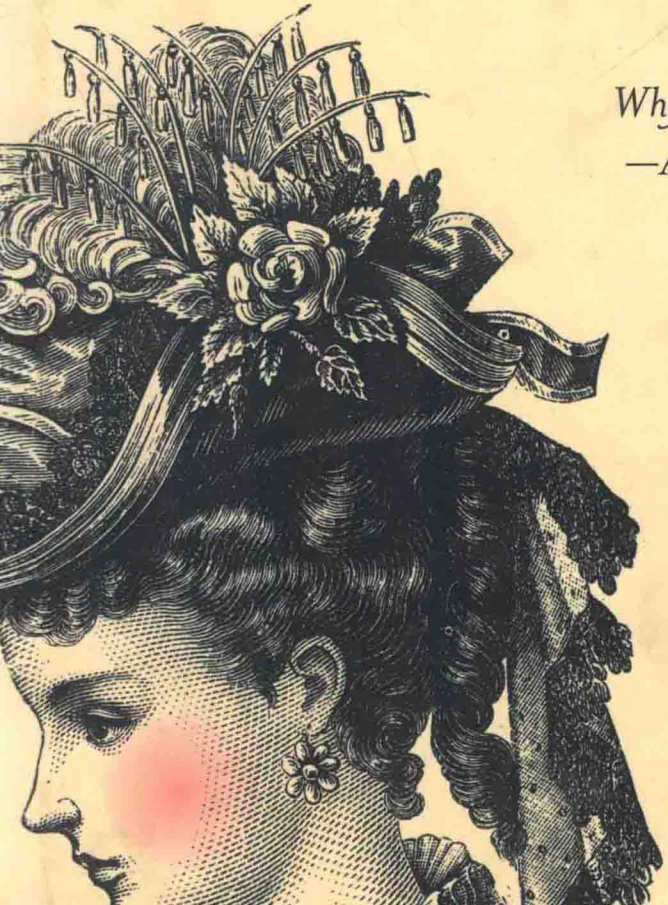
A *SLAP* IN THE FACE



Why Insults Hurt —And Why They Shouldn't

WILLIAM B. IRVINE

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A Slap in the Face

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the 1920s, a group of writers, editors, critics, and actors were in the habit of meeting for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. They sat at a round table in the hotel's restaurant and, preferably over martinis, swapped witticisms.

Playwright Marc Connelly was a member of the Algonquin Round Table, as the group was known. One day he was sitting at lunch when another man came up behind him, rubbed his hands over Connelly's bald head, and said, "Marc, your head feels as smooth as my wife's ass." Connelly reached up, felt his own scalp, and without missing a beat replied, "So it does, so it does."[1] This is a delightful example of repartee: an insulted person quickly turns the insult back on the insulter. This bit of repartee was sufficiently witty that we are still repeating it eight decades later.

In other cases, the consequences of an insult, rather than being humorous, are horrific. In 1996, for example, Ronald Shanabarger's girlfriend refused to cut short a cruise to come comfort him when his father died. He felt sufficiently insulted by this refusal that he apparently hatched a cold-blooded plan for revenge. He married the girlfriend, had a child by her, and

allowed sufficient time for her to bond with the child—all so he could kill the child: he suffocated it with plastic wrap. Doing this, he thought, would make the woman understand how he felt when his father died and thereby make her appreciate the gravity of her failure to comfort him at that time.[2]

Notice that in this case, what Shanabarger took to be insulting wasn't something his girlfriend said and wasn't even something she did; it was something she failed to do—namely, cut her cruise short. Notice, too, that the girlfriend might not have intended to hurt Shanabarger's feelings; to the contrary, she might simply have been thoughtless. We should not make the mistake, then, of thinking that only intentionally hurtful remarks can count as insults. Rather, if you find my behavior to be insulting, I have insulted you, perhaps without intending to do so.

Insults are ubiquitous. It may be uncommon for a boss or teacher to insult us by calling us a fool in public, but insults from friends and relatives are commonplace. They might tell us that the glare from our bald head is ruining the group photo they are trying to take. Or they might tell those present, as we are paying for their dinner, that such generosity on our part is astonishing and suggest that we must be experiencing the early symptoms of food poisoning. Curiously, friends and relatives say these things not because they want to offend us but because they like us and want us to like them in turn. Indeed, if we take offense at what they say, they will be surprised. "We were just teasing you," they will explain.

Another form of insult is simultaneously more subtle and sinister than this. Suppose I tell you that a mutual friend has

told me that you are a pompous fool. The friend has clearly insulted you, albeit behind your back. But besides this insult, there might be a second and arguably more malicious insult. Consider, after all, my motives in telling you about the friend's comment. It could be that I did so for your own good: I wanted to let you know that you should not trust this "friend." It is also possible, though, that my motives in reporting the insult are anything but benevolent: I might have wanted to inflict the pain of an insult on you without myself being the author of that insult and therefore without laying myself open to retaliation on your part. Indeed, if I dislike you, hearing someone insult you behind your back is cause for celebration, inasmuch as it presents me with the insult-equivalent of a free lunch.

An examination of insults gives us valuable insight into the human condition. We are people who need to be among people. The problem is that once we are among them, we feel compelled to sort ourselves into social hierarchies. If we were wolves, we might accomplish this with a series of fights: whoever defeated all comers would be the leader of the pack, and whoever was defeated by all would be the last to eat—if any food was left. But we are not wolves; we are instead creatures who have evolved oversized brains, and we have used these brains to develop language. As a result, we don't need to use our teeth or fists to sort ourselves into social hierarchies. We can instead use words, strung together to form insults. And so we do.

Turning our attention to the historical record, we find that as long as humans have possessed written language, we have

used it to insult each other. Thus, in the Old Testament, we find individuals complaining to God about having been insulted: "I am a worm, not a man, abused by all men, scorned by the people. All who see me jeer at me, make mouths at me and wag their heads."[3] We find advice on what to do when insulted: "A clever man slighted conceals his feelings."[4] We find people insulting the Lord: "Remember, O Lord, the taunts of the enemy, the scorn a savage nation pours on thy name."[5] And we find Jeremiah reporting what the Lord told him regarding Israel: "Do you see what apostate Israel did? She went up to every hill-top and under every spreading tree, and there she played the whore."[6] That an omnipotent and perfectly good being would feel the need to insult mere mortals says something about how tempting it is to use words to inflict pain.

Among the ruins of the city of Pompeii, which was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 79 AD, we gain further insight into the role insults played in the ancient world. Among the graffiti found on the ash-entombed walls of the city, someone carved: "Lucius Istacidius, I regard as a stranger anyone who doesn't invite me to dinner."[7] This comment reveals that in ancient Pompeii, you could insult someone by failing to invite him to dinner. It also tells us that one way ancient Pompeiians responded to insults was to give someone the cold shoulder—to treat him, that is, as a stranger. From a distance of nearly two millennia, this instance of hurt feelings seems ridiculously petty, and yet, we need only look around us to find instances of people in our midst—and possibly even we ourselves—being similarly hurt by similar social oversights.

Notice that in the case just described, the offended person decided to inform Lucius Istacidius of his offense in an anonymous manner. There would have been, after all, a great many people Lucius had failed to invite to dinner; the graffiti leaves him guessing exactly which uninvited individual wrote it. Notice, too, that instead of sending an anonymous letter to Lucius, the offended person posted a graffiti that could be read by everyone. He apparently wanted the world at large to know of Lucius's shortcomings as a host.

At about this same time, in nearby Rome, the Stoic philosophers were analyzing insults and the role they play in relationships. We find Seneca listing the insults directed at him: someone openly laughed at his conversation,[8] someone at a party made a joke at his expense, and someone spoke ill of his writings.[9] Much has changed since Seneca's time, but these would all still count as insults. I will have much more to say about the Stoics later on. As we shall see, they possessed remarkable insight into the psychology of insults, and as a result, they are a source of valuable advice on how best to deal with them.

Moving on to Elizabethan times, we come to what some would call the golden age of invective. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, Kent calls Oswald "a knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-liver'd, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, superserviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave." And after, one hopes, pausing to catch his breath, Kent goes on to describe Oswald as, among other things, a "beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch."[10]

Curiously, although many of the words used in them may be obsolete, Elizabethan-style insults are still with us. There are several sites on the Internet that will, at the click of a mouse button, generate Elizabethan-sounding insults by stringing together, in semi-random fashion, words of disapproval that were common in Elizabethan times. One such site[11] obligingly labeled me a "gorbellied elf-skinned lewdster!" And if this insult did not sufficiently offend me, it claimed to have 388,943 other insults available that might do the job.

MODERN INSULTS generally aren't as colorful or verbally adroit as Elizabethan insults were, but they nevertheless manage to carry a sting.

Writers tend to be clever people with fragile egos and are therefore a good source of insults. Thus, we find Truman Capote's acerbic assessment of the works of Jack Kerouac: "That's not writing, that's typing."[12] We find Elizabeth Bowen characterizing Aldous Huxley as "the stupid person's idea of a clever person."[13] We find James Dickey declaring that "if it were thought that anything I wrote was influenced by Robert Frost, I would take that particular piece of mine, shred it and flush it down the toilet, hoping not to clog the pipes."[14]

Politicians are another good source of insults. It isn't that they, like writers, have fragile egos; if they did, they couldn't withstand the stress of campaigning. Rather, they insult political opponents because they realize, as H. L. Mencken put it, that "one horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms."[15] During an election year, voters are consequently treated to an avalanche of slung mud.

We find Abraham Lincoln suggesting that an argument propounded by Stephen A. Douglas "is as thin as the homeopathic soup that was made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had been starved to death."[16] We find William Cowper Brann invoking his dog to insult William E. McKinley: "Why, if a man were to call my dog McKinley, and the brute failed to resent to the death the damning insult, I'd drown it."[17] We find Jim Hightower characterizing Dan Quayle as being "so dumb he thinks Cheerios are doughnut seeds,"[18] and Barry Goldwater asserting, of politician William Scott, that "if he were any dumber, he'd be a tree."[19] And, across the Atlantic, we find Winston Churchill characterizing Clement Attlee as "a sheep in sheep's clothing" and as "a modest little man with much to be modest about."[20]

If insults can be amusing, so can people's responses to them. Indeed, many insult connoisseurs—myself included—would argue that the highest form of insult is repartee. We have already encountered one example of a quick, witty, and insulting reply to an insult: Marc Connelly's quip about his insulter's wife's derrière. For another example, consider actress Ilka Chase's response to Humphrey Bogart when, after telling her how much he had enjoyed her most recent book, he asked, "By the way, who wrote it for you?" Chase, annoyed by the suggestion that she had employed a ghostwriter, had the presence of mind to offer the following rejoinder: "I'm so glad you liked it. By the way, who read it to you?"[21]

I BECAME INTERESTED in insults while doing research on the Stoic philosophers.[22] They spent a considerable amount of

time, as I have said, thinking about insults and how best to deal with them. I thought this was an odd thing for philosophers to do but ultimately concluded that they were on to something. If one role of philosophers is to teach us how to have a good life, then it is entirely appropriate for them to ponder insults and the role they play in human affairs. After all, insults have the power to make us miserable.

As a result of reading the Stoics, I became a collector of insults. I started paying attention to the insulting things other people say and do. Blatant, vicious insults, I discovered, are rare; blatant but benign insults, though, turn out to be commonplace: people use them, as I have said, to tease friends and relatives. I also found that insults can be easy to misconstrue: what sounds like praise, for example, might in fact be a cleverly packaged insult.

In the course of my investigation of insults, I made a disturbing discovery: I myself was the source of many insults. For one thing, I became fully aware of how many blatant, albeit benign, insults I unleash in the course of a day. It is not unusual, for example, for me to tease friends. Thus, I might playfully refer to a taciturn friend as a chatterbox, and he might respond, again playfully, by referring to me as "the absent-minded professor." But besides these playful insults, I discovered that I am the source of other, more sinister ones. I would analyze conversations I had, only to realize that some of the things I had said could best be understood as subtle attempts to put other people down.

In one such case, a student told me of his plan to pursue graduate studies and asked what I thought of the university he

would attend. I replied that the university in question was a real bargain, as graduate schools go. It was only later, when I replayed the conversation in my mind, that I realized that I had, albeit obliquely, belittled his choice of schools. For one thing, my response implied that the school he would attend is where you go if you lack the money for a proper education. My response, in other words, expressed a degree of educational snobbery.

It was clear to me, in afterthought, how I should have responded to this person's announcement—and how I would have responded if I were a better person than I am. I should have congratulated him on achieving what for him was a significant life goal. Not only that, but the congratulations in question should have been heartfelt. And what prevented me from offering sincere congratulations? I must have felt that my own status as an intellectual was somehow threatened by his going to graduate school. "How utterly foolish!" I thought, and felt more than a bit ashamed of myself.

I may be the only person on the planet to engage in this sort of ego defense and petty social jockeying, but I don't think so. We all want other people to know and appreciate how wonderful we are, and one way to accomplish this is by making them realize how relatively insignificant they are. And so we go out of our way, often subconsciously, to inflict subtle insults that will put them in their place.

IT IS OBVIOUS that we insult someone when we intentionally cause him pain by something we say or do. But we also insult him when we cause him pain by something we *refuse to* say or do

(such as refusing to shake his hand), or even by something we *fail to* say or do (such as forgetting to thank him for a gift). Indeed, as we shall see, it is not only possible but surprisingly easy to insult other people in the act of attempting to praise them.

If our goal, then, is to go through life causing the least pain possible to those around us, it is important that we gain a deep understanding of insults. More generally, if we wish to understand the human condition, we would do well to investigate insults and the role they play in human relations. In our investigation, we will want to answer a number of questions. Why do we insult each other? Why are insults capable of causing us such pain? Is there anything we can do to prevent or lessen this pain? And perhaps most important, how can we overcome our propensity to insult others? It was with these questions in mind that I wrote this book.

Let me make it clear at the outset that this is not an "insult book" in the ordinary sense of the phrase. Rather than being a book *of* insults, it is a book *about* insults—about the psychology behind them and the social role they play.

In part one of this book I describe the insult arsenal, beginning, in chapter 2, with blatant insults, such as when someone walks up to you and calls you a fat, lazy toad. In chapters 3 and 4, I consider more subtle forms of invective, such as when someone insults you by failing to remember your name or by praising you in a manner in which you don't want to be praised. And in chapter 5, I consider benign insults, such as those involved in playful teasing. These are unleashed not because the insulter wants to hurt his targets, but because he wants to maintain a social relationship with them.