

DOES REPUTATION MATTER?

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Joshua Landy

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15 November 2018



How much should we care about our reputation? I think that’s a really difficult question. One can easily imagine a [Stoic telling us not to care at all](#): it’s not something that is under our control, and so our job is simply to learn not to worry about it. We should just strive to live a good life, and leave others to decide what they think of us. In the immortal words of Stoic philosopher Taylor Swift, [haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate](#).

Still, it’s not clear to me that reputation is something that is entirely out of our control. Yes, our enemies can make up all kinds of unpleasant things about us—but it also really helps them if we behave badly! If I go around kicking puppies in front of everyone, I’m going to get a reputation as a puppy-kicker—and that’s going to be my fault. (Editor’s note: no puppies were harmed in the making of this blog post.)

What’s more, reputation matters: if I get a reputation as a puppy-kicker, I’m probably not going to get invited to too many SPCA galas. It seems as though we have some practical reasons for caring that people aren’t getting it wildly wrong about us. And it seems as though we have at least some say in the matter, even though we can’t entirely protect ourselves against all misunderstandings or malicious gossip.

Maybe a deeper worry is that caring about our reputation will make us vain, narcissistic, and inauthentic. We will start cultivating a fake persona, just to trick people into thinking that we’re cool. We’ll go to shows and events and places we don’t like, just so we can brag about them later. Maybe we’ll even [put our lives at risk just to take a nifty selfie](#).

Worse still: maybe this will reach down and corrupt our very character. We’ll start liking those shows and events and places. We’ll start wanting to take pictures of our breakfast. We’ll start enjoying post-structuralist philosophy. Horrors!

I think these are very real worries, and we all need to take them extremely seriously. That said, I also think there’s something to be said on the other side. If we completely ignore what others are saying about us, we may remain stuck with an inaccurate self-image. Yes, others sometimes lie about us—but surely we lie to ourselves, too.

We’re very good, unfortunately, at confabulating, very good at remembering our own successes and exonerating our own failings. As a result, it’s extremely hard for us to see ourselves with any accuracy. Sometimes the only way to know who we really are is to check in with other people, to make sure we’re not just telling ourselves a bunch of stories.

There are, after all, aspects of who we are that aren’t entirely up to us. Someone may think of himself as a “successful comedian,” but if he has never in his life made anyone laugh, that characterization doesn’t fit. Another person may think of herself as “not a very good doctor,” but if she has saved thousands of lives, her self-image is equally erroneous.

Most of us trust reputations, at least to some extent, when it comes to other people: we use sites like Yelp and Tripadvisor to help us decide whom to hire, what to eat, and where to stay. We assume that the opinions of our fellow human beings—at least in large enough numbers—give us information that is reasonably reliable. So maybe we should think the same way about ourselves. (That’s why I read my teaching evaluations religiously: no matter what I may think about a class I’ve taught, the students are the ones who count.)

The reputation system is vulnerable to misinformation and malice; it can generate narcissism and self-alienation; in some cases it can even destroy people’s lives. But it also motivates us to be better people; it offers us warnings about dangerous individuals, boring plays, and sophistical works of philosophy; and it teaches us important things about ourselves. All in all, we probably shouldn’t just “shake it off.”

COMMENTS (2)

Harold G. Neuman

Thursday, December 6, 2018 -- 1:03 PM

Reputation, like privacy, is in short supply these days. But as with the demise of privacy, very few people seem to notice that reputation is not worth much to nearly everyone arising from the millennial generation. Inauthenticity is highly over-rated as a reason for doing or not doing anything. And vanity, attached to reputation, seems to get things the wrong way round from where they were before the advent of the twenty-first century. I think we are confused if we believe reputation is somehow contrary to values and ethics. But, on reflection, contrariety is being flaunted a lot these days. The ills we create are surely among the least worthy of our myriad creations. Seems to me...

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Berangaria Martineau

Saturday, December 15, 2018 -- 12:46 AM

Nice article, really liked it.

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