

EMILY MCTERNAN 

Taking offense: An emotion reconsidered

A stranger in the pub bumps into you spilling your drink and then doesn't apologize, or someone pushes past to grab a seat on the train. A colleague makes a dismissive remark about your work in front of your boss. A man catcalls a woman on the street, or wears a T-shirt declaring, "keep calm, watch lesbians." One reaction to affronts like these is to take offense. Philosophers have said a great deal about *causing* offense, especially whether we should punish or prevent it, but very little about what is to *take* offense, let alone whether we should.¹ Hitherto, the focus of moral and legal philosophy has tended to be the offender, not the offended. Meanwhile, taking offense has captured popular attention, with a multitude of books and opinion pieces condemning "oversensitive millennials" and "generation

With thanks for detailed and constructive written comments to two anonymous referees, Hallvard Lillehammer, Rob Simpson, Jennifer Page, and Christopher Nathan. I am also grateful to insightful audiences on various versions of these ideas at the University College London, the London School of Economics, Wake Forest University, the Universities of Manchester, Reading, Northumbria, Leeds, and Pompeu Fabra, at the Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Conference 2019, and particularly for the discussions with the participants in a book manuscript workshop, David Axelsen, Simon Caney, Simon Kirchin, Hallvard Lillehammer, Chris Mills, Jennifer Page, and Katy Wells. I began to think about offence while on research leave funded by "The beacon project," Templeton Religion Trust, and this article was completed during a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. I thank both funders.

1. To illustrate, see, for example, Joel Feinberg's influential discussion in legal philosophy. Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law: Volume 2: Offence to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For more recent discussions, see, for example, George Sher, "Debate: Taking Offense," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (September 2020): 332–42; Jeremy Waldron, "Debate: Taking Offense: A Reply," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (September 2020): 343–52. See also the philosophical work on slurs, for example, Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore, "Slurring Words," *Noûs* 47, no. 1 (March 2013): 25–48; Mihaela Popa-Wyatt and Jeremy L. Wyatt, "Slurs, roles and power," *Philosophical Studies* 17 (2018): 2879–2906.

© 2021 The Author. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.
Philosophy & Public Affairs 49, no. 2

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

snowflake.”² There, however, being offended tends to be characterized, I will argue, mistakenly, as a kind of emotional upset, borne of oversensitivity or emotional fragility, or as a retreat into victimhood.³

In this article, I offer an analysis of what it is to take offense and what doing so is like, on which a more nuanced and positive appraisal of this emotion becomes possible as compared to its popular reputation. First, I survey the shortfalls of the limited discussion of offense by philosophers, before proposing an alternative analysis. Second, I distinguish offense from nearby emotions, like anger, disgust, and pride. Third, I examine the implications not only for how we conceptualize offense but also how we regard those who take it. On my account, offense tends to be a smaller-scale, more everyday emotion than those making claims about its threats to society suppose, and one ripe for a moral reassessment. While offense sometimes appears excessive, that is likely only in limited cases: namely, those requiring symbolic withdrawal or proxy forms of estrangement. Even there, the appearance of excess may be illusory, with the grander gestures of offense appropriate given the distance between the offended and offending parties. Furthermore, on my account, to take offense is to resist affronts to one’s standing, rather than merely a reflection of hurt feelings.

2. Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” *Comparative Sociology* 13, no. 6 (2014): 692–726; Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “The New Millennial ‘Morality’: Highly Sensitive and Easily Offended,” *Time*, November 17, 2015, <https://time.com/4115439/student-protests-microaggressions/>; Claire Fox, *I Find That Offensive!* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016); Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

3. As illustrations of this victimhood or emotionally upset interpretation of offense-taking, see most notably Campbell and Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures”; Campbell and Manning, “The New Millennial ‘Morality.’” As they describe, “A culture of victimhood is one characterized by concern with status and sensitivity to slight combined with a heavy reliance on third parties.” Campbell and Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” 715. In places where we find such a culture, they suggest, “personal discomfort looms large” in policymaking. Campbell and Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” 716. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, discussing offense-taking on university campuses, declare: “the current movement is largely about emotional well-being. . . it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm.” Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Within philosophy, see Sher’s characterization of offense as hurt feelings. Sher, “Debate: Taking Offense.” One thing that goes wrong in these contemporary debates is that the anger of marginalized groups is misread as “mere” offense. Another—and this article’s target—is that offense is mischaracterized.

Concluding, I sketch a defense of this resistance as a sometimes valuable response to injustice.

I. PHILOSOPHERS ON TAKING OFFENSE

Taking offense has received relatively little attention from philosophers. When analyzing slurs, philosophers of language consider the pattern of our offense taking, such as how it varies when differently situated individuals use the same slur; when a slur is mentioned rather than used; or when presented with the negation of a slurring sentence.⁴ However, their interest is in conceptualizing slurs, not analyzing offense, and the resulting notion of offense is very thin. To illustrate, on one representative account offense is defined as the “achieved effect on audience members” of a slur, “determined in part by their beliefs and values.”⁵ Such depictions tell us little about what it is *like* to be offended.

Likely the most influential account of offense is that offered by Joel Feinberg. On what he terms a strict and narrow sense, offense is any disliked state that I attribute to another’s “wrongful conduct” and for which I resent them.⁶ This definition incorporates a wide range of disliked states including disgust, affronts to one’s senses, shame, and annoyance.⁷ To illustrate, take the breadth of Feinberg’s central examples: a series of untoward experiences you might have while traveling on a bus, such as someone masturbating next to you; eating a disgusting picnic; or running their fingernails down a slate tablet.⁸ On a plausible reading of Feinberg, his “offense” is taken at nuisances a person cannot easily ignore.⁹ However, his is not a depiction of any discrete emotion, nor does it describe what it is like to be offended; rather, any disliked state counts. Given Feinberg’s aim, that breadth ought not be surprising; he examines what conduct a

4. See, for example, Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt, “Slurs, roles and power”; Anderson and Lepore, “Slurring Words.”

5. Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt, “Slurs, roles and power,” 2881; adapted from Christopher Hom, “A Puzzle About Pejoratives,” *Philosophical Studies* 159 (2012): 397.

6. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 2.

7. *Ibid.*, 1–2, 10–14. Feinberg also offers an account of “profound offense” that is mostly a mix of moral outrage and disgust at sanctity violations; again, then, an account of offense that is disunified and diverse. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 50–96.

8. *Ibid.*, 10–14.

9. Robert Simpson characterizes Feinberg’s offense as “all subharmful mental states in which the agent’s attention is frustratingly ‘captured.’” Robert Simpson, “Regulating Offence, Nurturing Offence,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 17, no. 3 (2018): 237.

state might regulate beyond that which causes harm. Yet, there is a distinct way that to be offended feels as compared to being annoyed or disgusted. That distinct notion of offense, which I seek to capture below, should be familiar both from our ordinary experience in navigating social relations and from popular discussions of a “culture of taking offence.”

Continuing with those who fail to see offense as distinct, some conflate it with anger.¹⁰ However, one task of this article is to show that this would be misleading; indeed, in important respects offense is closer to contempt and pride. Another conflation sometimes found in popular discussion, often implicitly, is to regard being offended as a form of harm, as an injury to feeling or damaging self-esteem.¹¹ However, while offensive conduct might cause such harm that does not suffice as an account of what offense is. For a start, it fails to capture all the relevant instances. I am not harmed when someone fails to shake my outstretched hand or makes a mildly sexist joke, yet I could be offended.¹² Indeed, I think it is possible that sometimes taking offense, when others back you up on the rightness of your offense, can even be pleasant: feeling like an affirmation of one’s standing, rather than constituting a harm.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF OFFENSE

What, then, is it like to take offense? I start by offering three sets of cases likely to provoke offense. What they all share, despite their varying levels of seriousness, is that they are affronts to social standing: the standing we deem ourselves due, and that we expect to be respected, recognized, or expressed through our social interactions.¹³

10. For example, see Rini’s “How to Take Offence,” which, despite its title, discusses anger. Regina Rini, “How to Take Offence: Responding to Microaggression,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 3 (2018): 332–51. Martha Nussbaum’s notion of status-focused anger may appear like offense if stripped of desiring payback. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016): 17–21.

11. For examples, see Note 3. There are philosophical examples too: while legal philosophers often define offense in contrast to harm, John Shand characterizes “personal offense” as “feeling justifiably hurt” John Shand, “Taking Offence,” *Analysis* 70, no. 4 (2010): 704. Sher similarly characterizes offense as hurt feelings. Sher, “Debate: Taking Offence.”

12. Feinberg also describes offense as “a different sort of thing,” and explains that his bus cases are not instances of harm. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 3, 14.

13. This is distinct from moral standing, in being a member of the moral community, and political standing, such as eligibility to vote.

As paradigm cases of the first set, where our standing is disregarded, consider a stranger who queue jumps in front of you, who pushes past you to grab the last seat on the train, or who spills your drink without apologizing. Or take a colleague who repeatedly fails to remember your name. In these cases, someone disregards some ordinary token of respect or consideration that we deem ourselves due. Often, such instances cause offense by virtue of violating a widely held social norm of what counts as respectful, polite, or appropriate behavior, expected from all.¹⁴

For the second set of cases, of direct attacks on one's social standing, consider the man who wears a T-shirt declaring, "keep calm and watch lesbians!" waves a banner declaring, "iron my shirt," at a rally for a female politician, burns an American flag, or defaces a bible.¹⁵ Alternatively, suppose a colleague reveals an embarrassing detail about your personal life to your boss.

The third set is cases where someone dismisses another or mistakes her social standing in a downward direction: where person A assumes that person B has less standing than B takes herself to have, or less than B's situation would usually entail that B be attributed, were it not for some confounding feature. To illustrate, suppose that an estate agent talks only to the male companion of his female customer, even though she is the one selling the house. Or take Rebecca Solnit's case of a woman having her own book explained—"mansplained"—to her.¹⁶ A further case would be when academics or doctors who aren't white and/or aren't male often find that their title isn't used, where it is for their white male colleagues.¹⁷

14. On how social norms let us communicate respect, or its absence, see Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 251–75.

15. "Iron my shirts" was a sign held up against Hillary Clinton; see Diana B. Carlin and Kelly L. Winfrey, "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): 326–43. Some of these Feinberg would label profound offenses, including flag burning and, perhaps, bible defacing. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 50–96. However, as I shortly discuss, for offense I take these acts to be felt as personal, not impersonal as Feinberg proposes: personal both in that only those individuals who incorporate the affronted nationality or religion as a valued attribute of themselves could take offense, and that the act is then experienced as a strike against oneself/one's group.

16. Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 8–28. Epistemic injustices are often affronts of this kind. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

17. For a study amongst doctors, see Files et al., which found that titles were used in 95% of cases when the introducer was female and the speaker male, and only in 49.2% of cases with a male introducer and female speaker. Julia A. Files et al., "Speaker introductions at

Given the nature of the mistakes made, these instances often amount to indirect attacks on a person's standing.¹⁸ Sometimes, these may be unintentional: the offending party might not mean to target the offended individual; indeed, they may not intend to affront anyone.

Where instances like these do cause offense that emotion has three defining properties. First, the person who takes offense believes, judges, or perceives that her social standing has been affronted, whether being ignored, diminished, or attacked by the act at which she takes offense.¹⁹ The affront is the intentional object of the emotion: that at which the emotion is taken. What counts for whether an individual takes offense is her own perception of her standing and how that standing ought to be reflected and acknowledged through the ways in which others treat and regard her in social interactions of particular kinds, within particular contexts. To illustrate, I might think that my standing is such that in a professional context people ought to greet me by shaking my hand, not patting my head, yet amongst friends find a handshake unduly formal or unfriendly. When I do not get the expected greeting, then I may take offense. For most of us, our sense of our social standing, and so the behaviors we expect from others, is heavily shaped by the socially salient groups to which we belong and our social roles. For example, a doctor expects deference from his patients, and a middle-class, white woman expects the police to treat her with courtesy. Some also incorporate other attachments into their conception of their social standing, say, a national

internal medicine grand rounds: Forms of address reveal gender bias," *Journal of Women's Health* 26, no. 5 (2017): 413–19.

18. Microaggressions, like the titles case, are paradigmatic examples. See Chester Pierce who coined this term, for instance, Chester Pierce, "Stress Analogs of Racism and Sexism," in *Mental Health, Racism and Sexism*, eds. Charles V. Willie, Patricia Perri Rieker, Bernard M. Kramer, Bertram S. Brown (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995). On their general relevance for social standing, see Emily McTernan, "Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2018): 261–81. On microaggressions being "used to keep those at the racial margins in their place," see Lindsay Pérez Hubar and Daniel G. Solorzano, "Visualizing Everyday Racism: Critical Race Theory, Visual Microaggressions, and the Historical Image of Mexican Banditry," *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (2015): 223.

19. I remain neutral here amongst competing conceptions of emotions, for instance, as involving beliefs, judgments or perceptions, to the extent possible given that offense is a complex emotion.

identity, religion, or long-supported sports team, such that an affront to it can be experienced as an affront to them.

Sometimes, political philosophers appear to regard social standing as some settled “amount” or constant rank that a person holds across their life.²⁰ However, instead, in formulating this first property of offense by a person’s perception of her standing I have in mind something closer to the sociological and sociolinguistic notion of “face”: namely, that image or persona that we present to others, constructed through and negotiated during particular interpersonal interactions. On Erving Goffman’s classic account, face is defined as:

the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes.²¹

Miriam Locher offers a helpful analogy to a “mask” that the person puts on in a particular interaction, although the success of that presentation depends upon those with whom one interacts.²² When we take offense, we react to some affront—and so threat—to our social standing, as we are conceiving, constructing, and presenting it in an interaction.

Informed by the notion of face, when I discuss social standing there are two differences from the settled rank view. One is that standing is dynamic and context-sensitive, not static. It is up for negotiation and can vary across interactions with different people or in different settings: say, at work we present a different self-image to that we’d convey when in the park with other mothers, where the relevant socially valued traits differ. Admittedly, that variation is constrained by the social rules in play as to what kinds of “moves” can be successfully made, having uptake from

20. An instructive example is Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, but it is also found in relational egalitarians’ talk of “equal respect.” Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational Egalitarianism: Living as Equals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

21. Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 5. On the idea’s origins, see Xiaoying Qi, “Face: A Chinese Concept in Global Sociology,” *Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 3 (2011): 279–95.

22. Miriam A. Locher, “Situated Impoliteness: The Interface between Relational Work and Identity Construction,” in *Situated Politeness*, eds. B.L. Davies, M. Haugh, and A.J. Merrison (London: A & C Black, 2011), 188.

others.²³ Among these, socially salient identities tend to shape one's standing across interactions.

The other difference is in what one's sense of one's standing encompasses. Our sense of ourselves will be informed by various aspects of our identity, social position, and social roles.²⁴ However, while social standing in my sense has a comparative element, in that it is something we construct with and contrast to others, it need not include a ranking against others. Furthermore, as noted above, our self-image can incorporate various attachments, such as moral or religious commitments, if one takes these to be valuable or socially important attributes. If I attack, dismiss or fail to recognize some aspect of yourself that you take to have value, which is a threat to how you wish to present yourself. As a result, my act may be a fitting thing at which to take offense.

As the second property of taking offense, the offended person, regarding her standing to have been affronted, will feel estranged from the offending party. That estrangement comes in varying degrees: she might feel alienated from the other person or simply taken aback by what they did, a phrase which gives a sense of how this is a small, temporary moment of estrangement. Alternatively, she might feel bored by the interaction, or even amused at the person and what they have done. Repeated cases of being offended in the same way are particularly liable to be characterized by amusement, as are notably egregious instances of commonly experienced phenomena, such as Solnit's case of a woman having her own book "mansplained" to her.²⁵ The woman is not laughing *with* the man explaining her own book to her, but *at* the situation and perhaps the offender too: at the absurdity of such slights, and the absurdity of the

23. The emphasis in sociology and linguistics is on the co-construction of standing in each encounter. See Goffman's discussion of the line that someone takes within a particular interaction. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*. Or see Locher and Watt's depiction of face as "socially attributed in each individual interaction," or as "masks" "on loan to us for the duration of different kinds of performance." Miriam A. Locher and Richard J. Watts, "Politeness Theory and Relational Work," *Journal of Politeness Research, Language, Behaviour, Culture* 1, no. 1 (2005): 12. However, constraints from social position are often referenced; for instance, Locher and Watts continue their description with someone who "performs in the role of a Prime Minister, a mother, a wife. . .," someone, then, occupying a particular set of social positions. Locher and Watts, "Politeness Theory," 13.

24. Standing is not therefore reducible to identity: it concerns the self-image I project and construct in this setting, not "who I am."

25. Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*.

person committing them. What unites these varying feelings as ones of estrangement is that all distance the offended from the offender.

Third, the person who is offended will tend toward actions expressing her estrangement: actions of withdrawal.²⁶ At first glance, the behaviors associated with taking offense look highly varied. For example, at one end of the scale, the offended party may raise an eyebrow, turn away, pointedly refrain from laughing at a joke, or leave slightly too long a silence. At the other, they might refrain from any future relationships with the offending party, seek to publicly expose them, or call for the imposition of further costs, like losing an honorary position. However, what unites these is that all are ways of withdrawing from the other in our social relations, of pushing the other away, or out. A pointed silence can be a very effective, if temporary, way to express our estrangement from another. While we may not always act on our offense, say, if we fear another will retaliate, this tendency toward withdrawal is a relatively strong one: usually there is a reason where we do not, such that the default is that we would express our emotion. Sometimes, we even communicate our estrangement unintentionally, say, by being silent for just a moment too long.

This account of offense makes it a particular and unified emotion, unlike Feinberg's cluster of disunified states. What it is like to have this emotion is to take it that one's standing has been attacked, dismissed, or ignored, to feel estranged from the person who commits the offensive act, and to tend toward acts of withdrawal. At least to those of us not too deeply steeped in Feinberg's way of thinking, this emotion ought to appear familiar. It is an everyday emotion that you might feel when a colleague makes a sexist joke, someone pushes in front of you, or your partner is condescending. It also comes in degrees: sometimes, being taken aback for a moment; other times, being so offended that we break off relations for good.

The analysis accords too with the way in which sociolinguists and social psychologists regard offense as an emotion concerned with affronts to

26. The notion of an action tendency I borrow from psychology; on its use, see Jonathan Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, eds. R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, and H. H. Goldsmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 853. An emotion motivates or disposes one toward particular types of action. As a result, to defend the appropriateness of offense involves defending as appropriate, to some extent, the actions that usually follow from taking it.

one's "face," such as the impoliteness or disrespect of others.²⁷ Finally, it accommodates many of Feinberg's classic bus cases as ones where we might take offense in my sense, yet makes clear how some fall short of being paradigmatic or clear instances of offense.²⁸ To illustrate, we can reframe his cases of disgust, such as vomiting up a meal in public or engaging in public sex acts, as also failures to attend to other's comfort, and so manifesting a disregard for others that may offend. Yet in such cases disgust, not offense, would be the primary emotion.

Some might object that, nonetheless, my analysis wrongly excludes some cases of apparent offense. First, we appear to use the notion of offense to describe things other than affronts to social standing. Take the idea of an offensive smell or other affronts to the senses; or the notion that one's aesthetic sensibilities have been offended, say, by some hideous interior décor. In such cases, we perceive no affront to our social standing. So, too, we are not necessarily estranged from anyone when something smells or looks bad. All that is shared with the standard cases above is a desire to withdraw, here, from that affront to one's sensibilities. Thus, these would not count as offense proper, as I define it—unless the interior décor is done to spite you, the smell is inflicted deliberately, or these otherwise manifest another's disregard of you.

However, on a plausible reading, in these cases the term "offense" is used merely to capture the way in which our senses are affronted, rather than our truly feeling offended. It is a dramatic use of language to describe someone's decorating attempts as offensive but odd to be genuinely offended, and the best characterization of one's reaction to a terrible smell is as disgust. Still, all I need for this article is to insist that at least in paradigmatic cases of offense, all three properties are present. Furthermore,

27. See Jonathan Culpepper, "Reflections on impoliteness, relational work and power," in *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its interplay with power in theory and practice*, eds. Derek Bousfield and Miriam A. Locher (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008); Francesca D'Errico and Isabella Poggi, "The lexicon of feeling offended," paper presented at *Symposium on Emotion Modelling and Detection in Social Media and Online Interaction*, University of Liverpool, April 4–6, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326096901_The_lexicon_of_feeling_offended; Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*; Locher, "Situating Politeness"; Locher and Watts, "Politeness theory and relational work"; Amy Aisha Brown, Caroline Tagg, and Philip Seargeant, *Taking Offence on Social Media: Conviviality and Communication on Facebook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

28. I include as instances of offense cases that Feinberg's "profound" offense would not, such as mildly sexist jokes and failures to shake hands.

the target of current debates over offense concerns such offense at affronts to standing (despite the fact that these debates often confuse this with claiming victimhood) and not people becoming more sensitive to smells or interior décor.

Second, it appears that we can be offended even where there is no particular agent to whom we can attribute the affront; for instance, taking offense at a sign when we don't know who erected it, or at the actions of an institution that express disrespect for people like us, even if no agent within the institution intended that outcome. To reply, clearly, some relation to agency is required. There is no affront to social standing from the mere fact that it rains, say, even where that frustrates one's interests in staying dry: no agent disregards one's interests. However, in the cases of the institution and sign, we know that agents are involved in the resulting state of affairs. On my account, taking offense does not require the direct intent of an agent to affront; given its dependency on uptake from others, our construction and projection of our image is more vulnerable than limiting it to only such direct threats would suggest. I might be also offended, say, by another not noticing my presence, or an unintentional putdown. Hence, there is no reason to rule out the arrangements of an institution or a sign put up by an unknown other from presenting an affront to our social standing. Nonetheless, there is good reason to restrict offense to acts where there is some agent(s) involved, in that standing is constructed through our *social* interactions.

That raises the issue of in what sense an interaction must be social in order to provoke offense. This ought not be confused with how public an affront is. Our social standing is something negotiated in particular interactions, and thus can be threatened in classically private settings, such as one's partner making a dismissive comment at home, as well as in cases with more witnesses. Still, our standing is something we construct with and for others. One may think, as a result, that restricting offense to affronts to standing still rules out too much. Suppose that I find out through reading someone's private diary that they hold a very low opinion of me. Mightn't I still be offended, even if they have never expressed their view to anyone? In general, can I be offended by the private attitudes of others, where I come to know these?²⁹

29. With thanks to a referee for raising this issue and example. Clearly, unknown private attitudes do not offend.

I suspect that in the particular case, one's offense may be driven, or at least compounded, by the diary writer's hypocrisy in presenting a falsely pleasant public face, and so chiefly by one's interactions with the writer. To compare, if knowing that someone dislikes me, I read their private diary, evidence of their low opinion is unlikely to add to any offense I feel. Still, the written words themselves, and other discoveries of negative private attitudes, can indeed cause offense, given that they present some sense of a threat to one's standing. After all, our sense of our standing is constructed socially, and is influenced both by how others treat us and how they regard us. Merely knowing that someone else holds a low opinion is a challenge, of sorts, to how one wishes to present oneself and, if expressed, could undermine one's standing.

A third apparent exclusion looks more troubling. Despite the earlier remarks on face, some might doubt that offense taken at affronts to one's religion, from depictions of the prophet to burning bibles, fits well into an analysis of offense centered on social standing.³⁰ Yet philosophers of jurisprudence in particular may take these to be paradigmatic instances of offense. Much the same might be thought about affronts to one's moral commitments. However, while religious cases may have been paradigmatic ones for the law, they are less clearly so for everyday life. Likely, most of us take more offense over the details of social interactions, such as someone snubbing us, or a colleague overlooking our contribution. Certainly, it is these sorts of social interactions that capture the attention of sociolinguists and linguists working on offense.³¹ In addition, religious and moral affronts are often mixed cases, combining offense and other emotions, such as disgust at purity violations, or anger at violations of moral codes.

Still, however, my analysis captures why offense can be taken on the grounds of religious and moral commitments: why, sometimes, transgressions against these commitments are fittingly experienced as affronts to one's standing. That happens, first, when people incorporate religious and moral commitments into their constructions of their selves, whether in taking these to be valued attributes, say, regarding oneself as a good

30. With thanks to a referee and Robert Simpson for raising this concern.

31. For instance, Michael Haugh considers offense at minor impoliteness and slights in conversation. Michael Haugh, "Impoliteness and taking offence in initial interactions," *Journal of Pragmatics* 86 (2015): 36–42. Tahmineh Tayebi considers affronts such as one's host putting too little effort into the food that they serve. Tahmineh Tayebi, "Why do people take offense? Exploring the underlying expectations," *Journal of Pragmatics* 101 (2016): 1–17.

Christian or committed vegan and seeing these as valuable things to be; or as part of one's identity, in ways that opens one to related dismissals or attacks on standing. Then, affronts to one's religious or moral commitments could become fitting candidates for offense: in attacking or dismissing these commitments you may threaten my standing as I perceive it, by dismissing the value of what I take to be a good feature of myself or slighting people like me.

Second, for offense to be fitting, the transgressions of another must be plausibly taken to be targeting the standing of you or those like you, a restriction I further defend in Section V. What I have in mind by talk of "targeting" here is that there is an affront that concerns you and yours, one pertaining to your standing.³² That explains why not all rejections or violations of moral or religious commitments offend: not all are to do with my standing. To illustrate, suppose that I take donating to charities to be a moral duty and meet someone who usually fails to do so. Their behavior does not seem to provide grounds for offense. Alternatively, take the priest who has an extramarital affair in a moment of weakness of will, for which he sincerely repents. I might be deeply disappointed or disillusioned, rather than offended.

But a subset of transgressions of moral or religious commitments do look likely to provoke offense rather than, say, disgust: those where one's religious or other value commitments are attacked directly or dismissed. That happens when they are made into objects of fun, such as in the show the *Book of Mormon* with its mockery of core tenets of Mormonism as absurd, given the dismissive attitude toward one's commitments thereby expressed; or where one's commitments are deliberately or pointedly violated. These turn the violation of a code into something about you in the relevant sense to threaten standing. The vegetarian is not likely to take offense at the mere knowledge that somewhere in the world, someone is eating meat. But they may when a colleague deliberately eats meat next to them, while commenting that vegetarian food tastes bad. The latter is a deliberate provocation or challenge to what they value, where the former is not.

III. DISTINGUISHING OFFENSE

With the analysis in view, the next task is distinguishing offense from nearby emotions. In particular, some may wonder if offense is a form of

32. And not that the offending party intends to target the offended party.

anger, although that may merely reflect anger's contemporary popularity amongst moral and political philosophers.³³ Below, I argue that not only is offense distinct from anger but, further, in crucial respects both contempt and pride lie closer. Gabriele Taylor observes that there are many ways to carve up emotions and which we choose largely reflects our interests in so doing.³⁴ Nonetheless, two common groupings map out the relevant terrain. The first are emotions of self-assessment or self-conscious emotions, such as pride, shame, and guilt. These emotions have the self as their object and, as Taylor describes, a person feels them when she believes that she has "deviated from some norm" and so "altered her standing in the world," positively (pride) or negatively (shame, guilt).³⁵ A second, contrasting set are the other-assessing emotions, the central instances of which on the negative side relevant here, and labeled the other-condemning emotions, are anger, contempt, and disgust.³⁶ These negative emotions tend to have another person or another's acts as their object.

Within this latter set, anger is an emotion of approach: of engaging with and especially attacking or getting back at another whom we perceive variously as violating a moral norm, injuring us, or committing an injustice. As Jonathan Haidt depicts anger, for instance, it "generally involves a motivation to attack, humiliate, or otherwise get back at the person who is

33. See, for example, Alison Bailey, "On Anger, Silence, and Epistemic Injustice," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84 (2018): 93–115; Macalester Bell, "Anger, Virtue, and Oppression," in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, ed. Lisa Tessman (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2009); Nicolas Bommarito, "Virtuous and Vicious Anger," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2017): 1–27; Myisha Cherry, "The errors and limitations of our 'anger-evaluating' ways," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, eds. Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 132–44. For more critical views, Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122, no. 2 (2012): 341–70; Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*. There is also a long history of work on anger.

34. Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1.

35. See Taylor for a depiction of self-assessment emotions. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, 1. On self-conscious emotions, see Michael Lewis, "The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, no. 818 (1997): 119–42.

36. On other-condemning emotions and this "CAD triad," see for instance Haidt, "The Moral Emotions"; Paul Rozin et al., "The CAD triad hypothesis: a mapping between three moral emotions (contempt, anger, disgust) and three moral codes (community, autonomy, divinity)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 4 (1999): 574–86.

perceived as acting unfairly or immorally.”³⁷ By contrast, contempt and disgust are emotions of withdrawal, not engagement: we tend to avoid those who provoke such emotions.³⁸ What provokes our disgust is a violation of some purity- or contamination-related norm from which we recoil.³⁹ Feeling contempt, we regard another as inferior and, as Macalester Bell describes, have a “dismissive and insulting attitude that manifests *disregard* for its target.”⁴⁰

So where does offense fit? Offense looks like a negative emotion with, at first glance, the acts of another as its object: we do not take offense at ourselves. If so characterized as amongst the other-assessing and especially other-condemning emotions, offense would rest closer to contempt and disgust than anger. First, offense is an emotion of withdrawal, not approach, lacking the payback or vengeance aspect common to anger which some even treat as definitional.⁴¹ When offended I may merely be taken aback and feel a little estranged. Or consider that offense, unlike anger, can be characterized by amusement, as a form of withdrawal: take the egregious mansplaining of one’s own book. By contrast, if someone is both angry and amused, their amusement likely eats away at their anger. Second, offense is centrally concerned not with injustice or direct moral

37. Haidt, “The Moral Emotions,” 856. See also the association of anger with injustice, for example, Bailey, “On Anger, Silence, and Epistemic Injustice”; Bell, “Anger, Virtue, and Oppression”; Bommarito, “Virtuous and Vicious Anger.”

38. On avoidance behaviors in disgust and contempt, see Benoît Dubreuil, “Punitive Emotions and Norm Violations,” *Philosophical Explorations* 13, no. 1 (2010): 35–50. See also Haidt’s depiction of disgust as including “the motivation to avoid, expel, or otherwise break off contact,” but contempt as motivating “neither attack or withdrawal,” rather “the object of contempt will be treated with less warmth, respect, and consideration.” Haidt, “The Moral Emotions,” 858. Bell discusses active and passive contempt. Macalester Bell, *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

39. On the connection to contamination see Dubreuil, “Punitive Emotions and Norm Violations”; Rozin et al., “The CAD triad hypothesis”; Edward Rozyman et al., “CAD or MAD? Anger (not disgust) as the predominant response to pathogen-free violations of the divinity code,” *Emotion* 14, no. 5 (2014): 892–907. On the CAD triad and disgust being associated with an “ethic of divinity” and a broader sense of purity, see Rozin et al., “The CAD triad hypothesis.”

40. Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 8. On seeing the other as inferior, see Dubreuil, “Punitive Emotions and Norm Violations,” 45.

41. See Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*. Some have argued that anger doesn’t always lead to a desire to take vengeance; see Bommarito on anger at one’s father. Bommarito, “Virtuous and Vicious Anger,” 5. Of course, people may be angry and offended: we can have conflicting emotions, like grief and relief at the passing of a long-sick loved one.

norm violations but, rather, the violation of social norms, or acts of disrespect and disregard.⁴²

That difference in its object—being a reaction to an affront to standing—also distinguishes offense from disgust, which is instead concerned with perceived contamination. As a result, the two emotions often come apart: stepping in dog poo is disgusting, but it is not offensive. Nonetheless, there is some overlap; for instance, we might find being spat on both disgusting *and* offensive. Norms of what counts as respectful or appropriate behavior, the transgressions of which often cause offense, incorporate some norms around bodily functions and contamination. To deliberately inflict something disgusting on another, or even to negligently expose them to such, can cause offense through being a failure to be considerate.⁴³ Still, if I accidentally vomited on you, suddenly stricken by food poisoning, you would be disgusted but not offended.

Offense may sit even closer to contempt and its related emotions like disregard, disdain, aversion, and an urge toward mockery.⁴⁴ Not only is contempt characterized by estrangement in our relations to the other, variously characterized as coolness, withdrawal, or lack of respect, but it also is centrally concerned with what some psychologists term an “ethic of community,” and so “moral violations involving disrespect and violations of duty or hierarchy.”⁴⁵ As a result, contempt, like offense, concerns status. Contempt, however, is a deeper, less surmountable form of estrangement than offense: contempt is corrosive of close relationships, say, between friends or lovers, where offense is not. Furthermore, while contempt has as its object the person, offense has as its object the act: we can be offended where we don’t know which agent performed the act, whereas we cannot feel contempt.⁴⁶ Most importantly, in feeling contempt we regard the other as inferior. By contrast, offense responds to a challenge to, or denial of, our social standing and we need not regard the other as inferior to take offense at their behavior. Indeed, for us to take offense, we must regard

42. Although some social norm violations transgress against moral norms, say, on dignity or respect for persons.

43. See Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility,” on civility and bodily functions.

44. Drawing on Haidt here: “Contempt paints its victims as buffoons worthy of mockery or as nonpersons worthy of complete disregard.” Haidt, “The Moral Emotions,” 858.

45. *Ibid.*

46. On contempt as a whole person emotion, see Bell, *Hard Feelings*. Admittedly, we might label the act “contemptible.”

the other as having sufficient standing to be able to present a challenge to our social standing; we cannot perceive the other as too far beneath us or else we would not take offense. Contempt has no such lower limit.

The relevance of another's standing when taking offense captures a feature of our experience: sometimes people are no longer offended by acts that once they found offensive. One explanation is that an affront no longer constitutes any real threat to standing; for instance, being mistaken for a student by one's students might be offensive to the junior academic but a decade later, as a professor of great renown, no longer be so. The claim here is not that we can only take offense when our standing is successfully undermined but, rather, that an act must succeed in affronting our standing. Such success requires that the other has the capacity to threaten our standing, even if they fail. However, the bar to be exceeded to constitute a threat to standing is low, and nor must the threat be serious: our social standing in any interaction is up for negotiation and can be threatened through acts as small as rude remarks.⁴⁷

Despite offense's connections to contempt and disgust, some may not yet accept that offense and anger are distinct. The association of anger with "status injury" stretches back to Aristotle, as Martha Nussbaum notes. Anger, then, is often taken at acts that threaten standing.⁴⁸ So, is what I term "offense," merely a variant of this status anger? Suppose it were so. Still, offense would be distinct from the forms of anger often defended by contemporary moral and political philosophers, where we justifiably feel anger at grave injustice and evil, or at least moral violations.⁴⁹ But this distinction between anger and offense is no mere matter of terminology, best resolved by conceding that offense is one form of anger. Doing so threatens to obscure what offense is like: as described above, it is an emotion of withdrawal, not engagement, concerned with social, not moral, violations. Furthermore, as I now explore, offense, unlike anger, also fits

47. Echoing the notion of "facework" or "relational work," see Locher, "Situating Impoliteness"; Locher and Watts, "Politeness Theory and Relational Work."

48. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

49. Assuming that we are in the realm of "status-injuries" that are not straightforward moral violations unlike many cases in Nussbaum's *Anger and Forgiveness*, such as rape. For illustrative defenses of anger at injustice, see Bommarito, who carves off "personal" "non-moral" anger. Bommarito, "Virtuous and Vicious Anger." See also Bell, "Anger, Virtue, and Oppression" and Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," among others. Of course, collectively, small status injuries can produce injustice; for instance, see McTernan, "Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices."

poorly into the strict divide between emotions of self-assessment and other-directed emotions.

Offense, then, is unusual in that it could be characterized as not, or not only, an other-condemning emotion. Instead, while social psychologists have paid offense limited attention, when addressed it is taken to be a “self-conscious” emotion alongside pride, shame, and guilt.⁵⁰ To be offended is to suffer a blow to one’s honor, and so, perhaps, to one’s self-image. Isabella Poggi and Francesca D’Errico describe it, for instance, as a “nick” to one’s self-image.⁵¹

Nonetheless, offense does not function quite like other emotions of self-assessment. Rather than the agent doing something that alters “her standing in the world” as she perceives it, another rejects, mistakes, or overlooks the way in which the agent regards her own standing within some particular social world, and the agent reacts against that.⁵² For instance, while in feeling shame, one adopts other’s view of oneself and perceives oneself as lesser or failing at some standard, in taking offense, one resists another’s view. Still, an aspect of self-assessment remains in taking offense, in that we weigh our standing anew given the other’s threat.⁵³ When someone affronts us, often we reconsider how we are regarded in certain contexts or, at least, by that person. Our construction of our “face” is disputed and realizing that is one of the defining properties of offense. But another is that, in taking offense, we resist, rather than accept, the lowering of our standing. Indeed, sometimes, when making our assessment of our standing, we even feel confirmed in our sense of having higher standing than the offending party treats us as if we have, and so offense shades back into an other-condemning emotion. Thus, offense is distinctive: lying

50. D’Errico and Poggi, “The lexicon of feeling offended”; Isabella Poggi and Francesca D’Errico, “Feeling Offended: A Blow to Our Image and Our Social Relationships,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2018): 1–16.

51. Poggi and D’Errico, “Feeling Offended,” 1.

52. Borrowing again Taylor’s depiction. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, 1. See also Lewis’ depiction of self-conscious emotions emerging from “reflecting on our own appearance and thinking about others thinking about us.” Lewis, “The Self in Self-Conscious Emotions,” 119.

53. In support, on one depiction: “face is an image of self possessed by a person through their interest in how they are regarded or judged by others, and face is a social representation of a person reflecting the respect, regard or confidence others have in them.” Qi, “Face,” 287. How others regard one is clearly relevant to constructing one’s self-image.

somewhere in between an emotion of self-assessment and an other-condemning emotion.⁵⁴

There is one further issue with regard to offense's relation to other emotions: its connection to the reactive attitudes involved in blame, such as resentment and guilt. On some theories, offense may appear to be a way to blame someone.⁵⁵ To illustrate, on T. M. Scanlon's theory of blame as relationship modification, the person blamed has done something reflecting "attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her" and the blamer modifies her relations accordingly.⁵⁶ Taking offense could be one of the right sort of relationship modifications; Scanlon's account includes acts like failing to offer one's usual friendly greeting—an act of estrangement. On Angela Smith's theory of blame, our relationship modification protests "the moral claim implicit" in the blameworthy party's conduct and "seeks some kind of moral acknowledgement: from them, or others in the moral community."⁵⁷ Offense looks like such a form of protest; indeed, amongst her examples, Smith includes cutting off contact and "dispassionately 'unfriending'" someone on Facebook, which could be manifestations of offense.⁵⁸ Finally, Shoemaker and Vargas offer a signaling theory of blame, where what unifies blame is its function as a costly way "to signal the blamer's commitment to a set of norms."⁵⁹ Offense, too, can signal one's commitment to a set of norms, for instance, regarding what is appropriate language.

Yet, there is some gap between offense and blame. First, one can take offense at another's acts without blaming them, and even where they aren't blameworthy. Take the very young child who parrots the offensive—say, racist, sexist, or ableist—views of her parents. One may be offended, but without blaming the child. As another example, take the Microsoft chatbot Tay which, after interacting with other users on Twitter, produced a series of racist tweets. One might be offended, yet the chatbot

54. While contempt also involves a dimension of comparison of self to other—you take yourself to be superior—it is far less central, since contempt is primarily concerned with assessing another. The self-assessment is derivative or implied.

55. With thanks to a referee and Manuel Vargas for raising this connection.

56. T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 128.

57. Angela Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43.

58. *Ibid.*, 32.

59. David Shoemaker and Manuel Vargas, "Moral torch fishing: A signal theory of blame," *Noûs* (2019): 1.

is not to blame.⁶⁰ Or take any case of innocently caused affronts, lacking even culpable ignorance on the part of the offender; say, someone who is unaware of the local norms, and reasonably so, and whose behavior was intended to be polite but is read as offensive.⁶¹ Despite the lack of blame, these acts may offend; nonetheless they may constitute affronts to one's standing, since another's blameworthiness is not required for their acts to threaten our sense of social standing or how we wish to present ourselves in some setting. Of course, in many cases like these, there will be someone to blame for these affronts: the designers of the chatbot, say, or the parents of the child. But the point is that offense targets the act, rather than tracking who is to blame for it.

Furthermore, there is reason to think that being offended at someone may not suffice, by itself, to blame them, for those who regard blame as having a distinctively moral dimension: as addressing moral norms or moral wrongdoing, or as making some moral claim on others. Offense is usually taken at violations of social, not moral, norms. Despite the interplay between manners and injustice, often we take offense simply at rudeness with little wider significance. Indeed, offense is not always an appropriate reaction to violations of moral norms, if these violations do not concern one's presentation of self. At the least, then, other reactive attitudes like resentment look more widely appropriate than offense within our blaming practices.⁶² So, too, often what is sought in taking offense is not a moral acknowledgement, as Smith suggests blaming demands, but a change in our social interactions. What is primarily at stake is not one's moral status, but one's social status: consider that when I offend, I may primarily feel embarrassment, not guilt. Thus, I suggest that offense is better viewed either as a "blame-like interpersonal practice" to borrow Shoemaker and Vargas' phrase, or as a potential part of a blaming practice, but perhaps one that is, by itself, insufficient.⁶³

60. Whether one is offended by these tweets depends on if one regards a chatbot, or perhaps its programmers, as participating in social interactions, so taking offense makes sense as it would not for a natural phenomenon.

61. In order to be innocent, that ignorance can't reflect or reinforce underlying social hierarchies of race, class, gender, disability and so forth. Often, one ought to have known and done better. For a discussion of the culpability of white ignorance see Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

62. Perhaps always appropriate, but see Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*.

63. Shoemaker and Vargas, "Moral torch fishing," 18. They admit that this signaling function appears in other practices too.

Still, reactions of offense may form a part of blaming: I might, for instance, be both offended and resentful.

IV. RETHINKING OFFENSE: DOMESTIC, NOT CATASTROPHIC

Offense, then, is a distinct emotion that ought to be disentangled from other close emotions like disgust in a way in which Feinberg fails to do. The rest of this article is devoted to examining how this recharacterization motivates a more nuanced moral appraisal of offense as compared to popular perception. To begin, on my account, offense becomes a more domestic emotion than it is sometimes taken to be. Public discourse focuses on the extreme end of the associated behaviors: public exposure to shame and shunning. Yet, often, offense will not escalate to such behaviors; rather, much of it is every day, involving raised eyebrows, tisk-tisking, or other minor signs of disapproval. Against popular perception, this lack of escalation is even seen in many online interactions: a study of offense on Facebook found reactions of offense to be mostly small in scale.⁶⁴

However, some might question why taking offense ever escalates, if we can express our offense and signal our withdrawal simply by not laughing at a joke or turning away. There are two possible answers, the first of which may lie behind some of the fear of the (supposed) culture of offense. On that first answer, some may see offense as the kind of emotion that, once felt, tends to escalate, just as some characterize anger as involving the loss of control and provoking indiscriminate, excessive violence. In this case, once offended, I will keep escalating my behavior until drastic consequences result for the offending party. However, this first answer does not ring true when we consider many everyday cases of offense where no such escalation occurs: say, when your partner makes a rude remark about your cooking, or a colleague makes some inappropriately sexist joke. Nor is this a plausible way to think about emotions like offense any more than it is about anger: many emotions do not sweep away all measured responses. If someone gets angry at their computer freezing and so smashes it with a hammer, we would not accept what happened as simply a normal part of feeling anger; at least, not that of an emotionally mature adult, rather than a toddler.

64. Tagg et al., *Taking Offence on Social Media*.

Furthermore, there is a second, alternative answer for why we sometimes see an escalation in offense, especially when interacting with strangers online. Sometimes everyday, small-scale ways of expressing withdrawal are unavailable, as I examine below, and so we may be pushed toward starker displays of offense. However, rather than being necessarily indiscriminate or excessive, these starker ways might be the only way to express the withdrawal that characterizes being offended in such settings; in Section VI, I argue, further, that these grander displays can be as morally appropriate as those smaller in scale.

V. THE LIMITS TO TAKING OFFENSE

To continue the case for a more nuanced appraisal of offense, I propose two limits to when taking offense is apt, based on the distance between the potentially offended party and the affront in question. That distance, I argue, can render taking offense inapt in two senses: in whether taking offense fits the situation, but also in that taking offense outside these limits opens agents to moral criticism. Furthermore, proposing these limits tackles two aspects of our practices that those skeptical of offense may find especially objectionable: where others pile on in taking offense and where people search out grounds on which to take offense.

As the first limit, the analysis of offense has implications for *who* can fittingly take offense at a particular act. Just as it is intelligible for a parent to take pride in the achievements of a child as “theirs” in some sense, often people take offense when the standing of their group is affronted.⁶⁵ The relevant group could be one with which they identify or belong, or with which they are commonly identified by others. Given that people’s construal of their own standing is often tied to such features, this should be unsurprising. As a consequence, an affront can also be shared by other members of the same group, even where they are not the one at whom the affront is aimed. For instance, a woman might be offended when another woman is called a “girl” by their boss. That this affronts her standing too makes sense against a background of gender inequality, one that is sometimes manifested through reminders of lesser standing, such as

65. Parents may take offense at slights to their children too, if they construe their children’s standing as impacting their own, by, for example, taking how well their child does to reflect their parenting. Slights to one’s children can then be taken to be slights to oneself, by, for instance, threatening one’s self-presentation as a “good” parent.

describing adult women as “girls”—a reminder to both the woman called that, and those witnessing it.

However, sometimes our offense-taking can be unintelligible: there are conceptual restrictions on when taking offense is appropriate. Just as in Hume’s case where a man takes pride in a fish in the sea that has nothing to do with him, so, too, we can mistakenly take offense at slights too distant or disconnected for our offense to make sense. The affront at which one takes offense must target something that it makes sense for me to incorporate into my sense of my own standing.⁶⁶ If, instead, I take offense at an affront to the social standing of some group to which I am not a member nor otherwise closely associated with, or a slight made about an individual to whom I bear no relation to and share no facet of identity with, then I am mistaken in the object of my offense. The thought here is that it is not my place to be offended, just as I cannot forgive on other’s behalf or feel pride on the grounds of another’s achievements, at least where those others are unrelated to me. Taking such offense would be to mistake how the world is: to think myself connected to some affront, where I am not. I would incorporate into my self-conception and presentation of self, something that has nothing to do with me. Often, this would be a moral mistake too. A wrong is done to someone whose own standing is affronted that is not done to the person who witnesses an affront targeting someone else. To take offense at an affront to another obscures that difference.

Given this limit to the intelligibility of offense, there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between the claim “that’s offensive” and someone actually taking offense. We can label some act offensive without feeling offended. Furthermore, we can label some act offensive even where the slight is too distant from us to be intelligibly offended. Thus, on my analysis, the emotion of taking offense does not include statements of the form, “that’s offensive.” Of course, we may experience unpleasant sensations when people say things that we label offensive, even where they do not

66. There is a parallel here between offense and pride, which should be unsurprising given that both of these emotions relate to our standing and what we value about ourselves. See David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 275–94. The description here accommodates cases where someone takes offense at a derogatory remark targeting a group to which they secretly belong or with which they privately identify. The affront has to do with them despite the fact that they hide their connection with the group in public.

affront our own standing. A man seeing a T-shirt with the slogan “women, get back in the kitchen,” or a straight person hearing jokes about greedy bisexuals, might feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or even disgusted. Sometimes, the third-party counterpart of offense may be indignation. At other times, we might call something offensive without any accompanying emotional response. None of these, however, is the same as feeling offended, and the resulting action tendencies also differ. Thus, while being offended consistently disposes people toward a particular behavior communicating estrangement, labeling something offensive does not.

As a result, I resist one facet of what might be called a “social justice warrior” phenomenon: namely, the piling on with offense-taking at affronts made to unrelated others. Taking offense on another’s behalf and acting in ways that express offense’s kind of estrangement from the offending party makes both a conceptual and moral mistake. However, this implication is a plausible reading of our emotions: there is something different in how you feel when it is *you* that someone insults, compared to when they insult someone else. Furthermore, we tend to find something suspicious or disingenuous about the unrelated, uninvolved person taking offense at a slight made to someone else; we think that they are making the situation all about them. Indeed, unless they are conceptually mistaken about offense, that is the best way to make sense of their really feeling offense rather than merely pretending: they are turning the slight into one that affects them too. For instance, I could be offended that someone thinks *I* would put up with such affronts to others, turning an other-directed offensive remark into one salient for my standing. Suppose, for instance, that you take yourself to be the sort of person that others ought not say such things in front of, given your consistent work promoting social justice. But even if so, the offense is not taken at the affront itself but, rather, at someone saying such things in front of you. The affront at which offense is taken, then, is not the statement about another group, but the presumption about yourself.

Hence, when people pile on in taking offense at affronts directed to others, they are open to moral criticism. These individuals look self-involved: they turn an affront to another into one affecting them. In addition, they obscure what is going on, rather than illuminating the injustice done to those who experience frequent affronts to social standing. That is not to say that outsiders ought never react but, rather, that it would be preferable to respond in another way, say through emotions such as

indignation and hence, likely, with behaviors other than withdrawal. Indignation, for instance, as a species of anger, would likely provoke reactions of (negative) engagement instead.

The second limit to taking offense concerns which affronts, among those that target me, are apt candidates for offense. It might seem a quirk of my analysis that while media discussions of the “culture of taking offence” emphasize Twitter spats and public shaming, I focus on more everyday interactions, where we take offense in pubs or on trains, and at friends, colleagues, or partners. Furthermore, given my characterization of offense as involving feeling estrangement and inclining us toward acts of withdrawal, a question arises as to its scope. Can one take offense at the act of an unrelated, unconnected, distant stranger? One can, of course, feel anger at gross slights to standing or at attacks on basic moral standing, whoever performs such transgressions. However, when it comes to offense one cannot withdraw from relationships to entirely unrelated or unconnected others: that is, from those to whom one stands in no existing relation. That may simply mean that we would be frustrated in any attempt to express our emotion. More troublingly, however, nor can one become estranged from someone with whom one shared no prior social relation or connection. What then would estrangement mean? A person cannot feel more estranged from another, where that other is a stranger he will never meet and with whom he has nothing in common, no shared connections, nor previous contact.⁶⁷

67. With thanks to Serena Olsaretti for first observing this apparent implication of my analysis. One might think that knowing one no longer wants contact with some random, unconnected stranger in itself counts as feeling estranged. Yet that seems a stretch beyond the permissive understanding of relationships from which one can be estranged to follow: in the absence of prior expectations of contact, the size of the global population makes it look odd to view all strangers as people we’d potentially be in contact with—unless they offend. At the least, for reasons I shortly discuss, others are likely to fail to read one’s behavior as expressing withdrawal. However, that isn’t to deny the possibility of strangers that you encounter offending you: you can be estranged from someone who you didn’t previously know, say when a stranger yells a slur at you in the street. The thought in this case is that the offensive act itself creates a connection of the right kind to underpin taking offense; that connection arises from being addressed directly. In these cases, one is in direct contact with the offending party, and in an interaction that concerns your presentation of self. Further, in cases where you have such direct contact with a stranger and they offer you an affront, it is easy to meaningfully convey withdrawal, say, through turning away. With thanks to a referee for pressing me on these points.

Hence, it looks like to be conceptually coherent, offense must be taken at the acts of someone with whom one bears some existing relationship or connection, sufficient for it to be possible for us to feel *more* estranged from them. Were offense subject to such a limitation in scope, it would not be unique. Grief, for instance, also requires prior connection to its object. However, in the case of offense, there are good reasons to be permissive about who could potentially count as close enough to provoke offense.

First, what matters for conceptual coherence is the kinds of relations from which people can feel themselves estranged. Some have a wide-ranging understanding of to whom they bear sufficient connection such that they could feel more estranged. For instance, it appears intelligible, if a tad dramatic, to state, “I no longer recognize myself as British after Brexit.” Someone might take their citizenship to be a sufficiently significant bond to feel a relationship to all co-citizens and, further, ground that relationship on perceived shared values. But others might not.

Furthermore, these more wide-ranging feelings of offense are not necessarily lacking in expression: it is possible to express a withdrawal from another both from a distance and only symbolically. Focusing on behaviors like not shaking hands or tutting might mislead us into thinking that one can only manifest offense within ongoing, face-to-face relationships. Yet we can convey withdrawal without physical contact, such as by blocking someone on social media or declaring that we no longer read their work. Sometimes we can even merely symbolically withdraw by, say, stating that we’d not accept invites where that person would be present—even if we never receive any. Still, there is some limit to symbolic withdrawal: if the other never had any expectation of connection with us, then our act may have limited social meaning, or even fail to symbolize withdrawal altogether.

Second, sometimes we might adopt a form of “proxy” estrangement, with accompanying tendencies to withdraw from these proxies, where we are not in contact with the one whose behavior we take to be slighting us but we are in contact with some who are associated with the person who slights us. Then, we find ourselves estranged from the associated others. Take the French woman offended by Trump’s “grab them by the pussy” remark, who feels a sense of estrangement from those who vote for Trump despite having no relation to Trump and never having lived in America. Perhaps she would make statements such as, “I can’t understand people

who vote for Trump,” or would cease to invite Americans who vote Republican to her parties.

Thus, my account captures our practices of taking offense. We usually take offense within existing relationships like teacher-student, amongst friends, or at co-citizens. Sometimes, the connection is more distant: say, where a stranger in another country has tweeted some remark about one’s group. Then we are pushed toward symbolic withdrawal or proxy forms of estrangement and withdrawal. However, that distance is what produces some of the more apparently excessive offense reactions: symbolic or proxy forms are harder to perform with subtlety. Where I am in frequent contact with someone and they are attuned to my behavior, I don’t need to do very much to convey that I am offended. That could explain why the offense we take in interpersonal relations is often subtle, say, a small silence when our partner says the wrong thing. Where we are not in such close relations to another, however, something more dramatic is sometimes required, insofar as we wish to convey our offense.

Finally, here lies a reason why many find people taking offense at slights made by people to whom they share no obvious relation, odd or objectionable. We might begin to think that sometimes people try too hard to draw a link such that they can relate to the other in a way that makes taking offense fitting. We can find people’s claiming relations with very distant others absurd, or suspect it reveals some kind of bad faith. “What’s that got to do with you” becomes a reasonable retort, and the social meaning of one’s symbolic withdrawal is in doubt.

VI. TOWARD A DEFENSE OF TAKING OFFENSE: FROM VICTIMHOOD TO SOCIAL STANDING

This article’s goal has been to detail a distinct emotion of offense. On this account, when person A takes offense at B’s doing φ , where “ φ ” includes omissions, and where “B” can be a person, group agent, or institution:

- A believes, judges, or perceives that φ is an affront to her social standing as she perceives it;
- and so, A feels estranged from B as a result of B’s doing φ , even if only for a moment;
- and, as a result, A has a tendency toward acts that express withdrawal from B.

Furthermore, I defended two resulting restrictions in scope. One is at which affronts we can take offense; namely, those that I can reasonably take to target my standing. The other is from whom the affronts come: we must have some kind of relation to the person who commits the affront such that we can be estranged, or where we can estrange ourselves from proxies for the person who offends.

In light of this analysis, it is clear that offense is an emotion ripe for moral reassessment. Already, this analysis provides a partial response to those worried that a rising inclination to take offense will harm social relations. For a start, I have domesticated this emotion: often, offense is small scale and, often, it takes place within ongoing relations and without major ruptures. This is a perfectly ordinary emotion, with a role to play in our social relations in regulating how we relate and the ways in which we do, or do not, respect each other's projected sense of standing. Furthermore, we can be, and often are, very precise in the extent of our offense.

Nonetheless, there will be a limited category of cases where offense is more likely to escalate and could appear excessive: where the relationship to the person who offends is sufficiently distant to require symbolic withdrawal or proxy forms of estrangement. However, in such cases, these expressions may be the only way to convey offense, given the distance, rather than being needlessly excessive. This should revise our moral assessment of some apparent excesses in our practices of taking offense. One might object that, instead, people under such circumstances ought not express their offense, even if feeling offended is appropriate. Even if grand gestures are the only ways to convey offense, they are still disproportionate: it would be to react as if the distant other had done something much worse than they had.⁶⁸ Yet this rests on a flawed assumption that grander gestures, whether made by those near or far, are costlier to the offending party than those smaller, and thus disproportionate. Instead, however, a friend or boss failing to laugh at your sexist joke in front of people you are in frequent contact with likely inflicts a greater sense of having misstepped and does more significant social harm than a stranger blocking you on social media or boycotting your events. A subset of the grander acts of offense then turn out to not be as costly as one might suppose.

68. With thanks to a referee for raising this.

Some might think that, still, the scale of grander acts alone renders them disproportionate: they express greater estrangement and yet, regardless of distance, the same offensive act ought to provoke the same degree of offense. However, rather, where the offending party is distant, starker acts may convey the same degree of offense or estrangement: a partner cares about a raised eyebrow, while an acquaintance would be indifferent. The estrangement expressed by two very different acts of withdrawal can be much the same, given the different starting points. The rarer, grander gestures of offense, then, are not necessarily to be dismissed as disproportionate or as evidence of excess; rather, they may be measured ways to convey offense at a distance.

I finish with the strongest reason to reassess offense. Taking offense is commonly regarded as manifesting oversensitivity and weakness. Take the popular notion of a “snowflake” generation, or Campbell and Manning’s rendering of offense as involved in a “culture of victimhood.”⁶⁹ But instead, on my analysis, those who take offense attend to their standing and how others regard them. That should change our moral assessment. For a start, such attention to our standing is a pervasive feature of our social lives, rather than the novel phenomenon that some take it to be. Indeed, that offense is nothing new is confirmed by the history of work on “face,” politeness, and offense: a history longer than the current fears over people taking offense.⁷⁰ Most of us are attuned to everyday details of how others treat us, salient for determining whether we receive the respect we consider ourselves due and whether our self-presentations are accepted, from others’ greetings and jokes, to where they touch us and the attention that they pay. Of course, sometimes people care too much: consider someone hypersensitive to threats to standing; or the grand professor, expecting many acts of deference and constantly affronted when those he deems his inferiors fail to abide by his expectations. Still, paying some attention to our standing is defensible: how others regard us shapes how our lives go and, often, has a bearing on how go the lives of those like us too.

What, then, if some did take more offense these days, as it is feared? Suppose, say, that women were more easily offended now at what was

69. Campbell and Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures”; Campbell and Manning, “The New Millennial ‘Morality.’”

70. See, for example, Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.

once dismissed as mere “banter” or acceptable flirting. What would that tell us? Then offense is ripe for a defense akin to that which feminists offer for anger.⁷¹ In particular, sometimes our emotions serve as a way to resist or protest injustice. In this case, where members of one group are commonly attributed less social standing than members of another, to take offense is one way to resist the everyday patterning of social hierarchies.

To illustrate, a woman offended at a sexist joke rejects the ordinary patterning of relations wherein women have less social standing than men and, as Merrie Bergmann observes, are traditional objects of humor.⁷² That resistance takes two forms. First, sometimes, when people take offense, it gets uptake from others. Others realize that some behavior offends, in being read as an affront to social standing, and they may be wary of risking the associated social costs of causing such offense, so changing their ways. But, second, even when others fail to change their behavior, still, taking offense can be valuable. A woman who takes offense at a sexist joke rightly attributes to herself more standing than others attribute to her: she resists another’s lowering of her standing. To be offended, then, can be an act of direct insubordination against a social hierarchy, and one that might help to preserve one’s sense of standing.⁷³

Hence, to take offense at dismissals or attacks on one’s social standing sometimes looks like a way to resist being treated as lesser. Thus, depending on who takes it, and at what, offense is ready for a defense that sees the emotion as a way to resist the injustice of ordinary, everyday social inequalities. Now that we are clear about what offense is, we can begin to see what it might be able to do.

71. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1983); on racism, see Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 25, no. ½ (1997): 278–85. See Bell on the structure of such defenses, drawn on here. Macalester Bell, “A Woman’s Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 80–93.

72. Merrie Bergmann, “How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make a Joke? Sexist Humor and What’s Wrong with It,” *Hypatia*, 1, no. 1 (1986): 63–82.

73. Serving as “emotional insubordination,” as Bell describes. Bell, “A Woman’s Scorn.” See again the self-assessment aspect of offense in Section III. One might make the argument above in terms of shoring up respect and self-respect, but the relation of these notions to a dynamic understanding of social standing is complex. Still, resisting a lowering of one’s standing looks likely to boost one’s self-respect. With thanks to a referee.