

Treating others disrespectfully

The Cranky Professor

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There are three ways in which we treat other people disrespectfully. We manipulate them, we humiliate them, and we burden them. Whenever we treat a person disrespectfully, we express some degree of contempt for her.

Treating people disrespectfully consists in failing to acknowledge through one's actions that other people's projects are as significant to them as one's own are to oneself. We treat others disrespectfully when we don't care that they are living lives that matter to them.

We manipulate another when we get that person to assist us in our own projects independently of her will to help to us. That is, we manipulate another when we trick her into giving us assistance, when we arrange things so that her consenting to help us is not free or informed. Manipulating another is disrespectful and contemptuous because in manipulating that other, one gives scant regard to her existence as a person in her own right.

Lying is always manipulative and, thereby, always disrespectful—even when it is done benevolently, even when it succeeds in making things better for the person lied to, and even when it does this at some cost to the liar. A liar uses another person to attain her ends independently of the other person's free and informed consent to be used toward those ends. That is contempt, no matter what good results from it.

Notice here that manifesting disrespect for a person doesn't require that the other be aware of our contempt, of our failure to appreciate her personhood. We can treat another disrespectfully though neither she nor anyone else ever notices. And, as we've seen, manifesting disrespect for another need not harm her, nor harm anyone else.

Those of us who wish never to treat others disrespectfully as well as to help make things better sometimes find ourselves unable to fulfil both wishes. To keep peace among our colleagues, we must lie to Sally; to treat Sally with respect we must speak honestly to her, though doing so will produce bad feelings and hostility all around.

No argument can show that we should value good consequences over respect or respect over good consequences, and no argument can establish at which degree of badness one should put respect aside. (We can't imagine what it would be to make a mistake about these things, so we have no idea what getting them right could consist in.) For my own part, I prefer respect over producing good outcomes, and even over avoiding bad ones—except when the bad outcome threatens to be really bad. (Or so at least I say. My actions, I fear, might speak differently. I might choose being nice over being respectful more often than I imagine.)

We humiliate another when we make her feel small in her own eyes. We humiliate her when we cause her to find her projects and feelings insignificant or foolish—in comparison, that

is, to our own. We certainly have our reasons for humiliating others, just as we do for manipulating them. Humiliating others can be an enjoyable expression of one's power, or an effective means of elevating oneself above the other.

We burden others when we force them to deal with us, to look after us, to clean up the mess we have left behind. Of the three forms of disrespect, burdening is perhaps the least studied, the least understood. Philosophers who prefer good consequences to respectful treatment are right to note that burdening usually creates bad consequences, but the bad consequences are incidental to the contempt it expresses.

Some simple examples of burdening: littering; walking slowly three abreast on a public sidewalk; talking while the movie's playing; playing music loudly in your apartment. These are examples of someone depriving others of an enjoyment or getting in their way. They also illustrate the fact that one need not intend to treat others disrespectfully to burden them. Burdening, that is, can result simply from insensitivity, indifference, or inattention. This is a way in which burdening differs from both manipulating and humiliating.

But of course we live among others and so we are always getting in each other's way. Getting in someone's way, then, cannot, all by itself, be disrespectful. Moreover, it's often because of your temperament or prejudices that you charge me with having got in your way. It's just as easy in such cases for me to say that it's you who is burdening me, you being so delicate and all, and to deny that I'm burdening you.

No, getting in another person's way is not in itself disrespectful. What matters is whether the burden is imposed fairly. One treats another contemptuously when one burdens that other unfairly. Our task now is to think hard about in what fairness and lack of fairness could consist here.