

## Taking Offense with Emily McTernan

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**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Funk and Flash]**

**Christiane Wisehart, host and producer:** I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Imagine sitting in a staff meeting where one of your co-workers makes a joke about people with disabilities. You're offended, so you roll your eyes and cross your arms in front of your chest for the rest of the meeting. You might worry that your reaction was pretty insignificant, and didn't really do any good. My guest, philosopher Emily McTernan, argues that in fact, taking offense and showing disapproval, even in small ways, can actually be a force for social good.

**Emily McTernan:** But there's also a signal sent when we take offense. So other people will see and the person who offends will see that we don't want to be treated like that. People like us shouldn't be treated like that. And that is the way it can start playing a role in the shaping of social norms.

**Christiane:** We'll discuss microaggressions, public shaming, and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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**[interview begins]**

**Christiane:** Welcome to the show, Emily McTernan. We're talking about your book *On Taking Offense*. So briefly introduce us to your project.

**Emily McTernan:** So the book is a partial defense of an often disliked emotion, the emotion of taking offense. So, what the book is trying to do is carve out what this emotion really is to try to make it a distinct emotion, make clear what it is that we're feeling when we feel offense and then trying to talk about the valuable social role it can sometimes play and why we might want to reconsider the way we think about it in public.

**Christiane:** You write the offense is an emotion that's ripe for moral reassessment. So why might this be the case?

**Emily McTernan:** So I think the way that it's thought about in popular discourse, there are two errors that are being made that I really wanted to correct. So I think the first worry I

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had is that it's seen as this expression of something like mere hurt feelings and it's a matter of vulnerability that it expresses some kind of victimhood. And I think that's just a real mischaracterization. I just don't think that's what offense really is.

So I think it's about standing up for your standing. So I think you perceive that you've been affronted, that someone has said something that disrespects your standing and you want to push back on it. You say, "No that's not how I should be treated." And you take offense, you say, "Don't make those kinds of remarks, don't commit that kind of microaggression, don't queue jump in front of me," these sorts of things.

And the other mistake that I think gets made in popular thinking about offense is that it's seen as catastrophic: that somehow people are now taking offense all the time, that this is going to have a chilling effect on society, that we're seeing this new culture in there, too. And so one of the parts of the book is really just to insist that this is a really domestic and ordinary piece of our interactions. I think it's an important piece, but there's nothing new here.

So I think we all take offense all the time over little things. Obviously we have different things that might set us off. But a popular one in the UK context, which is where I'm speaking from, is people who, it's quite common to take offense if someone doesn't include you in the round of drinks. Or someone queue jumps. That's a big no-no in British culture, right? It's seen as offensive, right? Someone's pushing in front of you and suggesting that you don't matter so much.

So these are the kind of ordinary things that are going on. And I just think perhaps we're seeing this offense being directed at new things as our norms are beginning to change about how to treat one another. So the "me too" Movement is a nice example of this. So a lot more things in the workplace are now off limits. You shouldn't say certain kinds of flirtatious things. You shouldn't make certain kinds of jokes that maybe once seemed fine.

**Christiane:** And when you say that that the, the type of taking offense that you're talking about is when people are insulting our standing, does that mean social standing? Like our standing in society?

**Emily McTernan:** Absolutely. Yes, thank you for that clarification. So it's social standing. So the way that we perceive our standing to be, how we want to be treated and regarded by others and how we think we should be treated and regarded by others.

**Christiane:** A lot of your account is about manners and politeness and social etiquette. And a lot of times, you know, I sort of associate etiquette with maintaining a hierarchical social order, right? That I ought to be super respectful of my boss or something like that. But you write—this relates to the standing thing—you write that this can also be really important for people from marginalized communities. So people who typically maybe don't have as much power as others. So I love, I love the title of your third chapter, which is called “Do Sweat the Small Stuff.” So what's the small stuff you're talking about? And why is it okay to worry about it?

**Emily McTernan:** Absolutely. It's the case that it taking offense can be used in a bad way and we're probably all familiar with the ways it can be used to reinforce hierarchy. So the professor with an enormously inflated sense of his own standing and how he should be deferred to, then takes great offense at what he perceives to be slights. And they're slights to him. But of course, the rest of us will think it's just a normal way to treat each other that's not justified, the kind of offense he's taking. So I think sometimes offense can definitely be used in a bad way.

But you're absolutely right. That one of the key tasks for the book is to say that sometimes it can also be socially and politically valuable and that is indeed when it's used in the other direction. So when it's used to raise people up to having equal standing rather than protect your own inflated place in the hierarchy or higher up position in the perceived social hierarchy.

So the chapter on sweating the small stuff is an attempt to get to grips with the nature of the social hierarchies that structure our society and the way in which we construct them together partly out of these small things we do in conversation when we encounter each other. So the thought here is that these social hierarchies are the kinds we're familiar with are those based on gender or race or sexuality or abilities and so on. They're all hierarchies that clearly have often have political and social and economic aspects and are underpinned by those, but they also have a social aspect. So I'm trying to get to get to the distinctively social aspect of them and come up with something a bit better than the usual relational or social egalitarian account where we think in terms of having the absence of oppression and domination and perhaps the presence of things like shaking hands.

So the chapter is really trying to construct, what is it about our social encounters that can construct our hierarchies? And so I think what's going on is that we have all of these little reminders, these little ways that we pattern these hierarchies through our interactions. So sure that happens in an office with your boss. It's also little reminders, right.

Maybe they have a title like professor and you don't. Maybe there's someone you have to be a bit deferential towards or that you don't talk about certain things and those are all reminders of the hierarchy. But we get those for all these other hierarchies, too. So, microaggressions is something I've written about before. So they're a nice example of the ways that there can be these really small reminders of putting people in their place in these hierarchies.

And the thought in the book is that we should really look at these things like interruptions and microaggressions and unwarranted intrusions, small acts of disrespect. So each on their own might not seem very important, but collectively, I think they're how we're realizing and sustaining relations of inequality in our interactions with one another and that's where offense can start playing a role at pushing back. It's one of the things we can do to try and get to grips with those hierarchies.

**Christiane:** So is the argument, something like if, if you're from a marginalized community, taking offense, sort of, can sort of be a way of like, stating your actual standing as opposed to whatever the offender is saying. And it's not necessarily like, yes, I believe that, people in power should always be deferred to. It's more just like, take the marginalized person up to where they ought to be.

**Emily McTernan:** I'm defending it where it's a kind of an attempt to resist being attributed less than equal standing. That's where I think it's doing something good. So, and the thought is something like, some of what we're seeing, some of the things that people who are writing about the culture of taking offense or objecting to, is people's attempts to change the norms around certain groups and how they get treated and taking offense is just a tiny play in that negotiation of the norm.

So it's to resist that attribution of less-than-equal standing. It's to say no, I don't take myself to have that standing. So there's a kind of moment of realization of your own standing in an act of kind of supporting your sense of self respect. But there's also a signal sent when we take offense. So other people will see and the person who offends will see that we don't want to be treated like that. Perhaps people like us shouldn't be treated like that. And that is the way it can start playing a role in the shaping of social norms.

Because one of the things about the emotion of offense is that it's very much an emotion, social emotion, it's one of the emotions we use to, to reinforce, but sometimes to renegotiate, our social norms. So what's going on is we're saying, "That isn't the right kind of way to behave around here. Don't touch someone's hair. Don't interrupt at this moment.

Don't use those kinds of terms. Don't make those kinds of jokes.” And offense is one way we say that's just not okay around here.

That's the kind of signal that it's sending to people. Of course, it's not always a signal people accept. So you do get pushed back if you take offense. But where it doesn't get push back, suggest to everyone that indeed the norms are shifting around here. So sometimes you take offense and there's a kind of silence, it's very awkward. It's quite a clear signal. That's really not the done thing around here.

**Christiane:** In recent decades, a lot of focus is put on the people who offend. If somebody takes offense, then what happens to the person who has offended? Maybe they lose their job or maybe they're embarrassed or humiliated socially or whatever. But you focus on the offended more and, and so what are the costs borne by the person taking offense? Because a lot of times there's costs there too. Why, and why is your focus on them as opposed to the offender?

**Emily McTernan:** So the book's absolutely a focus on taking offense and not on causing it. There is work in legal philosophy about causing offense. I was much more interested in what's going on on the other side of the equation, the person who's taking offense. I'll say a little bit about the cost to the person who's taking offense and a little bit about the cost to the offender because that is something I want to push back on a little bit.

So the person who takes offense, they are in a way taking on a certain burden. So if you, you were kind of familiar with some of these right, you might be seen as humorless if you don't laugh at the joke or you leave a kind of pointed silence. In the conversation, when people say the wrong kind of thing, you might seem a bit disagreeable.

So there are clearly costs and of course, anyone who's in a marginalized group, there are already these floating possibilities of costs in social interactions. They should be taken quite seriously, these costs, even though I do think they're fairly small. I mean, one thing I perhaps haven't said enough about already is just the fact that to take offense is often something that we do in incredibly small ways.

So I think it's a very domestic kind of emotion. So it's things like raising an eyebrow or leaving an awkward pause. Sometimes it's saying, “That's offensive” or something much more clear, but very often in our interpersonal interactions, we can signal it very subtly. So we're not talking here about hugely costly behaviors. They're not necessarily kind of boycotting that person forever, never speaking to them again. They might just have been

raising an eyebrow, letting the pause carry on a bit too long saying, "I don't really like that" and none of these are kind of particularly socially dangerous things to do.

So I think that's one thing to say is the costs aren't too heavy. The other thing I think about is the fact that the person to whom something offensive has been said in my sense, something that affronts their standing, is already in a socially threatened position. So they're already being flagged in this group. So one thing that we do when we do things like microaggressions and these kinds of small acts of putting people in their places is often making salient facets of social identity that the other person might not want to be made salient or kind of making people seem lesser in this environment by pulling these things out and bringing them up to light all the time.

And so I think one thing to bear in mind is when someone's taking offense, they're resisting that lowering of the standing. And so they're already in a kind of socially-threatened position. So they're sure there's some social threat in taking offense too, right? People might respond badly but they're already in this threatened position. So it's one way of trying to negotiate that tension.

I think there are burdens. Obviously, there's nothing in the book saying that one must take offense. It's much more a question of trying to see the social value of doing so. So it might be something that we think is socially valuable and important. In terms of the people who, against whom offense is taken, we do tend to think of the handful of cases where or perhaps more than a handful now where people undergo extremely serious consequences for having said something offensive or done something offensive.

And so one part of the book is to say that's not the norm for offense-taking. So I think it happens all over the place, all the time, right? I offend someone in my class, they say it's offensive. I change my behavior, we move on. Nothing further happens from that consequentially.

And so the book isn't defending the kind of public shaming. And one part of the book is to try and say offense just isn't the same as public shaming. So I might take offense *and* publicly shame someone *and* try and cause them to lose their job. But there's nothing about taking offense that does that. Sometimes we also then publicly shame someone.

So offense is very much an emotion of withdrawal and estrangement rather than attack. So of course, we can be both offended and angry or both offended and want to publicly shame

someone but they're not to be rolled in together. The book also talks a little bit about why we do see such exaggerated forms of offense-taking online.

So perhaps some of the listeners are thinking, "Well, look, ok, what you describe about these sort of small interactions, like how I feel when someone queue jumps in front of me or when someone commits a microaggression in the classroom or when someone doesn't use my title, but they do use my male colleague's title." All of those things aren't very important, you know, *are* reacted to in this kind of very dramatic sense. But of course, online, sometimes these things are reacted to in this dramatic sense. And so I think online. Of course, when we're talking about the online, we're talking about a bunch of different platforms. So some of them look a lot like offline interactions.

There's a wonderful book on taking offense on social media that talks about the fact that Facebook looks really similar to our offline interactions. So there too, you see things, people doing things like leaving the silence, not responding to the comment, these kinds of things that I'm emphasizing in our offline interactions.

Twitter, though, is the one that does worry me. So one part of the book is about the dynamics of taking offense. So it's a signal to someone close to me that I'm offended. That's quite easy. I can do that with a raised eyebrow. I can do that with an awkward pause. I can do that by just saying, I don't really like it or making a certain kind of facial expression. If it's a stranger on Twitter, I'm gonna have to do something much more dramatic to convey I'm offended. They're not gonna notice a small pause. And so I think there is a kind of pushing towards more dramatic statements happening online.

**Christiane:** Yeah, I found the chapter on social media really intriguing especially especially because you bring in the idea of whether or not it's up to us the public who's using social media or the companies to regulate the maintenance of proper social norms that you're talking about.

**Emily McTernan:** I think an interesting thing in the social media space is the fact that platforms like Facebook (not so much Twitter now) are taking on the role of a kind of pseudo government almost. Right. They're coming up with these lists of community standards where they're going to rule what counts as protected speech and what counts as the kind of speech that they should ban or they should block people from platforms for and their standards are really much stricter than the law on average. Right.

So on Facebook, someone got banned for a while for saying “all men are scum.” So it's not clear that that's hate speech. So when it comes to non-legally-defined hate speech, I'm quite troubled by these platforms, putting these regulations out there in a kind of quite an unaccountable way where we're not really able to shape them very directly as users. They are these important spaces where we do engage in speech and some of that speech matters.

And I think one thing that's odd about the culture of taking offense is it's, it's regarded as being this culture where people kind of lower down in social hierarchies are causing these big problems for those higher up. But in fact, when we're looking at kind of repressive free speech worries about free speech culture, it's these very powerful people imposing these regulations that I think we should be much, much more worried about.

So it's not that there should never be these regulations on speech. Of course, there should be online, but there's something worrying about the thought that we should just remove all offensive content because it doesn't let the kinds of contestation that we might sometimes want to have happen online and it's going to generalize too much. It's going to include things like the “all men are scum” comment which was in the context of a post on the “me too” Movement. It's not going to let people engage in this kind of political speech and action that they want to online because the whatever the guidelines are that are come up with by these platforms are going to just rule out a lot of those kinds of speech that we want to protect.

**Christiane:** If your account is, is true, right? That taking offense is like an important negotiation that we're doing socially, then if we're letting some far off person in Silicon Valley or probably at this point AI, like a robot, determining these things, then it sort of takes away the whole point of that, of that negotiation between people.

**Emily McTernan:** You're seeing this kind of public contestation, because one thing we need for a norm change is to see the willingness to enforce that norm out there. And so the nice thing in a way about online speech is it was permitting the enforcement of new norms: “We don't say things like that now” to be public and kind of lasting in a certain way. And that was actually quite desirable and to just delete all that content doesn't have that social norm, enforcing role because it doesn't mean you should never do it. There are lots of reasons to remove the content, like some of this content is extremely harmful to marginalized groups and of course should be removed.

But there's going to have to be some kind of balancing, particularly in the era of AI where it's going to get very quick removing these things. One assumes much quicker than the people

are now. And so there will be this instantaneous removal and there maybe will be some loss there. That doesn't mean we shouldn't remove a lot of it, but we need to be a little bit careful about what we might lose when we remove too much.

**Christiane:** In the last 10 years or so, and that might even be longer, people taking offense have seen quite a lot of criticism, right? They're often called snowflakes, overly sensitive, that they're taking things too seriously, they can't take a joke, et cetera, et cetera. And so, you know what we've been talking about is the fact that you defend taking offense. Why is it not only why is it morally acceptable to, to take offense?

**Emily McTernan:** The thought is that it's not always morally acceptable to take offense. There are three things that can go on, it can be morally unacceptable to take offense. So I think the person who's very high up in a social hierarchy who takes offense, you know someone makes a slip around them and they take offense to make things even worse for that person, that might well be morally unacceptable.

Then there's a morally neutral or sometimes morally neutral but socially beneficial kind of offense taking. So part of the book is about the way that we're sometimes maintaining general politeness or manners. So when I take offense at the queue jumper, when my colleague takes offense at someone not buying him a drink in the round for everyone else at the table in the pub, we might be playing a small socially beneficial role in sustaining norms that are desirable in certain ways.

So, queuing is a very effective system to ensure that everyone gets onto the bus and no one gets pushed or buying the rounds is, it's an effective way of sort of small gesture of respect and consideration for the people you're hanging out with that is then reciprocated by the next person buying a round. So no one loses out. It's quite a nice way to deal with the question of who pays for the drinks.

And so the thought is sometimes, is it, it's morally neutral because it's not clear quite how much weight those norms have morally speaking out. They're just a matter of manners and they're not the kind of manners that I think have moral weight. And I'll come to that in a second, but they might be socially beneficial to sustain. And so sometimes when we take that kind of offense of doing something that's socially useful, morally, nothing much to say there.

And then I do think that sometimes when we take offense, it's both socially beneficial in the sense of helping us very, in a very small way, but in a potent way towards more equal

relations and morally good to do it. And that's in cases where we're resisting social hierarchies, which I think are just, they're bad. This is a small way to resist them, resisting them is therefore morally good.

And perhaps to really support that, I'm gonna have to say a little bit more about manners and politeness. So I'm very much with people like Cheshire Calhoun and Amy Olberding and Sarah Buss who think there is a kind of moral significance to these manners. So it's easy to say they don't really matter very much. Or they're just mere social matters, not moral matters. It's just, it's the kind of thing we should just rise above and not really care about.

And the thought here is just that these are the way in which we can express respect and consideration for each other. That's very much Buss and Olberding and Calhoun's point. I think what I want to add to that is they are also the way we can subtly indicate that we don't respect that person quite as much as that other person. And so there is a moral question here.

So these norms matter because they're the way we can express respect and consideration of each other. They also matter because they're the way we can go about subtly indicating to people that we don't think they're worth quite as much or we don't respect them quite as much. And so to take offense in the right directions can be a morally good thing to do because it can be pushing these norms which have a certain moral weightiness, these norms around politeness and manners and who gets to be treated with respect and who doesn't in better directions.

**Christiane:** If we're on board with, with taking offense being ok, how can we start to figure out when it's ok to take offense or when we might be asserting our humanity and basic, you know, need for respect. I'm specifically thinking of, of like, like white women, right? Because we're in a, we're in this position where we are oppressed, but we also are the oppressors a lot of the time. So, like, how, how can we sort of navigate that?

**Emily McTernan:** I think one thing I want to say is absolutely, one is gonna have to be very careful, partly because I think a lot of the time where offense gets taken over these norms that are in need of correction that do treat some groups less equally than others. It, it may well be that it's someone who is in a socially-advantaged position in one sense who then has enough social capital to effectively take offense and so they start to push the norms.

So one thing you see in the critiques of the culture of taking offense is the note that it's often university students who are taking it. So suppose that's correct. And then the point that the thought seems to be that these are people who are already in a reasonably good social position, in a sense, right? They're the ones at university, they've got a certain kind of social capital and surely they shouldn't be complaining.

So I think one thought I have is it might well be that indeed those are the ones that can complain. That doesn't mean that the, you know, the changing of the norms will benefit everybody when those very bad norms get taken off the table or get altered. Of course, there are gonna be misfirings, right. People are gonna take offense at stuff that isn't offensive and they're going to misunderstand what's happening. People might try and push norms that aren't the right norms that they treat white women with more respect than they're entitled to qua being treated as social equals. And that is a huge concern.

So one thing that I try and say in the book is that this is only a piece of the social negotiation. So you don't have to be right about what the correct set of social norms are to take offense. All you're doing is engaging in the negotiation towards a better set of social norms. So if you take offense at a norm that is one that means that you're treated with greater than equal respect, you're treated as someone who's higher up than someone else. That's bad.

If you go for a norm and then we decide collectively, that's not the norm we want, that's not a bad act of taking offense, that's just part and parcel of the negotiation. No one gets to create a new norm just by one act of taking offense. And again, I think I would also add that the act of taking offense, of course, is not the act of public shaming. So, if we misfire, it's not as serious as all that. Right.

If we raise an eyebrow, leave an awkward pause, but we ought not to have done. It's just part and parcel of social negotiation that we do this. There are social missteps, we can get them better over time. These are the sorts of thoughts. So it's not too catastrophic that we do take offense. But yes, you're absolutely right that we should be worried. And in fact, offense raises lots of these worries partly because it may well be that we find it taken particularly when people have some social capital in the situation that they're in.

And so that may, we're often in these dimensions where we have some standing in one respect and not in another. It's not a very once and for all answer I can see. And there's a lot to say about justified offense-taking. I think, I think some people would really like there to be a fact of the matter about what it's what kind of objective fact of the matter about what it's right to take offense at and not to take offense at.

And that is something that I push back a bit on the, in the book. So I don't think there is one right answer as to how we should demonstrate respect for each other. Or not. I say one of the dimensions of equality I talk about is being free from unwarranted intrusions. But clearly we're going to have cultures with different senses of how much intrusion into other people's personal business is and isn't appropriate.

And I don't think there's one right answer out there in the universe as to the correct specification of those, of those lines. That is the one right way to treat people as equals. I think that it's compatible with a number of different norms about what kinds of questions we ask and don't ask or what kinds of personal space we give people or don't give people.

**Christiane:** So you also write that there are ways in which taking offense could be considered, not only just an acceptable thing to do but actually a virtue, something that we might think we ought to do. Might that be too much emotional labor to be asking of somebody in a marginalized position?

**Emily McTernan:** So I think the first thing to say is that I see it as very much as a civic rather than a moral virtue probably. So by that, I just mean, I think that there is this social benefit to the regulation and maintenance in some cases, but mostly renegotiation of these norms around how to treat and regard one another that it is good if we do because it's not going to be very easy to get it done by the law.

So I probably don't want laws saying, "Don't say this sort of thing. Do say that sort of thing. Shake people's hand for this length of time. Only interrupt after a certain number of minutes." None of that is going to be particularly palatable. We don't want the government that does that.

So it's gonna have to be us that do that through the negotiation of social norms. So it's a civic virtue. It's not something that everyone has to do. It's not something that you're morally bad if you don't do. It's just that this—rather like tolerance—is going to require an awful lot from citizens in terms of just the maintenance of a good way to live together. So it's a little bit different from saying it's a moral virtue.

I do in the book say that there's nothing morally vice-ful about paying attention to your standing. So precisely because we usually have standing, our social standing is something that is a product of various facts about ourselves, including aspects of our social identity that we share with others. To care about one's standing is not such a bad thing to do

because it's also to care about the standing of those like you and in some cases, that's a very good idea given that we're in a society where some people are treated much worse than others. So that's to say that there's not a kind of moral dubiousness about caring about things like microaggressions, which I think some people think there is, is something like we should just rise above these small slights. And I think I want to push back on that a bit in the book.

Of course, some people face far more affronts to their standing as a social equal than others. That's part of the point of the book. And so they're going to be presented with many more opportunities in which they could take offense and we might worry that it's emotionally burdensome that they have to keep taking offense.

So the first thing to say is they don't have to keep taking offense nothing I say so they have to do this on this occasion, that on that occasion, it's very much up to the individual's discretion and their own sense of what would be useful in terms of renegotiating their relations with people. But the other thing to say is the emotional burdens are already on them. They're already experiencing all of these affronts. That's the real burden. And so to take offense is one way they can resist that, that attribution of less standing to affirm to themselves that they have greater standing than they're bit treated as they have.

So it's also, it's not an unpleasant thing necessarily to take offense. That's one thing I want to say in the book because it's not hurt feelings, they're standing up for their standing. So there's already this emotional burden here. You're facing all these affronts and taking offense is one amongst many ways in which you might choose to resist that emotional burden of constantly facing these affronts. So I don't see it as an undue burden on those who are already marginalized for that reason.

**Christiane:** So what brought you to this work? Why do you, why is this something you care about or that you cared to, to defend?

**Emily McTernan:** Two things, son one is I'm philosophical. So I've always found it very unconvincing how people talked about offense following Joel Feinberg's influential work where he just sees it as this collection of dis-unified, disliked states. So things like resentment, annoyance, irritation, actual offense, all get piled in there together, disgust, all get piled in together. So he has this wonderful example, if you're on a, on a bus and people start performing these hideous acts near you. So they're throwing up, they're, they're engaging in various kind of sex acts. They've got Nazi Flags.

What are you gonna do? How are you feeling? You're feeling offended! And I really wanted to get us a distinctive emotion because I think there is a distinct emotion that we feel that we're quite familiar with. And it's not this kind of bundle of every disliked state going that meets certain other conditions.

So I really wanted to get this familiar emotion that's to do with things like queue jumping and cat calling and innuendos at work and offensive jokes, this offense reaction. Someone's affronted me, and I don't think that's how I should be treated, and I feel a bit estranged from that person and I tend towards some kind of moment of withdrawal. It's often a moment, it can be bigger but kind of pause, a small rupture in our social relations.

So I just really wanted to pull out this emotion. And I think it's a really interesting emotion partly because it's not very like some of these other emotions it gets bundled in with. So one thing that the psychologists talk about is the fact that when you take offense, there's this moment of evaluation of yourself going on. So to take offense, you've got to believe, perceive or judge, I'm gonna remain neutral on how we think we should characterize emotions over that, that you have this standing and that someone's not treated you in accordance with how you ought to have been treated.

So that's a kind of affirmation of your own sense of your standing. Or there's this moment of reckoning, right? Where you think, "Oh, like, is that some way I should be treated like? Is that the right way to treat me or people like me?" And so I think there's something very interesting going on there because it's this moment of self evaluation and an act of resistance at the same time.

The other thing that motivated it was this deep dissatisfaction with the ways that social and relational egalitarians went about talking about what it would be like to treat each other as equals. There's two things they say, they say don't engage in these acts of domination and oppression and marginalization. Maybe do things like make eye contact, shake hands, all have the same title. And there was something very oddly static about that picture of social relations, it was if we could just adopt a rule and then that would be social equality. Whereas I think that I'm very much with the sociologists who want to think about the ways in which we try to present ourselves in certain ways, we have a certain kind of face or persona that we put on and we want people to treat us that way. And we have these different personas in different parts of our life.

So I'm someone different on this podcast to who I am when I'm the mum at the school gate, to who I am when I'm in a bar. I don't want to be treated in the same ways in all of those contexts. So there's not gonna be kind of one right answer about social equal

treatment and there's not going to be a kind of moment where we instantiate it and then we all stop. It's going to be this dynamic process of negotiation into which we enter on different terms in socially unequal relations with different amounts of power to change the terms on which we interact, right?

People who are very socially powerful, have much more power to set the terms on which we interact than people who lack social power, but it's still a negotiation and I think there's more moments of possibility and hope. The law, and ensuring everyone has a vote and even economic changes aren't gonna be enough to fix these horrible hierarchies of race and gender and homophobia, transphobia and all of these other things. We need those, but we also need something else. And what we need is this social negotiation. And this book is really a tiny, tiny part of, of what that looks like. And then the third and final thing of course is just the fact that I think the public discussion over taking offense gets offense wrong too. It thinks it's this matter of victimhood, it thinks that it's catastrophic. Whereas I think it's a domestic and ordinary part of our social interactions, a small and potent way of pushing back on certain kinds of unjust hierarchies.

**[Interview ends]**

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Rambling]**

**Christiane:** If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit [prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics](http://prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics).

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