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On Insults

ABSTRACT: *Some bemoan the incivility of our times, while others complain that people have grown too quick to take offense. There is widespread disagreement about what counts as an insult and when it is appropriate to feel insulted. Here I propose a definition and a preliminary taxonomy of insults. Namely, I define insults as expressions of a lack of due regard. And I categorize insults by whether they are intended or unintended, acts or omissions, and whether they cause offense or not. Unintended insults are of particular concern since greater understanding may help us to avoid them. And insults by omission warrant special consideration because they suggest an interesting extension of Grice's theory of conversational implicature.*

KEYWORDS: impoliteness, pragmatics, implicature, omissions, meaning

1. What are insults?

Visiting a friend at her new home, you bring flowers you arranged yourself. Your friend distractedly remarks on how amateurish the arrangement is: 'I hope you didn't pay someone for that mess!' Your skill and taste in flower arrangement has come in for rather rough treatment. Your gift was greeted not with the thanks you expected, but instead with an insult.

To insult, I propose, is to express a lack of due regard. That is, by word, action, or omission, an insult conveys that one has less regard for someone (or some group) than one ought to have. A stranger passing by is under no obligation to compliment your flower arrangement, but the friend who receives your gift should find something nice to say about it. To do otherwise is to demonstrate an insulting indifference to your feelings. Even a stranger passing by, we might think, should not go out of their way to tell you how ugly your flowers are. That, too, would be insulting. What counts as an insult, then, depends upon what kind and degree of

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regard are appropriate under the circumstances and upon local conventions for expressing regard. When you give a gift to a friend, local conventions for the gracious receipt of gifts determine what sorts of responses are appropriate. When you pass by a stranger, local conventions for interactions among strangers are in play instead. A violation of such norms expresses a lack of due regard and so is an insult.

We may, then, think of insults as the complement of politeness or civility, as described by Sarah Buss (1999), Cheshire Calhoun (2000), and Nancy Sherman (2005). Buss writes, 'When we treat one another politely, we are directly expressing respect for one another in the only way possible. We are, in effect, saying: "I respect you," "I acknowledge your dignity"' (1999: 802). Calhoun agrees both that politeness is fundamentally expressive and also that what it expresses is respect: 'The function of civility . . . is to *communicate* basic moral attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness' (2000: 255, italics in the original). And Sherman emphasizes the continuity of overtly moral actions with more subtle gestures of regard:

> Side by side with moral acts such as helping or showing courage or generosity, comportment and demeanor are vehicles through which we routinely express our concern or respect for others. To show the proper eye gaze toward another, to bear oneself physically in a certain way, to be mindful of what would offend, insult, or shame are in many cultures simply the ways we acknowledge others as worthy of respect. (2005: 273)

An insult, considered as a conspicuous lack of politeness or civility, would tend to express the opposite attitudes—a *lack* of respect for another's dignity, a *lack* of appropriate consideration or concern—in other words, a lack of due regard.

In what follows, I shall leave civility and politeness aside in order to develop this account of insults. Specifically, I structure the categories of insults according to a few fundamental differences among them, and I show how my account of insults as *expressions of a lack of due regard* successfully accommodates this diverse class of things.

2. Varieties of Insults

Insults might reasonably be categorized in a number of ways: by intensity, by degree of literality, by harms inflicted, by the relationship between insulter and insulted, and so on. My own taxonomy is intended to reveal some general causes and effects of insults and so to help us avoid or redress insults of these different fundamental kinds. In keeping with this principle for sorting, insults may (a) be intended or unintended, they may (b) cause the insulted person to take offense or not, and they may (c) be either actions or omissions. We can begin to see the importance of these categories by considering two preliminary definitions of 'insult' in Aristotle.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote that 'an insult (*hubris*) consists of doing or saying such things as involve shame for the victim, not for some advantage to oneself

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other than that these have been done, but for the fun of it' (1991: 1378b). This captures children's playground taunts exactly, but it leaves out many other sorts of insults. First, you might insult someone for other reasons than mere fun, or you might even insult someone accidentally. Second, insults do not always cause the insulted person to take offense. That is, an insult need not 'involve shame for the victim' since one's response to an insult is at least partly independent of the insult itself. An insulted person might not hear the insult, might fail to 'take up' the illocutionary force of the insult, or might simply disregard the insult. In each of these cases, the insulted person does not take offense and so would not feel shame at the insult.[1] Finally, insults by omission, which I shall call 'slights', are also left out of Aristotle's definition. He says that insults consist in 'doing or saying' things of a certain sort. But we can insult one another precisely by not doing anything at all when politeness requires a word or deed. Not shaking an extended hand is just such an insult by omission.

These differences between our broad notion of an insult and Aristotle's narrower one can be explained partly by the fact that, for us, insults are a genus, containing species like the slight. Whereas for Aristotle, the insult (ὕβρις *hubris*) is a species of the genus 'belittlement' (ὀλιγωρία *oligoria*).[2]

> Belittlement (*oligoria*) is a realization of an opinion about what seems to be of no value (for we think that both good and bad things are worth taking seriously and things tending to that condition; while whatever is of little or no importance, we suppose to be worth no consideration). (1991: 1378b)

This is, indeed, much broader. Unlike Aristotle's 'insults,' his 'belittlement' does not have a characteristic purpose (it is not just 'for the fun of it' but could be done for any reason). It also need not 'involve shame for the victim' nor must it be something said or done. My own account of insults hews closely to Aristotle's description of belittlement. One major difference is that he does not account for all the various unintended insults. In order to *realize* an unflattering opinion, one must hold that opinion. But unintended insults may be unrelated to the actual opinions of the insulter: we may simply express ourselves badly and so imply a disregard or dislike that we do not feel.

The paradigmatic insult is an intentional, offense-causing action. When one child shouts at another 'You're stupid!', the insult is something actively done, with an intention to insult, and is likely to hurt the insulted child's feelings. Each change

[1] I am treating shame as a feeling, but it is generally taken to have a social aspect, too (Deonna et al. 2012). One might be unaware that one's drunken antics are inappropriate and so *feel* no shame, yet still suffer the consequences of diminished social status that follow from shameful behavior. When we focus on the internal feeling of shame, it seems obvious that one's own attitudes determine whether one is shamed. Attending instead to the social aspect of shame, we see that things are not so simple. If shame is taken to be a diminution of social status, then you can be shamed by others even when you disagree with their judgments.

[2] To confuse matters further, *oligoria* is sometimes translated as 'slight' (as in Roberts's 1984 translation). That is, our modern terms 'slight' and 'insult' seem to be a species and genus, respectively. But for Aristotle that was reversed (genus and species, respectively).

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from the paradigmatic case seems to make the insult somewhat less typical, so that the most distant from the paradigm—an unintended omission that causes no offense—might not always be characterized as an insult.[3] For example, suppose a group of friends meets regularly, and one week a new person comes along. The new person shakes hands with each regular member of the group but one. Suppose the omission was not meant to express a lack of due regard, and it went unnoticed by anyone, including the person whose hand was not shaken. That hardly seems an insult. But add this detail to the story: All of the people involved were men, except for the person whose hand went unshaken. No one noticed that the new fellow failed to shake her hand because they do not think women warrant much consideration. She shares this view and so never notices such slights. In this elaborated story, we might reasonably think that the woman was insulted because the new fellow expressed a lack of due regard for her. His behavior, even if unreflective, expressed that only male group members deserve personal acknowledgement. Whether the people involved noticed the slight, we can see it plainly and see it as insulting.[4] And so I think it is appropriate to categorize this as an insult though it is a less typical case.

Again, my definition of 'insult' is to express a lack of due regard. It is the generality of this definition that allows me to include such a wide range of cases. But why include all of these cases? In the next three sections I explain and defend each step away from the paradigm case.

3. Intended or Unintended

Suppose you sit next to the mayor of your city at a charity dinner and spend the evening talking to one another. A week later, you pass in the street and say hello, but she seems to have forgotten who you are. Her failure to acknowledge your acquaintance is an omission—it is the absence of a personal greeting, not an act of doing or saying something offensive—and it is probably unintentional. Mayors meet many people, and so it is natural that they sometimes forget someone. Nevertheless, it is insulting because it suggests she was not particularly interested in you and did not think you were important enough to remember. Her slight expresses a lack of regard.

Aristotle mentions this sort of case:

> Forgetfulness is also productive of anger, such as that of names, trivial as it is. For forgetfulness too is thought to be an indication of disregard. For

[3] Whether I have correctly identified features that are central to the concept of an insult could be tested by using something like the methods involved in Rosch's classic (1973) or one of the many experiments following her foundational work on the internal structure of concepts.

[4] Discrimination may often underlie this sort of insult. When someone systematically fails to notice that they are the victim of discriminatory insults, it may be explicable as an instance of 'adaptive preference'. An oppressed person may 'choose' to participate in their own oppression, since, for example, internalizing a norm about one's inferiority may be the best way to get along under certain difficult conditions. This is a complex and tangential issue, so I will set it aside. But see Khader (2011 and 2012) to better understand the complexity of explaining the behavior of oppressed people through adaptive preference.

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> the forgetfulness arises through lack of concern, and lack of concern is a species of disregard. (1991: 1379b)

Forgetting someone's name does indicate disregard because we often forget what we care little about, but forgetting can happen in spite of (or even because of) sincere concern. The mayor may have a poor memory for names or faces, or she may have been so anxious about meeting you that her anxiety interfered with her memory. Her forgetting does express a lack of due regard, and so it is an insult, but it need not arise from the opinion that you are of little value.

Jerome Neu gives this definition in the preface to *Sticks and Stones*: 'To insult is to assert or assume dominance, either intentionally claiming superiority or unintentionally revealing lack of regard' (2008: ix). This allows for unintentional insults, but like Aristotle's account of insults it admits only one psychological motivation for intentionally insulting. Aristotle said we insult others for the fun of it; Neu says, instead, that we insult others for the sake of dominance over them. I agree that one common implication of an insult is that the insulter is superior to the insulted, but there are many others. Further, an unintended insult need not arise through an assumption of dominance. In the mayor's forgetfulness, she need not intentionally claim superiority nor unintentionally reveal any genuine lack of regard. Her poor memory alone may be the best explanation.

My account handles such cases, first, by avoiding the characterization of insults in terms of the intentions of the insulter and, second, by including as insults any 'expressions' of a lack of due regard where that encompasses even the appearance of inappropriate disrespect. The mayor's forgetting you may convey a lack of regard even though she harbors no such feelings. Certain intentions and attitudes on the part of the insulter contribute to the intensity of an insult and can also help us to recognize an insult, but they should not be taken as necessary for an insult.[5]

A few pages after Neu's first definition of insults, he gives another:

> At its core, an insult is (or aims at) a kind of injury. . . . In its most familiar meaning, however, it ['insult'] refers to speech or behavior 'intended to wound self-respect.' The injury is personal—one might say, mental or moral—rather than physical; though I shall be arguing that it may often be unintentional, due to thoughtlessness or negligence rather than self-conscious ill will. (2008: 1, scare quotes in the original)

This is somewhat at odds with his earlier definition. Here, instead of relying upon dominance to explain why we intentionally insult, the explanation rests upon a more general desire to wound one's interlocutor. Still, both definitions are disjunctive: each defines some insults by the sorts of intentions that motivate them

[5] The intention to insult is not *necessary*, but is it *sufficient* for an insult? At least most of the time it is though there may be odd exceptions: Suppose you believe that US senators are usually called 'Your Excellency.' You mean to express your disdain for your senator by calling her 'Senator Warren' instead. Because you were wrong about the degree and kind of regard a senator is due, your form of address winds up being perfectly appropriate. This hardly seems like an insult. Still, acting upon an intention to insult, however ineptly, may by its very nature be an expression of a lack of due regard. I think a case could be made either way.

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and others by the kind of injury involved. By contrast, my account defines all insults in terms of what they express.

Thomas Conley describes an insult as 'an expression of a severely negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem; and often we consider insults to be examples of verbal abuse' (2010: 2–3). This is an accurate description of many insults, but, as with Aristotle's, it is too narrow. Contra Conley, an insult need not be *severely* negative, need not be intended, and can be used for other purposes than to subvert the self-regard and self-esteem of the insulted.[6] For example, an insult can be a mild one, 'It looks like you need to work on your parallel parking a bit'. It can be accidental, 'Ha ha! Great costume! Oh, it's not a costume?' Or it may be intended to affect people other than those who are insulted, as in the telling of sexist jokes among men—such behavior is probably meant to generate feelings of unity and superiority; the practice can hardly be intended to diminish the self-regard of the insulted when they are not present.

The forgetful mayor and the compliment of one's 'costume' exemplify two kinds of unintentional insults. Consider another typical sort: Suppose you turn to the friend beside you and remark that large cufflinks are pretentious. Little did you know, Bob was standing just behind you; he is terribly proud of his large cufflinks, he overheard your remark, and he suspects you were talking about him. Overheard remarks can be genuinely insulting, even when the speaker does not intend to cause offense. In such cases, the speaker's intention is irrelevant; the remark was an insult. In this example, the situation might be partially recoverable by a quick, 'Oh, I didn't mean *your* cufflinks—I meant the gaudy, tasteless sort'. But perhaps not.

Unintended insults may take many other forms, too, including errors due to 'invisible' group membership, as when someone mistakenly assumes that no one in the group is Jewish before launching into an anti-Semitic joke; errors due to cultural difference, as when someone mistakenly assumes that all people who are not Jewish enjoy anti-Semitic jokes; and even a simple lack of appropriate consideration, as when someone appoints the time for a meeting without asking whether that time is convenient for those who are expected to attend.

Each of these depends not upon the intention of the insulter but upon what seems to be shown by the insulter's behavior: a lack of due regard for the insulted. The highly conscientious person is more likely to consider the perspectives and feelings of others and so will tend to avoid unintentional insults. All of us, though, will sometimes fail to be sufficiently considerate. In those moments, we unintentionally express a lack of due regard; we insult others without meaning to.

It is clear, then, that the typical causes of intended and unintended insults differ. We insult intentionally, for example, when we wish to assert dominance, to injure, to subvert self-regard and esteem, or for the fun of it. We insult unintentionally through carelessness or a misunderstanding of the circumstances. Their typical effects also differ. An intentionally insulted person may see the insult as aggressive and

[6] Conley is not entirely consistent about the necessity of intent. On pp. 22–23, for example, Conley's discussion of subtle gestures suggests that some insults are unintended.

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hostile. They are apt to feel angry, and to retort with an insult of their own. An unintentionally insulted person, by contrast, may find the insult revealing about the insulter's hidden attitudes. They are more likely to feel resentful or disappointed than angry, and they are less likely to exchange further insults. Some accidental insults may even leave the insulted person contemplating whether there is any truth to it. Perhaps your cufflinks really are pretentious, or you really are unimportant to city politics.

As with most distinctions, there is a bit of grey area in the middle. Consider the case of a person who is careless because he thinks others' feelings are unimportant—perhaps this results from the unintentional assumption of dominance, as Neu suggested. Such a person might routinely insult people unintentionally but as the result of a consciously chosen indifference. We might explain this by saying each of these insults is proximately unintended but distally intended. Such cases provide an interesting complication, but I think they do not diminish the importance of the general distinction between intended and unintended insults.

4. Causing Offense or Not

'I am insulted', is a common way of saying 'I feel offended'. These statements are not exactly synonymous, though. We routinely use feelings of offense as an indication that an insult has taken place. But as we saw with the intention to insult, feelings of offense are unreliable indicators of insults; they are neither sufficient nor necessary for an insult.

Consider first that taking offense is not *sufficient* for an insult. In a perfectly straightforward kind of misunderstanding—mishearing—you might be offended by someone's remark but only because you are wrong about what they said. Your feeling offended is not sufficient evidence that an insult has taken place.

Cases of this sort may also be due to more complex kinds of errors. Chief among these is an overestimation of one's self-worth or underestimation of the worth of others, so that one expects greater regard than one is really due. Such a person may believe they have suffered an insult when they are simply mistaken about how much (or what sort of) deference and consideration they are due. For example, your friend might be offended that you failed to praise their fashionable new outfit. Even if you see one another frequently, you cannot be expected to notice every new wardrobe item. Your friend takes offense because they believe they are due an extraordinary degree of regard; they mistakenly believe you owe them your undivided attention. Your failure to praise the new outfit is not an insult, though, since it does not express a lack of *due* regard.

A word of caution is in order. It is risky to say that someone is mistaken about having been insulted because you thereby imply that they are due less regard than they expect. Your implication compounds the initial offense, and you might be wrong. Consider the hapless man who intends to help his female coworker by explaining that their boss's sexual harassment of her is not demeaning but flattering. Even if he is sincere in his misunderstanding, his explanation suggests to its hearer that he does not think she deserves ordinary professional respect. He seems to believe she is wrong to take offense because she does not deserve a career

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free of unwanted sexual attention. I think this goes some way toward explaining the intense ire generated by remarks like, 'You're just too sensitive' or 'I'm sure he didn't mean it that way'. When you take yourself to have been insulted, the assertion that it was not really an insult suggests that you are not due the respect you believe you are due. This unavoidably comes across as a second insult added to the first.

Conley takes this in an interesting direction: 'The key word here is, of course, 'intent'; for no term, obscene or not, can be considered an insult unless it is intended to be an insult. (This is not to deny that some people are 'insulted' when they shouldn't be; but that is a different matter)' (2010: 27). I agree that people sometimes take offense—we *feel* insulted—when no insult was given. But Conley conflates cases of people who take offense too readily with cases of unintended insults. He supposes that it is always wrong to take offense at unintended insults since, on his view, they are not insults at all. But intentions and offensiveness are orthogonal categories. An accidental insult might or might not cause the insulted to feel offended, and the same is true of intentional insults. Further, I shall contend that while perfectly appropriate behavior may be offensive to the egotistical, genuine insults may go unnoticed by those who lack dignity or self-respect. Again I find myself following Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he claimed that it is similarly bad to take offense either too rarely or too frequently. 'With regard to honor and dishonor the mean is proper pride, the excess is known as a sort of empty vanity, and the deficiency is undue humility' (1984b: *EN* 1107b). Ideally, he thinks, one should have an appropriate sense of one's own worth and insist upon fair treatment.

This brings us to the question of whether taking offense is *necessary* for insults. That is, do people invariably feel offended when they have been insulted? I think not. In the simplest case, as I mentioned above, you might mishear someone's insulting remark and so perceive it as benign. Other kinds of misunderstanding, such as underestimating your own worth, can also lead you not to take offense at an insult. At the end of section 2, I gave the example of a woman who is excluded from a gesture of respect—a handshake. In that case, I asked you to imagine that the woman was not offended by this. She was excluded because women are regarded in her social circle as inferior to men. She accepts this status, and so she mistakenly believes she was treated with due regard. In this case, she does not perceive the insult because of a misunderstanding about her own worth, rather than a misunderstanding about what was said.

A special case of insults that do not offend are those that the insulted person takes to be beneath their notice. Your spouse's resentful ex pretends not to know you at a party, a former employee you fired for incompetence spreads a nasty rumor about you, your racist neighbor never waves back, and so on. You may notice that someone has expressed a lack of due regard for you, but in a way that reflects badly on them, not on you. You might pity them for their pettiness while you feel untouched by their efforts to offend you.[7] It is not that those people have not

[7] Offense may share some of shame's complexity (cf. note 1). In both cases, there is both the private, emotional sense of the word—one's feelings, whether expressed or not—as well as a more public, formal sense. You might declare that you have been offended in order to insist upon your own worth even without feeling offended. In

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insulted you; their insults are just beneath you because their opinions do not matter to you. This case is interestingly different from the others because it involves understanding the circumstances correctly, yet not taking offense at insults.[8]

We may also find joking insults inoffensive, though the situation here is rather complex. Good-natured teasing uses insults to make someone laugh. (Such insults are even collected into joke books, like Herzberg [1941] and Safian [1983]; the online Shakespearean Insult Generators [e.g., http://insult.dream40.org/, Royal Shakespeare Company 2013] are obviously also meant to be humorous.) This phenomenon is so widespread that particularly clever insults are often retold as anecdotes:

> Legend has it, for example, that Professor Mahaffy was once chatting with a colleague in a corridor of Trinity College when a desperate student interrupted him to ask where the men's room was. 'At the end of this corridor,' said majestic Mahaffy, pointing, 'you will find a door marked *gentlemen*: but don't let that stop you.' (Adams 1977: 32)

But should we say that this is a joke, an insult, or both? Joking insults can be any of the three. The Mahaffy remark (supposing this really happened) would probably function mainly as a joke, but with some real criticism also implied. That is, the insult is real, though the remark is so funny that it would lack much sting. Other joking insults are not really insults at all, as when your running buddy is much faster than you, so you nickname her 'slowpoke'. Something Gricean is going on here. You and your buddy know that your words, taken literally, would violate a norm of politeness (as well as being false). But the context makes it clear that you do not intend to be rude. So the best interpretation of your remark is as a joke—one that exploits the convention of insulting for humorous effect. Other joking insults, of course, are not really jokes at all. A sincere criticism, followed by a half-hearted chuckle, might give you enough cover to insist later that you were only joking. But you and your hearer may both know what is really going on. Camp (2018) handles this phenomenon deftly.

Taking offense is thus neither necessary nor sufficient for an insult. Still, the paradigmatic insult causes offense. After all, an insult is an expression of a lack of due regard for the insulted and is usually interpreted in light of a reasonable estimation of the insulted person's worth. That mismatch between the respect that is due and the respect that is given is usually offensive. Insults that do not offend the insulted seem to require an explanation like the ones I have given: the remark may be misunderstood; it may take place in a shared context of underestimating someone's worth; it may be stated by someone whose opinion does not matter to

that case, I think we might do better to distinguish carefully between the expressions 'being insulted' and 'feeling offended'—reserving the latter for those emotional responses that are really felt.

[8] One explanation for this could be Aristotle's claim that 'whatever is of little or no importance, we suppose to be worth no consideration' (1984a: 1378b). That is, from a position of power it may be easy to dismiss an insult, while from a position of weakness an insult is more threatening. There is much to be said about the way unequal power affects whether and how one takes offense at an insult. For example, Nietzsche's image of someone whose character is poisoned by resentment: 'his soul squints' ([1887] 2007: 21), aptly captures the experience of taking offense when powerless.

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the insulted; or it may be understood as a joke. Insults that do not cause offense also have very different consequences than those that do. In particular, when someone is offended by an insult, they are apt to become angry, and so the insult may profoundly damage their relationship with the insulter. By contrast, insults that do not cause offense may have a wide variety of consequences: negative consequences, such as reinforcing an underestimation of the insulted person's worth or generating feelings of disdain for the insulter, but also neutral or even positive consequences like camaraderie among joking friends.

5. By Commission or Omission

On my definition of insults, slights clearly belong. Insults are expressions of a lack of due regard; an omission can express a lack of regard just as well as a shouted slur or a rude hand gesture and can do so with greater subtlety and panache. Slights occupy a similar place in our repertoire of social interactions as that of more obvious insults.

But slights are a bit different from other insults.[9] Ordinary verbal insults have enormous variety in what they may be used to express and in how they affect the insulted. All insults are likely to make the insulted feel negative emotions like anger or sadness, but when we dig a bit deeper, the characteristic uses and effects of slights are somewhat different from the norm. A typical verbal insult expresses a negative value judgment about the insulted, causing that person to feel angry at the insulter or to feel bad about themselves in some respect. Slights, by contrast, are more often used to express the unimportance of the insulted. The failure to do or say what is expected demonstrates thoughtlessness or unconcern about the feelings of the insulted. And so a slight is more likely to cause the insulted to feel rejected or socially ostracized than other insults.

For example, imagine you have had a busy day and as you sit down to dinner with your spouse, your thoughts are still occupied with the details of your work. You stare blankly at your plate, mechanically scooping up each bite of food in a distracted silence. When you finish, you walk away from the table, mumbling about your email. This is not just unpleasant behavior but also insulting to your spouse. It suggests you are not interested in talking to them, and suggesting that—even unintentionally—expresses a lack of regard. You would make more of an effort if you were more concerned about their feelings. And so your spouse is likely to feel rejected or socially excluded.

Thus slights do function as insults. But categorizing them as such reveals a surprising constraint: One cannot give a purely linguistic analysis of insults because some involve no language at all—not even a gesture. Insults must, then, be characterized not by the kinds of words said or the kinds of action taken, but rather by the role they play in communication.

[9] Interestingly, the line between act and omission is not bright; some gestural insults are so subtle as to be on the border. 'I was sobbing, but she looked right at me and didn't say a word', or 'I asked whether he thought I was clever and he just raised an eyebrow'. The vagueness between insults of commission and omission provides another reason to include both in our definition of insults: the exclusion of slights would require drawing a somewhat arbitrary line between the two kinds of insults.

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Much of communication, as Grice noted (1975), occurs because once we correctly understand what is literally said, we are further able to infer what a speaker means by it. In keeping with that central insight, pragmatics typically focuses on uses of expressions beyond their most literal meanings. This project could be broader, though: the inferences we use to interpret linguistic expressions are also useful for interpreting nonlinguistic actions and even omissions. Understanding a slight, like understanding a sarcastic remark, requires one to grasp the whole social situation, sometimes including what is contextually required by Grice's 'cooperative principle'. Our expectations about what should be said or done allow us to understand what is conveyed by failures to meet those expectations.

Consider, first, an ordinary example of a sarcastic remark. My dog notices her shadow and jumps in fear, so I remark to my spouse, 'Our dog is so brave'. The literal meaning of that statement contradicts the evidence we have just witnessed. That naturally leads the hearer to seek a different meaning. In this case, I have flouted the maxim of quality, which requires that speakers should not say something they believe to be false. But I said something false under a condition of mutual knowledge: we both know that what I said is literally false, and I know my hearer knows it is false. So my spouse works out that I meant it sarcastically using something like the implicit reasoning Grice describes:

> He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*. (1975: 50)

Knowing you have been slighted depends upon a similar inferential process: We use induction, inference to the best explanation, and sometimes even something very like conversational implicature to work it out. For example, suppose you walk up to the bar on a Tuesday afternoon. A few other people are also at the bar, but it is not at all crowded. Still, the bartender manages never to look your way. On the face of it, this is an intentional insult. That is, if there is nothing unusual about the situation, so you and the bartender have mutual knowledge about typical drink-ordering practices, then the bartender's blatant violation of expectations suggests their intent to express a lack of due regard.

Gricean conversational implicature is almost always treated as an analysis of *speaker* meaning, but Grice himself meant his project to be broader—not only about speakers, but also about nonverbal communication.

> As one of my avowed aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior, it may be worth noting that the specific expectations or presumptions connected with at least some of the foregoing maxims have their analogues in the sphere of transactions that are not talk exchanges. (Grice 1975: 47)

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So I believe my Gricean account of intentional slights is in keeping with the spirit of his project.

Not all slights work in that way, of course. Conversational implicature is a kind of intentional communication, and slights may be unintended. Nevertheless, the fact that omissions can be used to insult intentionally suggests that pragmatic theory (Gricean or otherwise) should be broadly applicable, beyond words and gestures, even to nonsymbolic behaviors and omissions. (Slights are not the only kind of omission that can be used to communicate; skepticism or disapproval, for example, can be expressed by 'an incredulous stare', but can also be expressed by silence and a flat expression.) So, just as I recommend a broad notion of insults that includes slights, I also recommend a broad notion of communication that includes the wide range of inferences we make regarding meaningful omissions. There is interesting philosophical work on omissions, but it is mostly metaphysical, focusing, for example, on whether an omission can be a cause; there is much work yet to be done on omissions as communication.

6. Due regard

People tend to take offense when they are treated with noticeably less regard than they believe is their due. Walking across an intersection, you might feel not only alarm but also indignation when a driver carelessly speeds through the crosswalk. They owe you more consideration than that, and so it is insulting to be endangered through their reckless disregard for your safety. (Extreme expressions of a lack of due regard, such as an unprovoked physical assault, are not felicitously called 'insults' because they can be correctly described in much stronger terms. They *are* insults on my account, but it is often misleading to call them by that name because it is such an understatement.) But avoiding a collision with a pedestrian is the respect owed by any person to any other, simply *qua* person. When a friend refuses to talk with you about your recent grief on the grounds that it would spoil a pleasant afternoon, that reveals a morally repugnant selfishness. It is insulting because it is an expression of a lack of appropriate regard for your feelings, *qua friend*. No stranger owes you the opportunity to unburden your grief on them, but a close friend may owe you exactly that. When someone denies that they owe you the regard of a friend, they deny that they are your friend or that the friendship is between equals. Mismatched expectations about what degree and kind of regard one person owes another are invariably hurtful and are often insults.

A slightly different account would call all such mismatched expectations 'insults'. For example, you might say that insults are (1) an expression of a lack of *expected* regard or (2) an expression of a lack of regard *simpliciter*. It is easier on these accounts than on mine to evaluate when an insult has taken place because every time someone feels insulted they have been insulted. I reject these alternative definitions, however, on the grounds that they are too broad. As to the first, expectations can be unreasonable, such that a person expects far greater regard than they deserve. You do not actually insult a narcissist by treating them with ordinary, appropriate regard, however offended they are by that behavior. The

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second alternative, that an insult is *any* expression of a lack of regard, is too broad in the same way as (1), but it also has this problem: In every interaction, a greater degree of deference is possible. Instead of signing a letter with the common 'Sincerely' or 'Best Wishes' you could sign 'Your most humble, obedient servant' or 'Very best wishes for the success of all your endeavors.' But those closings are, to the modern reader, overly ingratiating. There is a rough upper bound on what politeness requires, and to exceed that may be as disconcerting as falling below the lower bound is insulting.[10]

You might wonder, though, whether the word 'due' makes it impossible to insult someone you rightly despise, since any remark, however harsh, may be what is due in certain circumstances. When someone has insulted you deeply, it may be perfectly appropriate for you to respond with a cutting remark. If it expresses no less regard than you owe, it is not an insult. This may seem strange, but recall that you can *offend* without *insulting*. Every insult is inappropriate, undeserved, while some offensive remarks are perfectly in line.

Still, it may be possible for you to insult even someone who has deeply offended you, someone whom you feel you owe no regard. You should not physically harm or endanger others, for example, if that is inconsistent with the minimum fundamental regard we owe to all people, *qua* people. So it may remain possible to insult even those whom we despise by expressing a lack of the regard that is due to every person. Camp (2017) has found that metaphors are a particularly common and effective kind of insult. Perhaps metaphors provide another way to insult someone you do not respect. No matter how little regard someone is due, he is not literally a pig. Your calling him a pig, then, could be construed not only as offensive, but also as an insult. On the other hand, one could argue that literality is irrelevant—if he thoroughly deserves the comparison, it is not an insult. Because insults are always disproportionate—they always entail a lack of appropriate regard, however little regard that may be—it seems that they are always morally wrong.

To take another case, consider these comments a teacher might write on a particularly poor student paper: 'This paper needs a lot of work. Your writing is ungrammatical, your ideas are not in any particular order, and you appear to have fundamentally misunderstood the topic you are writing about'. The unfortunate student who receives these comments is likely to feel offended but would be mistaken to think the comments are insulting. Pointing out these facts, in one's capacity as a teacher, may be legitimate—even essential—criticism rather than an insult. Still, the teacher who uses a nasty tone or who berates a student excessively for their poor paper, does insult the student. A teacher certainly owes his students some respect, regardless of their class performance.

But I am in murky waters, here, where such confident assertions are out of place. Do we owe anything to others, *qua* people? And what exactly do we owe one another in particular circumstances? The answers depend, of course, upon one's moral

[10] At the start of this essay I mentioned that insults, as I define them, are roughly the complement of what Buss, Calhoun, and Sherman describe as civility or politeness. The *linguistics* of (im)politeness is also a fruitful point of comparison, though I will not attempt to include that here. Consider, e.g. Culpeper et al. (2017), Leech (2014), Culpeper (2011), and Lakoff (1973).

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theory. Throughout this essay, I have flatly stated whether each of my examples is or is not an insult. I stand by my claims about what *kinds* of things can be insults, but I am less committed to my verdicts about the moral values involved in these particular examples. My account of insults is consistent with any moral theory that takes us to have obligations to one another. It might seem that 'due regard' requires a commitment to certain metaethical positions, such as moral realism, but I deny even this. In order for insults to be an expression of a lack of due regard there need not be a determinate, discoverable fact of the matter about whether someone has been insulted. What constitutes 'due regard' will be as subjective or as objective, as real or not, as morality is more generally.

7. Conclusion

To summarize, then, what is essential to an insult is just that it expresses a lack of due regard. Each step away from the paradigmatic insult (an intentional, offensive action) can be justified: Insults may be intended or unintended, offensive or inoffensive, and acts or omissions. This definition of insults is broad enough to include much of our ordinary sense of 'insult' while still distinguishing being insulted from feeling insulted. The most significant consequences of this view are, first, that it calls for a pragmatics of omissions and, second, that it offers a framework for further research into the nature and ethics of insults.

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