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Anthony Dillon

Choosing to Be Offended

Our right to express opinions, question the motives of others, or simply express disapproval, has copped a hammering in recent times. Australians are being gagged. Saying the “wrong” (that is, unpopular) thing has got some people into trouble and silenced many others. Many, like myself, when wanting to express a concern because we feel something isn’t quite right, sometimes decide it just isn’t worth it. All it takes is for one person to say “You’ve offended me”, and any reasonable discussion shuts down. You are likely to be accused of being racist, uncaring, and the rest, or even end up in court. People are increasingly being monitored in what they can say or do because of the concern that their words or actions will offend others. It would seem that being offended places one in a position of power.

The increased controlling and monitoring of what people can say and do is apparently done with the intention of protecting vulnerable groups and individuals. Protecting the vulnerable from harm is admirable. However, much of what is considered harm (hurt feelings, for example) is laughable. And for those incidents where an element of racism is concerned, there are better ways of dealing with it that are more empowering for the target of racist comments than the current popular strategy of convincing people from minority groups that they are so fragile they need special protection.

There is a serious danger when we move away from objective descriptions of what is harmful and blindly accept subjective descriptions. At one time in history people could accuse a woman of being a witch and therefore harmful, and it was virtually impossible for her to prove she was neither a witch nor harmful. More recently, gay people were considered offensive, and still are considered by some to be the cause of offence; in fact not so long ago gay people were considered so offensive that they were labelled mentally ill or criminal.

I believe we have now reached the stage where if someone claims the actions of others cause them offence, it is impossible to prove that they are not caused offence. We need to examine more closely what it means to be offended.

People can claim to be offended because of something they see, because somebody questions their motives, or because words were spoken to them which they regard as nasty, slanderous, or racist. Even if the intention is to offend, I don’t see these examples so much as “sources” of offence, but rather, as “triggers” for offence, or even just “opportunities” to be offended as a means of avoiding or even attacking others through guilt (“Look what you have done to me”).

Although on the surface it may appear that words, opinions and events directly cause people to be offended, I intend to challenge this popular belief. I will show that being “offended” is simply a learnt response that serves the short-term interests of the “offended”, but comes at a long-term

cost. Further, I will argue that people do not have to be offended. They have a choice, but being offended is often the easier and more pleasing choice to take.

Perhaps the best counter-evidence against the popular belief that the words or actions of others cause offence, is that there are many people who are simply not offended by such words or actions. Two people can sit and watch the same movie and one can complain that it is offensive, while the other can say it was thoroughly entertaining. The movie itself is not offensive, but individuals can make it offensive to themselves; the movie is simply a trigger.

Instead of being offended by a particular event, some people give it a different interpretation. And a different interpretation results in a different response. All events are interpreted and we respond according to our interpretation. Epictetus in the first century said, “What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about things.”

People who are not offended see the supposedly offending events for what they really are, and therefore have no need to feel threatened by those events. Others are quick to take offence and believe that the offence has been caused by the “offending” person or event. Such a person is saying that others have more control over his emotional well-being than he has himself.

When someone claims to be offended, it is assumed without question that some event causes them to be offended. But just because offence follows from some event, it does not mean that the event caused the offence. This association is much like when someone starts putting on weight after some fast food restaurants open up around the corner. It may be true that weight gain occurred after the restaurants opened. But this need not mean that living in close proximity to these restaurants *causes* the weight gain. That seems to be akin to the reasoning behind the logic of “the actions of others cause me to be offended”.

Hurt feelings are often likened to physical pain, such as the pain from a heavy object falling on our toes. I don’t deny the reality of physical pain and its causes, but I do question if it is a good analogy when attempting to understand “being offended”. When it comes to offence, there seem to be rules and conventions that dictate who can be offended and under what circumstances. But no such rules apply to physical pain.

I was once told that hearing a racist joke is like being hit by a baseball bat—it hurts. I then asked the critic if it mattered if the person doing the hitting and the person being hit were of the same racial group? I have observed many times that people within a racial group are able to tell jokes and make remarks in relation to race, that outsiders simply could not without being accused of racism. I got no response. It seems that whether or not a word or phrase is racist depends on who spoke it.

Such double standards make it difficult to know how to behave in a way that won’t invoke accusations of being offensive or racist. Perhaps even more concerning is that what would not be considered offensive today, may one day in the future be considered offensive. For example, I proudly identify as a part-Aboriginal Australian (simply because I am), though some people tell me this term is offensive. Typically, they give no reason, but simply state it with much conviction as if it was an obvious fact. I suspect that the purpose of the outward conviction is to compensate for the lack of inner conviction that the term is actually offensive. I can remember many years ago when such expressions were part of normal conversation. Once when I was in America, I asked about the Negroes. I used the term “Negro” because that is how Martin Luther

King Jr referred to his people in all the books of his I have read. I was promptly told I must never use that word, and that the correct word is “Afro-American”.

Examples like these clearly demonstrate the inadequacy of the physical pain analogy when trying to prove that offence is caused in a person by external factors. It also demonstrates the ridiculousness of the claim that events, such as the words or actions of others, cause offence. Our *interpretation* of events is what causes emotional distress. When our interpretation of an event is that it is threatening (to our beliefs, ego, reputation and so on), we become offended.

Consider the recent news story of how one lady was upset because she was asked not to breastfeed in a public place. It is assumed that because she claims to be offended, then the comments made by the people who disapproved of her breastfeeding in public caused her to be offended. It is further assumed that she had no choice but to be offended, in the same way that you have no choice but to experience pain when a heavy object falls on your toes. However, if we are to be consistent in the application of this logic, then we have to accept that viewing a woman breastfeeding in public must also cause offence to some, simply because they claim that it does. Whose offendedness is the more valid?

In this politically correct society we live in, there are rules, and often arbitrary ones, for determining who can be offended and under what conditions. I would suggest that to calmly and confidently stand up for the right to breastfeed in public does not need the added support of “I am offended”. Indeed, this addition merely confuses the real issue.

As another example, consider the scenario of a man who claims that his girlfriend has “offended” him because she questions his whereabouts the night before. She holds the opinion that he may have been unfaithful to her. In his claim of being offended, what he is really saying is, “I don’t want you to comment on what I have been doing and can’t you see that your insulting opinion of me is causing me distress?” Does the girlfriend’s opinion of her boyfriend’s fidelity really cause offence? Is it possible that, rather than people’s opinions causing offence, that being offended helps us achieve an outcome we could not ordinarily achieve without being offended? Perhaps being offended is nothing more than a deeply learned attempt at inducing guilt in the other which has been reinforced by its history of effectiveness. Further, inducing guilt in others has the effect of making us feel innocent, perhaps even an innocent victim.

In both of the preceding examples, those who took offence were trying to avoid a situation in which they would feel threatened. What likely happens after the boyfriend takes (chooses— mostly just an unconscious and learned habitual response in such situations) offence? He avoids an accusation he is uncomfortable with. Even if he has not been unfaithful, the fact that his girlfriend may suspect it is unpleasant to him. The next time he wishes to avoid her questioning, he knows that being offended will achieve the desired outcome. Why is the breastfeeding mother offended? Most likely because she wishes to continue breastfeeding her baby when it suits her, and feels threatened that somebody would disapprove of her right to breastfeed in public. An alternative response for the mother instead of being offended might be to say, “Thank you for your concern. You have the right to be offended, but I will continue to breastfeed my baby.” Of course such options are only available to people who are truly at ease with themselves. Events (whether they be words, bare breasts, or whatever) do not cause offence; they are triggers. People choose (albeit unconsciously) to be offended because it serves a need— the need to avoid a threatening situation.

There is another reason I would like to suggest for why people choose to be offended. To be offended is to adopt the victim role. In *The Psychology of Victimhood* (eds. Wright and Cummings, 2005), Ofer Zur wrote:

In claiming the status of victim and assigning all the blame to others, a person can achieve moral superiority while simultaneously disowning any responsibility for his or her behaviour ... The victim status is a powerful one. The victim is always morally right, neither responsible nor accountable, and forever entitled to sympathy.

I am not suggesting that people are responsible for the actions (and sometimes senseless actions) of others. But they are responsible (having been shown new options) for how they respond to those actions.

The words that others use which we believe are racist or hurtful, are simply the other people's way of dealing with their own fragility. A person who is emotionally secure and has a positive opinion of themselves has no need to attack others. And if your opinion of yourself is more important to you than the opinion of others, then their words will have no negative effect on you. Wayne Dyer in his insightful book *Your Erroneous Zones* says, "You can learn not to give other people's behaviour and ideas the power to upset you." Being offended is simply a response that has been learnt because it has been rewarded. Avoiding criticisms and silencing others are powerful rewards. But if being offended is learnt, it can be unlearned.

Albert Einstein said, "Arrows of hate have been shot at me too, but they never hit me, because somehow they belonged to another world with which I have no connection whatsoever." By belonging to another world, he simply meant that he had a different understanding about human nature from most people. He saw people as either fearful or loving. (Contrast this view with the Buddhist understanding: "All a person ever does is either an act of love or a call for love." Once we understand this, the way we respond to those who rely on racism to protect their fragile self-concepts changes radically.) Someone who needs to engage in racist talk is clearly a fearful person. Only an insecure and unhappy person (despite outward appearances of confidence) would ever feel the need to attack another in order to alleviate their own deep feelings of weakness and fragility. And each time they deal with their suppressed fear through attack, it reinforces and legitimises those deep feelings of inadequacy, accompanied by even further denial of this reality. In other words, all offensive behaviour (such as racist comments) is actually unconscious defensive behaviour masquerading as offence. The best response to a person making racist remarks is, "Why are you so unhappy and fearful?" or "That's one way of viewing me".

It may seem paradoxical, but it seems that the unconscious motivation of the target of racism who feels a sense of victimhood is much the same as the motivation of the one who offers the offence in the first place. To show anger, disgust or cry victim in response to racist comments simply communicates the message, "You [the racist] have more power over me than I have over myself." So each time we respond this way to the racist remarks of others, we actually weaken ourselves, as we send the message (to ourselves and others), "I am fragile and need protection." On the other hand, adopting the "sticks and stones" approach tells the person using racist remarks, "My opinion of me is far more important to me than your opinion of me could ever be and therefore whatever you say has no relevance to the reality of my life." I realise that in our society it is difficult to find people with a robust sense of self-worth, people who value

themselves unconditionally. I cannot help but think that current and proposed laws will steer people away from considering the value of adopting a positive opinion of themselves.

When a racist person is seen for what they truly are—someone who is insecure and lacking self-respect, and who makes racist remarks as a way of dealing with their own inner insecurity and fragility—we can respond in a better way where we no longer need to feel offended or victimised, and the racist does not receive rewards for bad behaviour.

Changing the way the intended target of racism views their racist attacker changes the way they respond to racist comments. They no longer need to feel like a victim. They can rise above racist remarks. However, in our society there are many rewards for being the victim, hence for many, adopting the approach I am suggesting, while liberating, can mean letting go of the victim status and all its rewards.

On the wall of an office I used to occupy was a sign that read: “Offence is never given. It is only ever taken. And when it is offered and graciously refused, any offence intended returns to the one who offered it.” As a part-Aboriginal Australian who has often been referred to as a “coconut” (brown on the outside but ...), this advice has kept a smile in my face over the years. It has always been my intention that my fellow Australians (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) can keep the smiles on their faces and not be dependent on others for their happiness and emotional well-being. To make others responsible for your happiness and well-being is disempowering. And let’s not forget who the most disempowered group of people in Australia are.

For those who remain unconvinced that we do have a choice in how we respond to the actions of others, or feel it is just too hard, consider the experience and wisdom of Victor Frankl. He was a prisoner in the Nazi death camps who had the following insight based on his experiences:

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.

In the freedom-of-speech debate, let’s not be foolish and let being offended prevent necessary discussions from taking place. Silencing people will imprison us all. Instead, let’s promote alternative ways of understanding and responding to obnoxious behaviour.

Anthony Dillon identifies as a part-Aboriginal Australian who is proud of both his Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestries. Originally from Queensland, he now lives in Sydney and is a researcher at the University of Western Sydney. His e-mail address is anthonywodillon@yahoo.com.au