

23. Is it ok to ghost someone?

Clarification

Most people are probably familiar with the phenomenon of ghosting. To ghost someone is to abruptly stop communication with them, without warning. This takes the form of not responding to texts, app messages, phone calls, or emails. There is some evidence that the term originated in the context of dating, and especially online dating and flirtatious behavior on social media. Over time, people started using the term to refer to *any* case in which communication is expected but never comes, e.g., when someone is ghosted by a potential employer after a job interview. But let us focus on the original sense and ask whether it is morally permissible to ghost someone with whom you are in a romantic or potentially romantic relationship.

Con

Ghosting is wrong for two reasons. First, it is very disrespectful. Second, it has the potential to do much harm to the person ghosted.

Imagine you have a coworker who you don't get along with very well. Suppose that, for whatever reason, there is "bad blood" between the two of you. It would be wrong for either of you to show disrespect to the other, even though you don't like each other too much. After all, liking someone and showing them the respect that all persons deserve are completely different things. Unless one of you has done something really, really bad, respect is still required. Now imagine that your coworker starts to ignore you entirely. When you ask them a question, they act as if you haven't said anything at all. They don't communicate things to you that they do communicate to others. They don't so much as acknowledge your existence. That would be wrong because it is disrespectful.

The analogy with ghosting is pretty obvious. Just ignoring someone who has reason to expect that you will *not* ignore them is not ok.

If it's wrong in the case of coworkers, then it is especially wrong in the case of ghosting a potential romantic partner. At least with the coworkers it is understood that neither likes the other. In the case of ghosting, the ghoster might not dislike the ghostee. Clearly, if it is disrespectful and hence wrong to just ignore someone you hate, then it is also disrespectful and hence wrong to just ignore someone you don't hate. So, ghosting is wrong.

Even more importantly, ghosting someone is likely to cause them harm. Anyone who is ghosted is quite reasonably going to think that there must be something about them that the ghoster doesn't like. That's already kinda hard to take, but what makes ghosting doubly difficult to endure is that the ghostee doesn't even *know* what caused them to be ghosted. It's one thing to know that someone isn't interested in you because they think you're arrogant or too sensitive or not considerate enough or not smart enough, or whatever. It's quite another to know that someone isn't interested in you and to also deal with the agony of not knowing what it is that they don't like about you. In the first case, you at least have the option of thinking something like, "She says I'm arrogant, but that's because she often misunderstands what I'm trying to say." Or, you could acknowledge that you can sometimes be a little arrogant and either make an effort to fix this character flaw or just decide to live with it. But in the case where you don't even know what it is that the other person doesn't like about you, these options don't exist. That's what makes ghosting doubly bad, and it is the main reason why it is wrong to ghost someone.

People ghost others because it's just easier and because it causes *them*—the ghoster—less discomfort than telling the ghostee that the relationship is over. But if that is your reason for ghosting someone, you are a moral coward. Morality sometimes requires you to do things that you would rather not do or things which are bound to make you uncomfortable. If you opt for the easy way out instead of doing the right thing, that's pretty bad.

Pro

The analogy between the disrespectful coworker and the ghoster is informative, but not in the way that the author of the con essay thinks it is. There is a very important *disanalogy* between ignoring

your coworker and ghosting someone on a dating app. The difference is this: In the case of the coworkers there is an expectation—a starting assumption—that they must put their differences aside and interact with each other as needed to do their jobs. This expectation is quite reasonable and the person who violates it does indeed act disrespectfully. But there just isn't any similar expectation in the context of contemporary dating or flirting. Everyone knows, going in, that there is a possibility they'll be ghosted, so it is not disrespectful or wrong to ghost someone.

Consider again a pair of coworkers. Let's use the example of me and one of my professor colleagues. It would be disrespectful and wrong for me to come into the department one day and punch my colleague in the face. Obviously. But suppose my colleague and I have a shared interest in amateur boxing. So we decide to meet up at a boxing gym and spar. At some point I hit them hard in the face. Would *that* be disrespectful or wrong? Clearly not, since there is an expectation—a starting assumption—that when you box with someone you're likely to get hit by them. My colleague has agreed to take on the risk of getting hit when they decide to step into the ring with me. *This* is the right kind of analogy with ghosting. When you decide to use a dating app or otherwise try to find a romantic partner, you take on the risk of being ghosted. For this reason, the potential romantic partner who suddenly cuts off all communication acts no more disrespectfully than the boxer who punches their opponent in the face. Everyone understands that ghosting is a risk when you try to date, just as everyone understands that getting hit in the face is a risk when you try to box. This understanding is enough to eliminate the concern of acting disrespectfully.

But what about the harm issue raised in the con essay? Isn't the ghostee harmed by the ghoster? Maybe, but not in a way that makes the harm immoral. And this is an important lesson: It is not *always* wrong to do needless harm. To see why, all you have to do is again consider my colleague and me. I'm very likely to cause them harm—physical harm—when I hit them in the face in the boxing ring. But again, that's what they've signed up for, so it is difficult to see how the harm I do to them is wrong. And now make the analogy: When you enter onto the dating scene, you sign up for dealing with all the behavior that is expected and commonplace on the dating scene, and

that includes being harmed by ghosting. The harm done to you is not wrong. Furthermore, the alternative to someone ghosting you—telling you why they want to call things off—might do *more* harm than if they were to ghost you. Imagine that someone tells you that they don't want to pursue a relationship because they think you're very boring. Surely *that* would make you feel way worse than not knowing why they want to end things.

It is important to add that shared expectations can also eliminate concerns about moral cowardice. It *would* be cowardly for me to punch my colleague when they don't expect it, e.g., at a department meeting, but it is not cowardly for me to punch them in the face when we're boxing. If everyone agrees that one way of ending a relationship is via ghosting, then it is not cowardly to ghost someone. And if ghosting is often the easiest way for people to end relationships, then why shouldn't they use that method?