophy as part of their mainstream cultures to be able eventually to see the moral light.

But think about what might have happened if a Gandhi or King had arisen in Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, or Hussein’s Iraq. No doubt he would have been arrested and murdered in very short order. Where the British jailed Gandhi repeatedly, they dared not murder

him for fear of violating their own laws, and provoking violent rebellion across India. (And each time they jailed and released the popular leader, he gained even more support and strength.) Similarly, authorities in segregated American states feared provoking race riots across the country, and again could only watch as King's following intensified with each new arrest and release. But unlike the British, who had no intention of murdering every Indian in India, or the Americans, who had no intention of murdering every African in America, the Nazis fully intended to murder every Jew in Europe; Stalin, to murder every "counter-revolutionary" in Russia. If your oppressors intend to murder you, they will not give you much chance to teach them moral lessons. You may need to put them under lock and key to get them into a classroom.

Jackie Mason

I haven't forgotten I promised you Jackie Mason along with more sober-minded role models. His story brings this concept down to a personal level, so I'm sure it will be the one most likely to let you see how this can work in your own life. Mason, a great but definitely politically incorrect comedian, descendant of rabbis, and erstwhile rabbinical student, managed to absorb personal harm without taking offense, and then transmute the harm into humor for the benefit of others.

Mason is a keen observer of humanity and its cultural differences, and it is from there that much of his humor springs. Naturally, this means that some people find him offensive; others, hilarious. (We have already seen that indignation and laughter are opposite sides of the same coin.) Take, for example, Mason's routine about the late great Frank Sinatra, based on the premise that Sinatra actually couldn't sing very well at all. A great entertainer, yes; a great singer, no. Mason's point was that you don't have to be technically outstanding to be famous. Sinatra won over his fans with popular repertoire, charismatic personality, brilliant orchestration and production, a unique style of delivery—and famously, with a little help from his Godfather.

One night, after a performance that included the Sinatra bit, Mason was approached in his dressing room by three tough guys warning him to lay off the Sinatra jokes. Frank had heard about them, they said, and he wasn't amused.

Despite Sinatra's backstage reputation for the capacity to be cruel and vicious, Mason ignored the warning. Not too many performances later, Mason was assaulted in the alley behind the theater by three assailants, beaten so badly he had to be hospitalized.

As soon as Mason recovered, he introduced a new routine into his act. Paraphrased, it went something like this:

"I want to tell you about a great friend of mine, a man who saved my life. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be standing here entertaining you tonight. That man is Frank Sinatra. Here's what he did for me. One night, as I was leaving the theater, three thugs attacked me in the alley. I thought they were going to kill me. They were beating me and beating me, and I thought they were going to beat me to death. But all of a sudden this guy appears from nowhere and saves my life. It was Frank Sinatra! He walked right up and said 'That's enough, boys.' And they stopped! If not for him, they

would have beaten me to death. I owe my life to Frank Sinatra.”

This speaks not only of Mason’s comic genius, but also his great humanity. He had suffered savage harm, but ultimately transformed it into a hilarious anecdote for others to enjoy. Where Von Karajan made humor out of offense, Mason managed to create it out of harm. This is moral self-defense of the highest order – proof that you don’t have to be in pursuit of major political transformation to stand on higher moral ground.

The Politics of Offense and Harm

Credit John Stuart Mill with defining the philosophy behind the enlightened political approach to offense and harm. His essay *On Liberty* lays out the idea that the main purpose of government should be to prevent its citizens from doing harm to one another. This, according to Mill, is the sole justification a state has for restraining any of its citizens. It’s known as “the harm principle.”

“... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” — John Stuart Mill

Note that Mill does not include harm to oneself in this category. So if you want to run risks, that’s your business according to him, as long as you don’t harm anyone else, and as long as no-one else is depending on you. To take this to an extreme: If you’re all alone in the world, and want to drink yourself into a stupor every night, and can afford the liquor, then Mill would leave you to it. But if you’re behind the wheel, or directing traffic, or performing surgery, or looking after children, or doing any of a host of things that require sobriety, then your inebriation could bring grievous harm to others—in which case Mill would say that you have no right to engage in excess drinking, and, moreover, that the State has an obligation to prevent you from putting others at risk.

Mill is just as clear about offense. While he believes you have a right not to be harmed, you have absolutely *no* right not to be offended. He upholds each person’s liberty “... of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing as we like, without impediment from our fellow creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong.” The initial idea here is to prevent a majority—moral or otherwise—from dictating their tastes to a minority. And that includes *everybody*, because we are all minorities of one.

Adam’s Case: Creativity Meets Dictatorship of Taste

Adam’s case illustrates how Mill’s fundamental idea is being ignored in Western culture, and how creative freedom of artistic expression can be undermined by dictatorship of taste. A composer who studied western classical music, Adam also studied traditional music of India and Japan, with indigenous teachers. When Adam composed a piece blending Indian percussion, a Japanese stringed instruments and a European chamber ensemble, he was accused by an Indian musicologist of “voice

appropriation.” The operative notion in this accusation is that only an Indian is “supposed” to use Indian instruments, and so forth. If any non-Indian does, it’s somehow “offensive” to Indians. You see where this leads? A female novelist can write only about female characters, or else she’s “appropriating the voices” of males. I guess the authors of children’s books have to be children, too. We’d better pull *Harry Potter* off the shelves, for double jeopardy! In Adam’s case, the commission for the piece was actually withdrawn, unless he agreed not to “appropriate” other cultures’ instruments. Did the musicologist have a right to dislike Adam’s taste in composition and orchestration? Yes. Was the musicologist or anyone else harmed by it? No. Did the system have a right to censor Adam’s composition because the musicologist didn’t like it? No. Did the system need to take offense at all? No. Did the system confuse offense with harm? Yes.

When Adam learned about Mill’s philosophy, his dis-ease abated somewhat. Even though his creative interests had been harmed by political correctness and its dictatorship of taste, and his audience deprived of the fruits of his creativity, Adam realized that he himself did not have to take offense at the system’s confusion of offense with harm, and its subsequent abuse of Mill’s harm principle.

Avoiding Offense and Courting Harm

Mill also offers a deeper reason why it’s vital for us to tolerate offense – but not harm. And that has to do with truth. Why is truth so important? Because: If you had to choose between dis-ease and disease, or between feeling offended and being harmed, which choice would you make? Consistently, Mill would say that’s also up to you. But as long as you’d rather prevent disease and avert harm, then Mill would also say you’re better off knowing “offensive” truths and being safe rather than believing “inoffensive” falsehoods and being at risk. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Europe was ravaged by plagues during the middle ages. Most people believed back then that plagues were retributions from God, and so they congregated *en masse* in places of worship to pray for God’s forgiveness. But their gathering together also had the effect of helping to spread whatever contagious disease was going around. Now consider Mill’s point. Many religious people would have taken offense at being informed that their prayer-gatherings were more likely to facilitate the spread of the plague than its cure. But what’s worse: the dis-ease of challenging one’s religious beliefs, or the disease of plague itself? If you know the medical facts about plague, at least you can make an informed choice about your risks. But if truths are suppressed for fear of offense, real harms can ensue with no available choices for minimizing risk. That’s Mill’s vital point.

If we consider the global AIDS epidemic, the same reasoning applies today. In some places, the spread of HIV is still unchecked because opinion leaders and governments feel dis-ease in speaking openly about unsafe sexual practices that cause HIV to spread, and in addressing the social issues that give rise to unsafe sex itself. To spare themselves dis-ease, they facilitate others contracting the disease. Again, what’s worse: Re-examining one’s beliefs about sexuality and its expression, or contracting a potentially fatal illness?

Surely Mill was right that it's better to ascertain the truth, at least in so far as we can. And we will never know what's true unless we're allowed to think, speak, debate, write and publish as freely as we can – so that truths can emerge from arenas of freely contending ideas. The alternative is that falsehoods will be dictated to us. And in their train comes untold dis-ease, and sometimes disease and other harms as well.

“We have now recognized the necessity to the mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends) of freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion ... it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.” – John Stuart Mill

Kathi's Case: Back to Square 1+1

I've been moderating a monthly Philosopher's Forum in a Manhattan bookstore for several years now, and have facilitated dialogues on any subject the group wants to handle. Over time, we've addressed all the “hot-button” issues you can imagine – as well as the Big Questions in this book — and no-one has ever been harmed by our open and frank exchanges of views. In the diverse and eclectic intellectual hothouse of New York City, nothing makes us more aware of our common humanity than our passionate differences of opinion and taste, and our willingness to respect, tolerate and even embrace one another on account of those very differences. To really enjoy and appreciate this kind of liberty, you need to distinguish offense from harm in a hurry. So while I'm accustomed to being in the thick of heated debates about politics, religion, race, sex, drugs, tolerance, terrorism, education, and all the rest, I never dreamed that the question “What does 1+1 equal?” could cause much of a stir. I was mistaken.

One evening we were debating the perennial question of truth itself, when a bright and articulate young woman named Kathi, who held a responsible job in Manhattan, suggested that “All truths are relative.” She had been taught this by several professors at her Ivy League university, once a very good one. Nowadays, it too inflates grades systematically (for everybody, since literacy has declined nation-wide), and encourages its Faculty to teach that all truths are relative.

So I asked Kathi “How much are 1+1?”

She answered: “It depends.” She'd give no other answer, as she was sure it would vary with one's point of view. Moreover, she said she didn't want to express an opinion that might offend somebody else who happened to believe that one plus one equals three (or any other fashionable number). No matter that digital computers, and a lot of other things she needs to do her job, function precisely because $1+1=2$, and nothing else.

Now of course philosophers are supposed to doubt, and we apply doubt as an instrument of inquiry. Socrates made this method famous in antiquity, and it was put to great use by Rene Descartes in Early Modern times. But when Descartes declared “It is certain that nothing is certain,” he also left ample room for expressing logical and mathematical truths (e.g. $1+1=2$), which are the

most certain of all knowledge. While Descartes realized that we can be deceived by our senses, he never supposed that all knowledge is just a matter of opinion, or that all truth is relative.

We encountered moral relativism in chapters one and two. Recall, moral relativists refuse to distinguish right from wrong. And their unwillingness to do so causes considerable dis-ease. And now we have encountered a cornerstone of moral relativism itself: the sadly misguided notion that all knowledge is relative, period. Sorry, but it isn't. Life expectancies in the civilized world nearly doubled during the 20th century: because of reliable knowledge. Astronauts got to the moon and back: because of reliable knowledge. Computers have changed the way we work and play: because of reliable knowledge.

It's also true that the more we learn, the more we realize we don't know. But that doesn't mean we don't know anything! The human world is an increasingly complex place, more and more difficult to understand. Yet people strive unceasingly to make sense of things. How do we do so? — Primarily by building on reliable knowledge. Plato had a famous sign posted outside his Academy (the very first university), which said "Nobody Destitute of Geometry May Enter." Why? Because: Plato thought that mathematical truths were the most certain things, and should be learned before approaching more uncertain subjects like ethics and politics. He believed that the bigger questions in life (such as those about rightness and justice) could not even be properly formulated before the smaller ones (such as those about geometry) were answered.

Millions of people like Kathi are grappling with many issues in the global village, issues that concern us all and that can bring us considerable dis-ease: from economy to ecology, from health care to homelessness, from tolerance to terrorism. Plato would say that anyone who cannot make sense of the small questions — such as "What are 1+1?" — stands little chance with the bigger ones. If you can't do arithmetic, which is easy, how can you even begin tell right from wrong, which can be very difficult at times?

Plato would also say that any system of education that fails to guide its students out of the Cave must either reform itself or face collapse. And one of the first lessons in my reformed curriculum is – you guessed it – how to distinguish offense from harm.

"A civilization that can thus succumb to its vanquished enemy must first have become so degenerate that neither its appointed priests and teachers, nor anybody else, has the capacity, or will take the trouble, to stand up for it." – John Stuart Mill

Philosophical Exercises:

First exercise: Draw on your own experience to convince yourself of the soundness of this distinction between offense and harm.

1. Think of an occasion in your life when you were harmed but not offended. (For example: the time you fell off your bicycle and scraped your knee.)
2. Think of an occasion when you were offended but not harmed. (Perhaps you were taunted

by your schoolmates, or someone said something unkind to you.)

3. If it is possible for you to be harmed but not offended on the one hand, and offended but not harmed on the other, then offense and harm cannot be the same thing.

Second exercise: Think of something or someone who offended you. Why did you accept the offense? Can you discover a place of moral worth inside you, a place of human dignity that is immune from the shifting winds of external opinions? Remain there, and explore the inviolability of this place, and never allow an offense to intrude.

Third exercise: See if you can practice moral self-defense, by refusing to accept an offense the next time it is offered to you. At the elementary level, do not take the offense personally: You are not obliged to. At the intermediate level, see if you can change offense into humor, and deflect it back to the offender. At the advanced level, even harm can be accepted without anger or violent retaliation, provided that you can teach a moral lesson the one who harms you.