

Two Kinds of Judgement

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There are two different ways people judge you. Sometimes judging you correctly is the end goal. But there's a second much more common type of judgement where it isn't. We tend to regard all judgements of us as the first type. We'd probably be happier if we realized which are and which aren't.

The first type of judgement, the type where judging you is the end goal, include court cases, grades in classes, and most competitions. Such judgements can of course be mistaken, but because the goal is to judge you correctly, there's usually some kind of appeals process. If you feel you've been misjudged, you can protest that you've been treated unfairly.

Nearly all the judgements made on children are of this type, so we get into the habit early in life of thinking that all judgements are.

But in fact there is a second much larger class of judgements where judging you is only a means to something else. These include college admissions, hiring and investment decisions, and of course the judgements made in dating. This kind of judgement is not really about you.

Put yourself in the position of someone selecting players for a national team. Suppose for the sake of simplicity that this is a game with no positions, and that you have to select 20 players. There will be a few stars who clearly should make the team, and many players who clearly shouldn't. The only place your judgement makes a difference is in the borderline cases. Suppose you screw up and underestimate the 20th best player, causing him not to make the team, and his place to be taken by the 21st best. You've still

picked a good team. If the players have the usual distribution of ability, the 21st best player will be only slightly worse than the 20th best. Probably the difference between them will be less than the measurement error.

The 20th best player may feel he has been misjudged. But your goal here wasn't to provide a service estimating people's ability. It was to pick a team, and if the difference between the 20th and 21st best players is less than the measurement error, you've still done that optimally.

It's a false analogy even to use the word unfair to describe this kind of misjudgement. It's not aimed at producing a correct estimate of any given individual, but at selecting a reasonably optimal set.

One thing that leads us astray here is that the selector seems to be in a position of power. That makes him seem like a judge. If you regard someone judging you as a customer instead of a judge, the expectation of fairness goes away. The author of a good novel wouldn't complain that readers were unfair for preferring a potboiler with a racy cover. Stupid, perhaps, but not unfair.

Our early training and our self-centeredness combine to make us believe that every judgement of us is about us. In fact most aren't. This is a rare case where being less self-centered will make people more confident. Once you realize how little most people judging you care about judging you accurately—once you realize that because of the normal distribution of most applicant pools, it matters least to judge accurately in precisely the cases where judgement has the most effect—you won't take rejection so personally.

And curiously enough, taking rejection less personally may help you to get rejected less often. If you think someone judging you will work hard to judge you correctly, you can afford to be passive. But the more you realize that most judgements are greatly influenced by random, extraneous factors—that most people judging you are more like a fickle novel buyer than a wise and perceptive magistrate—the more you realize you can do things to influence the outcome.

One good place to apply this principle is in college applications. Most high school students applying to college do it with the usual child's mix of inferiority and self-centeredness: inferiority in that they assume that admissions committees must be all-seeing; self-centeredness in that they assume admissions committees care enough about them to dig down into their application and figure out whether they're good or not. These combine to make applicants passive in applying and hurt when they're rejected. If college applicants realized how quick and impersonal most selection processes are, they'd make more effort to sell themselves, and take the outcome less personally.

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