



A Slap in the Face: Why Insults Hurt--And Why They Shouldn't

William B. Irvine

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Insults are part of the fabric of daily life. But why do we insult each other? Why do insults cause us such pain? Can we do anything to prevent or lessen this pain? Most importantly, how can we overcome our inclination to insult others?

In *A Slap in the Face*, William Irvine undertakes a wide-ranging investigation of insults, their history, the role they play in social relationships, and the science behind them. He examines not just memorable zingers, such as Elizabeth Bowen's description of Aldous Huxley as "The stupid person's idea of a clever person," but subtle insults as well, such as when someone insults us by reporting the insulting things others have said about us: "I never read bad reviews about myself," wrote entertainer Oscar Levant, "because my best friends invariably tell me about them." Irvine also considers the role insults play in our society: they can be used to cement relations, as when a woman playfully teases her husband, or to enforce a social hierarchy, as when a boss publicly berates an employee. He goes on to investigate the many ways society has tried to deal with insults-by adopting codes of politeness, for example, and outlawing hate speech-but concludes that the best way to deal with insults is to immunize ourselves against them: We need to transform ourselves in the manner recommended by Stoic philosophers. We should, more precisely, become insult pacifists, trying hard not to insult others and laughing off their attempts to insult us.

A rousing follow-up to *The Good Life*, *A Slap in the Face* will interest anyone who's ever delivered an insult or felt the sting of one--in other words, everyone.

A Slap in the Face: Why Insults Hurt--And Why They Shouldn't Details

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Charles Eliot says

The author is a professor of philosophy, specializing in the Stoic philosophers, so the treatment of how the Stoics approached insults is confident and compelling. Much of the rest of the book, however, is airy conjecture. (For example: I'm pretty sure evolution has not fitted us out with a built-in "sociometer".) You'll be on the right track if you think of this as yet another self-help book, with the welcome twist that it's informed by the writings of Marcus Aurelius!

Tariq Mahmood says

It's a completely different approach to handling insults. The ideal way is not to dish out any insults or react to any insults directed your way, in a robot type manner even if you are left seething inside for weeks. The book first details every type of insult we are likely to face; which left me even more vulnerable than before as I not aware of so many types; but then I was given very rational and practical guidelines in dealing with every conceivable type of insults out there. The stoic approach work to handle insults seems very modern when coupled with evolutionary behavior science. Values are changing with changing times, they are depended on the type of society we find ourselves in, as well as the times we live in. The behavior of 'insulting' made sense when man was striving to survive in tribes against the elements, but completely defunct in our age where even the most anti-social person can still survive without starving.

The book is a great addition to revolutionary thinking.

mis fit says

Honestly, I picked up this book for advice on handling those moments of being verbally knocked down and walked over (which seem to be happening all too often in my life recently-- thank you, food service work!). The first part of the book is mostly just entertaining-- amusing historical examples of people who knew how to sling some nasty comebacks at the drop of a hat. Most interesting to me though is Irvine's discussion of the social uses of insults, how they establish or reinforce hierarchies, but also help us bond with each other through good-natured teasing.

I can't help but think about this dual nature of insults in relation to microaggressions. An insult can be interpreted differently by those involved, and the insulter might think they are doing nothing more than harmless teasing, making a joke that might even draw people together. In this way, the insulter doesn't have to face the implications of their words and how those words might reinforce systems of oppression. Then, this dynamic makes the person who has been insulted doubt themselves and the validity of their interpretation. Derald Wing Sue talks about the pain of this doubt in *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (which should be required reading for every human). The psychological and emotional strain of seemingly small, everyday slights can profoundly shape a person's experience, and ultimately, their life chances. This is also part of the everyday, lived experience that contributes to a sense of double consciousness.

Irvine breaks down the many possible responses one can give when insulted, outlining the pros and cons of each approach. Ultimately, he takes cues from the Stoics, who sought a sort of inner equanimity that could not be swayed by insults (or praise). While reading this book, I had a strange sense of coming across this argument before. And yes, as it turns out, I was actually remembering another book by Irvine I had read several years ago, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*.

I see so much overlap here with Buddhism. One of the major goals of my own practice is to become mindful of (and able to deal with) the pull of sense perceptions. The mind is like grass blowing in the wind, pulled whatever direction perceptions and emotions take it. If we become solid, like the unmoving log, we are not thrown around so easily and suffering is lessened. The same principle is true of maintaining both inner and outer composure when insulted. The takeaway: when in doubt, just say "Thanks!" and move on with your day. Useful advice indeed.

Gunn-Berit Sæter says

Fascinating introduction with great examples that really caught my interest. The middle part, however, I struggled to get through. Too many pages of "suppose this and that". And then, to my great relief, a very interesting ending with an enlightening discussion about insults, praise and the social hierarchy. And - importantly, how to deal with it.

Hlyan Htet Oo says

Both psychological and philosophical, in-depth account of insults: what an insult is, what the different types of insults are, why insults hurt, and yet why we insult others, and finally how to respond to insults (and also to praises) both externally and internally.

Right from the beginning, you will notice that this book is well-researched and practical. I find it really worth-reading. I'm sure this book will have a great influence on how I interact with other people.

Steven says

Geez -- what does it say about me that I gave a book about insults two stars? I can't say I liked it, but it was okay. There's good information here -- just maybe not a book's worth?

I remember enjoying Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*. I'm thinking that this current book is more of an expansion of one part of his previous one. In this go-round, I found the latter parts of the book, which discuss responses to insults, much more interesting than the first part of the book, which categorizes the types of insults. I understand that, as a philosopher, it's important to cover all the bases, but I found the early section to be dry, bordering on pedantic.

Still, I liked how he tied the theme of insults back into Stoicism. I needed to be reminded of the Stoics' approach to life. So simple and yet so difficult to follow!

E.S. says

I'm going to use the advice from this book. I will wait for a patron to insult me at work...

Gary Wright says

I finally forced my way through this one. It wasn't pleasant, emotionally, because I kept being reminded of times that I have been insulted & then didn't handle it well enough for my well-being. I am sensitive to social rejection & just not 'wealthy' enough (in strong secure self-esteem/self-image) to afford letting others have fun at my expense. "People who may over-respond to cues that connote acceptance/inclusion & rejection/exclusion can usually be tracked back to unstable sociometers."

Like the author writes: "We all have a need to project our self-image & to have other people accept this image & support it."

SO...the next time someone insults me, I hope I remember this books suggestions for best responses:

"Why did you say that?"

"Whatev."

"What makes you think I care what you think about me?"

"Sorry, but I don't do insults."

"To be perfectly honest with you - this failing of mine wouldn't even make it onto my own top 5 list of personal short comings."

I liked how the author also reminded us that an insult cannot turn a person who is good into a person who is bad. Be a good person & make it clear that by being noncombatant - future insults will probably only be wasted on you & thus should be saved in the future for real social rivals. Temperateness, justness & doing nothing to something that deserves a sneer are all exemplary character traits.

Jonathan says

Light hearted and humorous take on the meaning of insults as seen through the prism of the authors love of Stoic philosophy: Insults won't hurt us if we don't care about what people think of us, on the other side we should take compliments with the same pinch of salt. Insults sting because they are about silly things like status and hierarchy which are essentially meaningless with a proper Stoic outlook. Best way to defuse insults? Ignore them which is surprisingly powerful and useful for all situations because the insulter is flummoxed.

Rajashekar Chintalapati says

Part 3 (Chapter 9 to 12) of this book is very important as it says how to deal with insults, William B. Irvine

referred Stoic concepts like insult pacifism to deal with insults. (Part 1 & 2 mostly concentrated on how to identify insults, some references and examples and how it can damage a individual and a community)

I came to know regarding this book by below articles/conversations -

<https://modernstoicism.com/how-would-...>

<https://modernstoicism.com/stoics-do-...>

<https://modernstoicism.com/insult-pac...>

Brian says

This book sets out to the philosophical task of defining insults, from benign teasing to maleficent backbiting to direct humiliation. It does so with a variety of anecdotal and historical examples, as well as current events. The structure of the book, in fact, is first, to spend several chapters defining and refining what the author means by “insults,” then second, to discuss how we might respond to insults, more specifically, how to employ the Stoic philosophical strategy (spoiler: it’s not to get better at witty repartees or to practice pre-emptive insulting).

I wanted to read this book, I *really* wanted to read this book—I think insults are an interesting subject, and if you’re studying the philosophy of anger, then you’re studying insults too. However, this book had some major issues that turned me off and made me wary of the arguments being made.

The first issue was the structure of the book. While I completely recognize and appreciate the philosophical tradition and importance of clearly defining a category (what is a ball? What is a person?) for the purposes of clear discussion, debate, and developing a praxis regarding the term (how should I respond to these things we’ve defined as insults?) the amount of anecdotal examples stopped adding to the definitive task and started only to bloat the page count. I found myself wanting to know as little about the author as possible, only to be thwarted by each new example. This isn’t a unique flaw—most pop-philosophy or pop-think-piece books do this—I guess I was just hoping this wasn’t a pop-philosophy book.

Second was an aesthetic/quality criticism ... many of the anecdotes themselves were largely taken from the author’s life rather than researched, and the ones that were taken from current events often distracted from the point. He uses the example of a guy who, insulted by his girlfriend, marries her, has a baby with her, then kills the baby in order to get back at her. And he uses the example of the mother who faked a MySpace profile in order to mess with the head of her daughter’s ex-friend; the ex-friend subsequently killed herself. He uses these very tragic examples of humanity at its worst for their cheap shock value to illustrate a point which could be summarized as: “Insults can be serious, guys, and there’s no telling what will insult someone.”

The final nail in the coffin for me was his discussion of students being offended used as a tool to limit discussion in the university. It used to be that college was where free speech was protected, yada yada. He uses the term “political correctness” in a negative way, and then says, turn to chapter 10 for more discussion on this topic. This was a clear, you’re-either-with-me-or-not moment, and I was sooo not, so I closed the book.

I find “Political correctness” to be a coded term like “playing the race card” that serves to frame the debate surrounding traditionally dominated and devalued classes of people speaking out against their domination

and demanding respect and to be listened to and believed. It is a categorical dismissal. It is a red flag that says, I belong to a privileged class, and I don't like these uppity so-and-sos threatening my privilege with their lily-white sensitivity by telling me that I'm offending them or making them feel unsafe whenever I whip out my anal bestiality example in the classroom (Yes, the author uses an anal bestiality example to make some kind of point about jokes?!) While I understand that the author might have a valid argument for the subject at hand—insults—he's lost credibility and respect with me, so I'd much rather go to someone else for an explanation.

I couldn't summarize the book better than Sam Leith at the Guardian, who wrote: "All in all this is a pretty feeble book, and its author is a bit of a drongo."

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

Paul A. says

This book is timely; millions of American voters have just elected someone who insulted his way into the presidency. One can only expect the epidemic of insulting and hateful behavior to increase.

We don't have to add to it. The goal of stoicism is virtue -- living a good life and the reduction of suffering (especially the kind we impose on ourselves). This is not a book about how to zing back when we are insulted, because to zing back violates the goal of stoicism. How to not retaliate, when retaliation brings immediate (but short-lived) satisfaction -- Become an insult pacifist. It will be better for you in the long run.

However, to become an insult pacifist you have to become a praise pacifist. Craving praise is self-defeating. This is where Irvine shines: He manages to succinctly make a case for getting off the social hierarchy treadmill. As he says, "People place great value on other people's opinions of them. Insults hurt so much because they are reminders that our social standing is not as high as we would like it to be." But what if we don't care about our social standing? What if we realize that social standing is an artificial construct? If we have chosen the right values, insults can't harm us. Don't try to control things over which we have little or no control, such as other people's opinions of us. Spend time, instead, on choosing to do good and virtuous things. This leads to tranquility.

I recommend that you read this book in tandem with Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*.

Jennifer Campaniolo says

There were some good examples of stinging insults and clever repartee but this was not meant to be a guide to insults as much as an examination of them. The author could be a bit too didactic, with a lot of sentences starting with, "And now we will examine..." and "As you will see in Chapter..." etc, which made the text less of a popular read and more like a textbook. Still, it's the first book of its kind that I've read, and I enjoyed Irvine's anecdotes of his own trials with giving and fending off insults. Like it or not, as long as we are invested in the struggle for dominance on the social hierarchy, we will have to deal with insults. Praise those who can remain insult pacifists!

Daniel says

What caught my attention in this book, besides, of course, the practical guidance of the Stoics in order to overcome the damage caused by insults (both: from us and those targeted at us), was to realize that act naturally is not, almost never, in fact, the healthiest action. We were programmed by nature to devote ourselves to a never ending match for search to improve our social status and at the same time decreasing the status of our competitors, that is, the rest of mankind. This unending battle for status is also source of unending emotional and psychological distress, since nature is not even a little concerned about our mental well being, but just to place us in a position where we have better chance to reproduce and to survive for enough time to give conditions of our heirs play this same game by themselves. Today however, away far from the the African savannas where our evolution started, many of the behaviors and tendencies inscribed in our DNA have become counterproductive when seeking not the pure and simple way to survive and reproduce, but to achieve emotional well-being. It is interesting to see how much insulting (in its many forms) is a major piece on the gameboard of our social life and, at the same time, a hindrance hard to beat in the pursuit of a good and psychologically satisfying life.

Evan Schneider says

Great book that was truly eye opening. Definitely gave me a new way of looking at insults and they are dished out in the first place. Also, it provided insight on how to deal with them and how living my life with different priorities and values is the primary way to avoid getting my feelings hurt from insults.
