



Self-Respect and Retaliation

A.J. Grunthaler

This selection was originally part of a larger article that appeared on the Sophia Project website in 2002.

...What does it mean to have self-respect? According to most philosophical understandings, an individual who has self-respect recognizes that he is equal in moral worth to all other human beings. If I have proper self-respect I have a basic awareness of my own fundamental dignity and worth as a human being.

Although it is not possible to have too much respect for oneself, it is possible to have too little respect for oneself or to lack self-respect completely.⁷ The person who has little or no self-respect engages in a pattern of behavior that demonstrates his own lack of self-worth, either by acting in such a way that he treats himself as a moral inferior or by letting others treat him as an inferior. The most typical example of lack of self-respect is that of servility.⁸ According to Immanuel Kant, the servile person is one who is willing in practice to deny his moral equality with another in order to curry that person's favor. Such an individual allows himself to be used by another person almost as an object or allows himself to become excessively dependent upon other person. The "suck-up," for example, is so intent upon pleasing his boss that he will do anything to win his favor. He will allow his boss to abuse, berate or belittle him with out so much as a complaint. Similarly, the "good little wife" does everything to satisfy her man, even to the point of wearing the kind of clothes he prefers and associating only with those people he likes. She is willing to sacrifice her own ambitions and interests completely to make him happy.⁹ Finally, the "whipped boyfriend" will act as a virtual slave to his girlfriend in order to receive sexual favors from her. Whatever she wants he will buy her, even if it means depleting his entire bank account.

What each of these individuals has in common is that they have allowed themselves to be treated as inferiors by others for some advantage that they perceive for themselves, whether it is career advancement, a husband's approval, or sex. While some may argue that there is no problem with servility, because each of the individuals described above is ultimately getting what he wants through his servile behavior, that is hardly the point. The problem with servility is that it violates the basic sense of dignity and equality that each individual ought to possess. Kant further objects to servility because he maintains that it involves a false humility. The servile person acts as though he is not the equal of others when in fact he knows that he is. Ultimately such behavior leads to a debasement of oneself.¹⁰

But what if a person is not even aware that she is behaving in a servile way. The "good little wife," for example, may have been brought up in an environment where it was common for women to be subservient to men; she simply may not even realize that she ought to be treated as an equal to her husband. According to Thomas Hill, although the servile person who is not aware that she ought to behave differently cannot be subject to blame for her behavior, such behavior nonetheless constitutes a severe defect in character. On the other hand, if a person willingly chooses to behave in a servile way either because she is too lazy or timid to stand up for herself, she must also be judged as blameworthy.¹¹

Lack of self-respect can also be manifested in the way we choose to respond—or not to

respond— to contemptuous treatment inflicted upon us by others. All of us at some point in our lives will be confronted by some form of contemptuous behavior that calls for a response if we are to preserve our self-respect. Contempt might take the form of a boss who constantly makes degrading innuendos to a female employee, or a co-worker who makes insulting comments or snide jokes publically at another's expense. A student recently told me of an example of contempt that came from a completely unexpected source. This student was on her way to a crowded shopping mall, and, after driving around for quite some time, looking for a parking space, observed that a family was getting ready to pull out of a spot that was near the entrance of the mall. After waiting several more minutes for the family to get in their van, buckle up, start up the van and back out, the spot for which she had been waiting so diligently became available. Before she had the opportunity to claim her spot, however, a middle-aged woman in an expensive car cut in front of her and pulled into the spot. When the student told the woman that her behavior wasn't very kind, the woman responded, "Well, I guess that I'm just going to be a bitch today." The student was so shocked—as most people probably would be—by this woman's utter and complete disregard for her that she didn't even know how to respond. The contemptuous actions of the individuals in each of these examples have one thing in common: they are an implicit acknowledgment that the person treated with contempt is not worthy of any sort of real consideration—that they are somehow inferior and unable to stand up for themselves.

But how should one respond to such acts of contempt? One possibility is simply to do nothing, to turn the other cheek, to ignore the contempt that is being inflicted upon me. The problem with this solution is that, in doing nothing, I make myself complicit in the other's attempt to demonstrate my inferiority. As Leslie Hunt argues:

confronted with [contemptuous] treatment, I can easily feel that this sort of treatment constitutes evidence that I am not the sort of person who is worthy of my esteem, and that my accepting or tolerating it would be further, more devastating evidence. If I act out of self-respect in refusing to accept or tolerate it, then I am acting in order to protect my perceived worth from the appearance of being lessened or spoiled."¹²

According to Hunt, then, self-respect demands that one make an assertion of one own's dignity and equal worth in the face of ill-treatment by another person. In other words some degree of retaliation is an appropriate response to contemptuous treatment by others.

This retaliation, however, can take many forms. I might simply verbally put the other in his place when he is attempting to insult or degrade me. If I am clever enough, I can try to respond to certain forms of contempt with my own snide comment or barb. Barbara Tuchman offers an example of this kind of retort in her story of an incident that transpired between the Queen of France and a knight during a particularly raucous social event at court:

A knight, asked by the Queen if he has fathered any children, is forced to admit he has not, and indeed he 'did not have the look of a man who could please his mistress when he held her naked in his arms. For his beard was...little more than the kind of fuzz that ladies have in certain places.' The Queen tells him she does not doubt his words, 'for it is easy to judge from the state of the hay whether the pitchfork is any good.' In his turn, the knight asks, 'Lady, answer me without deceit. Is there hair between your legs?' When she replies, 'None at all,' he comments, 'Indeed I do believe you, for grass does not grow on a well-beaten path.'¹³

Unfortunately not all of us are capable of being as viciously witty as the knight in the story. In returning the Queen's assault on his virility with a jab at her own promiscuity, the knight also strongly reasserted his own personal dignity.

Some might argue that responding to contemptuous treatment with some form of our own contempt is childish. Retaliation can take a more mature form when one strongly lets the other

know that they will not stand for ill-treatment. A friend of mine who is of generous proportions was once mocked by a group of high school boys for her size. Her way of responding was simply to go up to these boys and to say, "Do you think that was a very kind thing to say?" Similarly, someone recently recounted to me how she responded to abuse inflicted upon her by her father-in-law by confronting him with his behavior and stating in no uncertain terms that his insulting behavior would not be tolerated any longer by her. What each of these individuals has done is to respond to contemptuous treatment in such a way that they are able to reassert their own dignity without stooping to the level of those are attempting to belittle them.

There are, however, certain situations where retaliation of any form is not in order. When an act of contempt is being instigated by a child, a retarded adult or someone who is perceived to be a marked inferior, there can be no real threat to my self-esteem, and consequently no need to respond. I may also choose to forgo any kind of response when standing up for myself has the potential to cause greater harm to myself or others. No one would argue that a black man in the pre-civil rights south who is called a "nigger" by a group of hostile and drunken red-necks must stand up for himself when doing so will very likely cause him to be lynched. The same would be true for the single mother who is being treated unfairly in the work-place by her sexist boss, but who doesn't stand up for herself because she fears being fired and not being able to adequately support her family. In each of these cases failure to retaliate is not necessarily evidence of lack of self-respect on the part of those who are forced to endure ill-treatment by others, since under less extreme circumstances their responses might be quite different.

ENDNOTES

17. This is just one difference between self-respect and self-esteem. See David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981) 346-360.

18. See Thomas E. Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," *The Monist* 62 (January 1979): 87-104. Hill unfortunately frames his discussion of servility in terms of rights. The servile person, he maintains, fails to "fully understand what his moral rights are, how they can be waved, and when they can be forfeited." I believe that it is better to completely avoid the question of rights and focus instead on the issue of self-conception. The servile person, I believe, simply suffers from an erroneous self-conception: he believes that he is worth less as a human being than others, when in fact he is by virtue of his humanity their equal.

19. This example has been taken from Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect."

20. See Stephen J. Massey, "Kant on Self-Respect," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (1983): 65-67.

21. Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect,"

22. Lester H. Hunt, *Character and Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) 47.

23. Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine, 1978) 210. Winston Churchill was said to have made an equally stinging retort to a female member of parliament who accused him one day of being drunk. In his typically biting manner he replied to her, "And you madam are ugly. But I shall be sober tomorrow."

© SophiaOmni, 2002. This text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.