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In defence of taking offence: a reply to critics

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ABSTRACT


This article replies to the insightful contributions to the book symposium for *On Taking Offence*. These range from theoretical questions about how we should conceptualise an emotion like offence and the role of empirical evidence when justifying it, to practical questions about who has the power to take offence effectively and how to dispute another's offence-taking. In this reply, I first defend offence as a distinct emotion. Second, I argue against the implicit conception of social standing that underpins some of these challenges, as static and fixed rather than dynamic, emerging from the particularities of particular social interactions, and easily threatened. Third, I address the instrumental justification of offence. I conclude with some unanswered questions, and some reasons to remain optimistic about what taking offence can do.

KEYWORDS Cancel culture; social standing; anger; offence; emotion

Introduction

The contributors to this book symposium for *On Taking Offence* raise deep questions about how to best conceptualise emotions, about the epistemic claims of standpoint theory, and about the nature of social standing (McTernan, 2023). The contributions have also pushed me to carefully consider my optimism about the results of offence-taking, especially regarding cancellation culture and taking offence online. I am grateful for the engagement of my critics and for the chance to revisit some of the book's arguments.

Two of the contributors, Christopher Bennett (2024) and Macalester Bell (2024), question the book's conception of the emotion of offence, with Bennett asking how to tell whether we should get angry or be offended, and Bell suggesting that offence may not be a single discrete emotion.¹ Bell also doubts that I sufficiently address the worrying culture of taking offence and, especially, whether the account leaves space enough to reason about and dispute felt offence. Questions of adjudicating offence-taking arise, too,

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in Richard Child's (2024) defence of humour, which proposes a distinction between disrespect and a far more limited category of actual threats to standing. Lastly, Miriam Ronzoni (2024) casts doubt on offence's instrumental defence and questions my deflationary account of the differences between offence online and off. In this reply, I first address offence as a distinct emotion. Second, I examine the right way to conceptualise social standing and the role of offence in negotiating it. Third, I defend the instrumental justification of offence-taking.

Offence as a distinct emotion

Both Bell's and Bennett's contributions question my characterisation of the emotion of offence. Bennett questions whether offence and anger can be pulled apart, asking when we should feel offence rather than anger. Bell asks whether offence might be just a judgement, with an affective component of anger, or contempt, or disgust.

I begin with a methodological dispute. Despite anger's popularity as a topic amongst philosophers, I question Bennett's assumption that we ought to start from the thought that anger is appropriate – and then ask when might offence be better. This reveals an underlying difference over how to think about our emotional lives. On Bennett's more parsimonious account, we already have anger and blame. He asks, 'why do we need offence as well as anger in our emotional vocabulary?' (2024, p. 1). On mine, we have a rich, varied, and nuanced emotional life, of which anger and blame are only one small part, and so we ought to explore a far broader range of emotions. Indeed, there is no particular reason to think that anger and offence are especially close-by emotions. In stark contrast with anger, offence can be felt with a tinge of amusement, as in the case of mansplaining in its more dramatic incarnations. At other times, we could more easily see offence as nearer disgust or contempt, especially when we take offence at someone's egregious violations of norms.

Still, Bennett's question remains of when offence *in particular* is fitting, rather than some other emotion, like anger. Bennett is, of course, correct that emotions involve seeing different patterns and making different features salient, as well as involving different practical attitudes. After arguing that various of the differences that I highlight between anger and offence in the book won't suffice, he proposes instead focusing on the differing expressive actions of withdrawal and attack. But there is an alternative that he doesn't address. Offence, on my account, reacts primarily to a social violation, not a moral one: it is a social emotion. Offence, then, is merited for affronts to one's social standing, and anger for violations of moral norms. The two can come together, of course, where the social norm violation also wrongs someone, or where the moral violation also expresses disrespect. But the aspects of

the world the emotion makes salient differs for offence and anger: for offence, the affront to one's own standing, for anger, another acting wrongly. For offence, the agent perceives, then, a threat to their self-presentation. No such perception needs to be involved in anger, and offence involves resisting that threat, even if only rejecting it oneself, in deeming it offensive.²

That leaves Bell's challenge that offence isn't a distinct emotion to answer. Bell makes two observations to underpin that challenge. One is the sheer diversity of things at which people take offence. She gives examples including someone showing up for a date in shabby clothes, people not speaking English, and unfollowing someone on social media (2024, p. 3). However, in nearly all cases the diversity of targets that Bell finds is, in fact, unified, since all concern what another's behaviour signals about standing. Some are about norms taken to be in play but violated, where those norms have to do with standing and whether one is respected; others, at acts directly expressing disrespect or affronting one's standing. This includes, to illustrate, the disrespect of someone not dressing up for a date, the slight of being unfollowed, and the feeling, when hearing another language, of being made a stranger in one's own country. Now, not all of these are morally appropriate or justified cases of offence, but they are fitting ones, on my conception, in that they have to do with one's standing.

In addition, I take offering a philosophical analysis of emotion to be a revisionist task: aiming to pull out a core of shared experience, familiar in ordinary life, but still requiring some adaptation of our folk concept and some trimming of what counts at the edges. In focusing our attention on how it feels to have one's self-presentation threatened and to face an affront to one's social standing, I hope to have isolated a recognisable core of the emotion of offence. With greater conceptual clarity – even at the cost of some infidelity to folk conceptions – we gain a more nuanced and careful appraisal of the emotion.

Bell's second observation challenging the distinctness of the emotion of offence is that we do such different things when offended, ranging from slapping someone to withdrawing. However, this variation can be explained. We often feel more than one emotion. Offended people who strike out violently are, I'd suggest, also angry, creating the atypical gesture: normally, the expression of offence is of withdrawal. In addition, I suggest we ought not be too perturbed that offence comes in degrees with varying expressions, ranging from raised eyebrows to physical recoil. Take anger too: that can be expressed simply with a facial expression, with a cold reply, or in an explosion of violence.

What then of Bell's proposed alternative, where feeling offended consists in the judgement or perception that one has been slighted, which can then be 'affectively tinged' with anger, contempt, or disgust? Given the limits of this response piece, I cannot fully explore this interesting possibility, although

I think that analysing the relation of objects of offence-taking to these other emotions could be fruitful. Where we part ways, though, is that I still see offence as a distinct emotion, one made so by its evaluative component (the judgement or perception of an affront to one's social standing); by what it makes salient in our environment (the small, and sometimes grander, threats to our self-presentations); and in the way that it motivates us to seek to preserve or protect our standing (to resist, even if only in with facial expression, by removing ourselves from the threatening target, and so on). There is also, I hold, a distinct way that it feels to be offended: to feel estranged, sometimes only momentarily, when one's interaction is disturbed by another's failure to follow social norms or by their otherwise presenting a threat to one's self-presentation.

Negotiating our social standing

In the book, I argue that offence is a way of resisting an affront and so standing up for one's standing, given the ways that our standing is co-constructed and negotiated through interactions. Of course, we often interact from very unequal starting points and when we talk of social standing, we aren't only talking about features peculiar to the individual, but also their social roles and social groups – aspects of their identities and self-presentations – that might raise, or lower, their standing. So, in a single interaction between two people, one person might be the boss, another their employee; one a man, another a woman; one straight and the other gay; and so on. With that in view, let me turn to a set of challenges my critics offer to offence as a tactic in the negotiation of standing.

Social power

First is the charge from Ronzoni that surely, 'it is mostly those who are already privileged, or who already enjoy at least some kind of authority or standing' who can successfully use offence to subtly enforce or challenge norms, through things like sceptical expressions and raised eyebrows (2024, p. 4). Here, Ronzoni suggests that the people that fit the bill are those like, 'a priest, a figure of recognised moral authority, a very well-respected and experienced personal assistant to whose judgement her boss often defers' (2024, p. 4).

However, we are far, far more sensitive over and about our standing, the ways in which we present ourselves, than this highly restricted list of those with enough social power to effectively take offence supposes. Few of us feel immune from the judgement of others that we are inappropriate, uncouth, unpleasant to be around – even where the other isn't a priest or another respected authority. Most care how they are coming across to others, even those who are not their superiors. So, too, we are more vulnerable to the

threat to our standing that *causing* offence creates, in its suggestion that we do not know how to behave, get on with others, or succeed in an interaction.

Often, too, the particularities of the interaction give us a call on the other's attention and some capacity or authority to challenge another's slight, even when that cuts against surrounding social hierarchies, such that the other person has far more social power than do we. Hierarchies abound, but our relations to one another are shaped by other things too. That includes happenstance and circumstance, such as being at the same party or gathering or in front of an audience with some sympathy (say, of fellow students when encountering a professor). It also includes the ways in which we can stand in cross-cutting relations, such as being friends or colleagues, that may give us standing within the interaction that cuts against a background hierarchy.

The real threats to standing?

Richard Child offers a nuanced appraisal of comedy's offensiveness. In it, he proposes a distinction between disrespect, where we express a belief another has lesser standing, and a threat to standing, where we do or say something that 'risks causing or reinforcing' in others the belief that someone has lesser standing. In the former camp, of disrespect, Child includes holding up a sign stating 'Iron my shirt' at a rally for a female politician. That, on first glance seems strange. Surely, any public expression of disrespect, any expression with an audience, is automatically a threat, being something that might shape others' judgement of one's standing. But Child has something much stronger in mind by threat, suggesting that they typically come from those with high influence, such as one's boss. I suspect that his concern is with serious risks of reinforcing beliefs one is lesser, for which, he holds, the person doing it needs particularly high status or authority.

By contrast, and again, I take social standing to be far more fragile and interaction specific than this. Suppose that I'm in a bar with an old friend, and we meet a bunch of new people. My friend makes a joke about putting me down. Doing so may succeed in lowering my standing, in this interaction. So, too, the sign saying 'Iron my shirt' might be a threat even if held up by some random member of the public, since such acts shape background norms about what kind of speech seems acceptable round here. Judgements that others are lesser, especially where we are tapping into familiar stereotypes and hierarchies, are easy to reinforce in others through subtle clues. Threatening another's standing is, on my account, easy and requires no special social power: we are constructing and negotiating our standing, the ways we present ourselves, in the interaction. Still, Child is right to raise the deep uncertainty about the long-range impact of any particular act, joke or not, on one's standing overall. Whilst the social dimension of social inequality

is made up out of the patterns of our interactions, the contribution of any particular interaction is generally hard to detect.

There is one more disagreement to note between Child and me concerning the centrality of what people *believe*. An animating example of my chapter on humour is of a scientist who made a sexist joke. His wife defends him as not really a sexist. I hold that this is the wrong kind of excuse to offer when we offend – and Child disagrees. He thinks that is a good excuse for having disrespected another, if not for the threat to standing. But I think it is of little use for either. Whether I disrespect you is a fact about this interaction between us, not what is really in my head or my deepest beliefs about you. In this interaction, where we negotiate our projected sense of self, our ‘face’, to borrow Erving Goffman’s terminology, to disrespect me is to offer a challenge to the way I am seeing and presenting myself (e.g. Goffman, 1956/2022). Whether you meant it, whether really you are a nice person, for the most part doesn’t affect the facts on the ground that you’ve affronted me, threatening the way I wish to present myself simply through the disrespect. With that picture of standing in view, a distinction between disrespect and threat can’t be made: all expressions of disrespect are threats, although these threats can be non-serious and have little impact. Whether serious or not, these are fitting candidates at which to take offence.

Disagreement and standpoint epistemology

Bell raises an objection to how I propose that we determine when we have really been offended, which relies (to an extent) on background, shared understandings of the meanings of some act. How can we think groups have shared understandings? As she observes, groups can disagree internally. Still worse, Bell argues, this picture makes it hard to see how to respond to those offended and yet not in our sub-group. It renders discussion between groups about the fittingness of offence ‘incoherent or pointless’: how could an outsider contest what one takes offence at (2024, p. 5)?

To answer, I’ll first have to explain the role that I gave to shared understandings in the first place. So, there are good reasons to doubt a purely subjective, individual account: I can take offence, and be wrong. Individuals, by themselves, cannot solely determine the meaning of an act: neither offender nor offended. Rather, our acts often borrow their meaning, what they imply or suggest about another’s standing, from the social context: our acts like shaking hands or spitting in another’s face, are imbued with respect – or disrespect – by our shared understandings of what the acts mean. However, there isn’t always just *one* social meaning of an act: sometimes, the same act can be understood as acceptable by one group and as insulting by another. To illustrate, Adam Cureton describes some well-intentioned attempts to assist those with disabilities as insulting, a form of ‘offensive beneficence’ (2016).

What do we do, then, facing competing social meanings or when trying to determine whether an act X really is, or is not, offensive? It is here, I suggest, that rather than opting for what most people think (often, the shared meanings of a dominant group) we should give extra weight to those offended and their understanding of what is going on – provided that understanding is not idiosyncratic or purely individual, nor excessively burdensome, nor requires that others make themselves unequal.³

What, though, of the possibility of disagreement within a group? The example I offer in the book is of the French feminists desiring different dating norms, each offering an account of what counts as respectful, and what counts as infantilising or otherwise sexist (2023, ch. 4). On my account, each can fittingly take offence. There isn't one, single correct specification of what it is to treat each other as equals – and at what it is then appropriate to take offence. Rather, there is an array of different gestures and norms that could be consistent with treating each other with equal respect, once they come to have the shared understandings of such. As we work towards an agreed set, we will have different, conflicting, offence-taking, much of which could be fitting.

What, then, do we do about that disagreement, whether within or between groups? Here, Bell and I share more in common than her piece supposes. Indeed, I agree that we can (and should) engage in disagreements and negotiate over the shared standards. One way we can – and do – do that, is by offering reasons, explaining what makes some act offensive or respectful. But another is by taking offence: this is a negotiation of our norms too, if a more practical one. I resist the idea that the only way we can disagree and then come to a shared understanding is by philosophical-style debates, putting reasons and counter-arguments to one another. Often, our social negotiations are also more nuanced or subtle, involving things like taking offence.

Such plurality and disagreement occur in less fraught areas too. To give an example, in British academia, there was a pre-pandemic period of apparent confusion over greeting norms: a handshake (older British people), a hug (younger British people, some Americans), a kiss, or more than one kiss (the French and Italians). Navigation of these differing gestures of intended respect was required, accompanied by some uncertainty about what degree of closeness and intimacy each gesture implied. No one, though, stopped to offer reasons; rather, there was a subtle negotiation of what the shared norms would be in workplaces, conferences, and other events, and each setting settled into norms around greetings. Some negotiations will be more charged, of course, in touching more centrally on deep and lasting inequalities of standing. Still, such negotiations can happen without always, and without only, offering explicit reasons.

Justifying offence: intrinsic, instrumental, or empirical

Ronzoni argues that my shift to an instrumental justification of taking offence is in tension with the book's earlier intrinsic defence of offence-taking and lacks sufficient empirical grounding. So, chapter six turns to reasons to think that taking offence might be socially beneficial in contrast to the popular conception of offence's negative social consequences. The justification of offence up to that point defends offence-taking as appropriate and morally justified, even when it fails to achieve much, as a response to affronts to one's standing as a social equal. How, then, do the two parts fit together? The answer is that taking offence is both a morally appropriate reaction to certain kinds of affronts *and* that it can have social benefits – under certain circumstances. These instrumental benefits of offence become relevant where I turn to defend taking offence as a potential civic virtue with social benefits, to challenge its popular reputation as civic vice. Civic virtues depend, for their justifications, on their benefits for society, while the questions of moral justifiability addressed earlier on, need not.

Still, Ronzoni's challenge that this instrumental piece of the defence of offence lacks sufficient empirical grounding, remains. There are three pieces to her challenge. First, given offence has a bad reputation, the odds are against offence being helpful to take. Second, given that offence can sometimes backfire but at other times succeed, my defence of the benefits of offence is too contingent. Third, only those in power can (easily) use offence.

The third I've tackled above. To address the rest, first, despite its bad reputation, we are not (yet) in a culture where offence has lost its value. We are still sensitive to causing others' offence and, mostly, seek to avoid doing so. Take the fact that the vast majority, most of the time, seek to abide by local norms and customs, so as to convey our respect and consideration of others. There is a fragility to our constructions of standing, too, that makes us care about causing offence: to cause offence threatens one's own standing in an interaction, as, for instance, someone who knows the social rules, or as a good interlocuter. Second, on Ronzoni's charge that offence taking is too contingent in its effects, such that offence sometimes does good – but, in the wrong circumstances, or taken at the wrong thing, or in the wrong way – backfires, that makes it no different to any other civic virtue or morally justified emotion. These are justified when taken at the right things, to the right degree, in the right way. Where they aren't, or where we have a deficiency or an excess, they may be vices. Tolerance can become indifference, or it can have the wrong objects, such as doctrines that endanger liberal freedoms. There is no special challenge to answer here, then, for offence.

As to the need for an empirical case for offence more generally, I'd resist the idea that what we need is a study about the benefit of offence or any other emotion in current circumstances, in order to prove

a civic virtue. I have limited faith in how general a conclusion we can draw from an empirical study or even a set thereof, especially, concerning how robust these results are for societies in any way unlike that in the particular study (see McTernan, 2019). Thus, the defence of offence as a civic virtue adopts a strategy from virtue ethics of asking if we have a general human weakness, for which the virtue may serve as a corrective (e.g. Foot, 1978/2002). It seems plausible to me – and I hope to the reader – that we, humans, are status-sensitive, and often status-seeking, creatures. The thought, then, is that taking offence will serve as one of the corrective civic virtues against others' propensity to claim too much standing, and standing over us. The threat of others' taking offence reigns in my seeking more standing at their expense: to offend others can be, itself, a threat to one's own standing.

Humour, offence online, and hope

The critics in this issue, as this reply reveals, have raised a wide range of questions. Two that I have not yet addressed point towards issues for future work. First, regardless of our disagreement over threat distinctions and intentions, Child rightly argues that the ability to play around with ideas that humour offers is important. How exactly we balance such value against the very common threats to standing it presents, and what the resulting duties for audiences and jokers would be, are questions needing more work, and work of the sort that Child's reply begins.⁴ The second issue is the last of Ronzoni's challenges, namely, that online offence-taking functions differently – and worse. One thing that Ronzoni's commentary brings to light is just how many of the signals of offence I discuss – like raised eyebrows, and awkward pauses, and startled looks – are physical and non-verbal. She is right to note how hard we are finding it to translate this online. So, I agree that I may have downplayed the obstacles of online offence-taking and that this merits more attention. We need to find better norms for signalling offence online, just as we need better epistemic norms for handling misinformation, better beauty norms for handling social media's filters, and much else.

To conclude, one thing I wished for the reader to take away from *On Taking Offence* was a sense of comfort, of greater optimism about contemporary cultural changes and what is going on when it seems people are taking offence all the time. A theme running through my reply is that standing isn't fixed and settled. We are the ones who co-construct these social hierarchies, and so we are the ones who can undermine them, piece by piece. Taking offence is but one piece of the picture of how we can do that. I offer hope, too, for those who worry that a culture of offence will be our undoing: at the right thing, and in the right places, taking offence can be a small, potent, and justified piece of our ordinary interactions.

Lastly, there is a little optimism to be found in my account for even those most worried about a culture of taking offence: something, then, to offer even those like Bell. If I am right, then the fact someone has taken offence *shouldn't* be taken as the end of the discussion, a knock-down objection, or a reason for third parties to step in to remove offending parties. I, like Bell, worry about the role that institutions like universities play when they remove or fire someone for saying the wrong thing, which is a threat to free speech in a way that being offended is not. Instead, to take offence is, in itself, one move in an ongoing negotiation about the norms we want to live by. If we de-catastrophise the taking of offence, we should de-catastrophise, too, having caused offence to others.

Notes

1. References to Bell, Bennett, Ronzoni, and Child in this article all refer to their contributions in this issue. See reference list. References to my book refer to McTernan (2023).
2. I leave here insufficiently addressed the promise of Bennett's analysis of withdrawal's expressive meaning, particularly for social norms.
3. Shared understandings, e.g. of what is polite or appropriate, also vary across social contexts: consider norms about appropriate speech amongst football fans in the stadium vs. academics. It isn't only identity groups that have shared meanings.
4. Answering it requires far more than this reply. For part of my response, on responsibilities of comedians, see McTernan (2024).

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