



Is Contempt Redeemable?

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Abstract: In this essay, I will focus on the two main objections that have been adduced against the moral acceptability of contempt: the fact that it embraces a whole person and not merely some deed or aspect of a person's character, and the way that when addressed to a person in this way, it amounts to a denial of the very personhood of its target.

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Contempt has had a bad name in philosophy. However objectionable a person's character or behavior, philosophers have tended to follow Kant in proscribing contempt as "incompatible with a fundamental duty of respect" (Hill 2000, 88). Recently, however, there have been attempts at rehabilitation of nasty emotions in general: there have been pleas for shame (Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011), jealousy (Kristjánsson 2002), and other "shadowy emotions" (Tappolet, Teroni, and Ziv 2018).

Contempt is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the holding or treating as of little account, or as vile and worthless; the mental attitude in which a thing is so considered." It is widely regarded as a nasty emotion that cannot be morally justified. Two objections, traceable to Kant, have been adduced against it. The first is that it embraces a whole person globally and not merely some deed or local aspect of a person's character. The second is that contempt amounts to a denial of the very personhood of its target. The two are closely related: targeting "the sin, not the sinner" seems compatible with retaining a basic respect for the latter. But an

attitude that regards a person as globally worthless suggests that there is nothing left to be the object of respect.

Nevertheless, the moral worth of contempt has recently found at least three champions. Michelle Mason (2003) has argued not only that contempt is sometimes morally justified, but that it is in itself a moral emotion. Kate Abramson (2010) has argued against the broad consensus that views contempt as unacceptably "globalizing"; and Macalester Bell (2013) has mounted an ingenious defense of contempt as morally warranted in certain specific circumstances.

A fair consideration of these defenses of contempt will require us to say more about its nature, as well as about the sort of respect of persons it is charged with violating. I will therefore begin with a distinction between a common, weaker sense and a stronger construal of the word "contempt." I will later link those two construals of contempt to corresponding species of respect. What will emerge is that some of the defenses of contempt rely on construing it in its weaker sense, linked to a mode of respect that admits of degrees. Only one of its three champions, at best, succeeds in justifying certain cases of what I shall call "strong contempt."

COMMON AND STRONG CONTEMPT

In common usage, "contempt" designates an attitude of superiority, grounded in a conviction that the target of contempt lacks some particularly important human characteristic. Often, though not always, that lack is a moral one: contempt targets someone who is incapable of basic decency or of any concern for others, for example. But for some, a person's most important virtues may not be moral: some clever people, those who profess to "not suffer fools gladly," might be said to hold people of low intelligence in contempt.

Contempt differs from related negative emotions such as hatred, resentment, or anger in that it is both globalizing and dismissive. The two are closely related. They gather up the moral objections that have been adduced against contempt. To say that contempt is "globalizing" is to say that it somehow englobes the whole person, regarding her as inherently inferior, not in regard to some specific fault but in herself. This calls for elucidation. But whatever it means exactly, the charge of globalizing, in viewing its target not merely as inferior in some respect but in herself, motivates the characteristic Kantian objection that contempt regards its target as worthless: not merely a flawed person, but a non-person: "Kant famously complains that to hold another in contempt is to deny her 'all moral worth' If someone has no moral worth, Kant continues, he 'could never be improved either,' which is objectionable

on the grounds that persons as such can 'never lose all predisposition to the good'" (Abramson 2010, 191).

More specifically, contempt differs importantly from hatred: for hatred focuses intensely on the person targeted and her faults, admitting or perhaps even requiring a kind of equality between enemies. Thus Nietzsche: "The noble person will respect his enemy, and respect is already a bridge to love . . . he requires his enemy for himself, as his mark of distinction, nor could he tolerate any other enemy than one in whom he finds nothing to despise and much to esteem" (Nietzsche 1967). Contempt, on the contrary, aims at withholding attention from its target altogether, and the main complaint against it is that it amounts to denying them the very dignity of enmity.

In practice, a great many defects can elicit localized contempt, understood as targeting not the person as a whole but some specific failing. Here, for example, is a list that Abramson has culled from Hume: "malice, a total lack of social virtues, dishonesty, iniquity, miserly avarice, infidelity and/or disloyalty, meanness or 'abjectness,' cowardice with respect to the defense of one's own country, impudence, a disposition to abandon oneself entirely to 'dissolute pleasures and womanish superstition' once in the safety of high office, and being at once 'indolent, profuse and addicted to low pleasures'" (Abramson 2010, 209).

In addition, contempt can be mixed so thoroughly with a great many other emotions as to make them hard to tell apart:

Most of us will have no trouble imagining contempt colluding with pity as well as scorn and derision; amusement as well as smugness, haughtiness, disgust, revulsion, and horror; love (as with cats and even children) as well as hatred, indifference, disdain, snubbing, ignoring, sneering, and an array of sentiments which motivate various forms of laughter and smiles: the sardonic, the sarcastic, and the indulgent (again as with pets and children). (Miller 1995, 481)

I will make no attempt to explore the rich diversity of nuance that can attend contemptuous superiority. Instead, I want to distinguish such an attitude, directed at some specific characteristic, from that which is sometimes, curiously, expressed by saying that someone is "beneath contempt." "Regarding another with contempt," Michelle Mason has written, "does not thereby objectify another person; rather, it is regarding him as beneath contempt that signals we have exiled him from moral community with us" (Mason 2003, 263). What I call strong contempt, then, might be equivalent to regarding someone as beneath contempt in what I shall call the common sense of the word. It is strong contempt that effectively relegates a person to

the status of a nonperson. The superiority implied in such a verdict is a simple binary one: although the target was *prima facie* a person merely by virtue of belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, or in virtue of a past connection, she is regarded as no longer worthy of eliciting the kind of response that we think of as appropriate to a person capable of moral agency. It is principally to that strong contempt that moral objections have been particularly directed. I propose to address some of the considerations adduced in defense of contempt—of one kind or another—by the three champions I have mentioned. While those defenses have some force for common contempt, I shall argue that, with one exception, they are not adequate to justify strong contempt.

INTENTIONAL OBJECTS

But first, the "globalizing" objection needs to be clarified. As I understand it, it targets an interpretation of contempt as bearing on the individual as a whole rather than a specific action or characteristic of that individual. That might be taken to commit the common mistake of confounding different categories of intentional objects.

The logical structure of most standard emotions involves different categories of intentional objects. Confusing these different sorts of objects has been at the root of at least one significant mistake in the history of philosophy. It underlies the preposterous conception of love put forward by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, in which Plato concludes that once we realize that the beloved boy is loved for his beauty, we are entitled to discard him in favor of that most unlikely rival, his own beauty, and ultimately Beauty itself.

Common sense and a modest application of grammatical analysis will establish that if we keep certain distinctions in mind, that strange view cannot get off the ground. The boy is the target of my love, and his beauty, for which (we may grant) he is loved, is the focus of the lover's attention and perhaps the causally effective property that makes him lovable. If my love is to be fitting, moreover, then the boy must indeed possess the characteristic identified as the formal object that defines that emotion. But there is no need to switch my affection from the boy to Beauty itself.¹ In support of this commonsense view, consider what we would say if someone claimed they used to think they liked ice-cream, but now realized they did not; instead what they liked was the taste of ice-cream. Surely, we find that just silly. The ice-cream is not in competition with its own taste. Neither is the boy competing for love with his own beauty. Similarly, one might protest, contempt, like love, targets a person, but it does so because my attention has focused on the defects that make her inferior.

Should we then conclude that when contempt is accused of being "globalizing," this is the result of a similar confusion? No. In both the cases of love and contempt, more is at stake than a mere confusion of target and focus.

THE CONTINUUM OF LOVE AND CONTEMPT

The case of love affords an apposite analogy, for two reasons. First, if we consider the range of attitudes that a person can inspire, we might find it plausible to say that love and contempt are polar opposites on a continuum that measures respect. Love focuses intensely on the autonomous individual core of a unique individual, while contempt ignores it entirely. Mere respect is the minimal threshold condition for regarding a person as an autonomous agent.

How much autonomy does anyone ever actually have? David Velleman (1999) has argued that the proper object of love is the other's core autonomous self. While unconvincing as an account of love, this is suggestive in inviting us to regard love as a sort of mathematical limit of respect. But if autonomy admits of degrees, then so do love and respect, and if respect is a minimal condition of love, then contempt lies below that threshold.² In this perspective, then, contempt is the absolute antithesis of love. And although respect is not yet love, it amounts first, perhaps, to the acknowledgement of a certain kind of universal equality with a Kantian flavor. At the other end of this continuum of respect, contempt withholds respect altogether, and in that way fails to recognize the other as a human agent.

What this rather hazy metaphor of a continuum of respect is intended to convey is that we can, for both love and contempt, make good sense of the claim that one's attitude of respect admits of degrees, and is responsive to properties or features of a person, as distinct from the person herself. It is one thing to love a person, and another to love her generosity, her beauty, her rebelliousness, or her virtuous character. Similarly, it is one thing to say one feels contemptuous of a man's cowardice, or disloyalty, or inability to fulfill some important obligation; it is another to say, on the basis of those failings, that one has contempt for the man himself. Only in the latter case, might one be tempted to regard the target of one's contempt as no longer worthy of being regarded as a person. This would make "strong contempt" also into something like a limiting case, in the sense that it would lead to a kind of disregard which, while not exactly indifference, might no longer qualify as an emotion.³

This, in effect, is the burden of Abramson's (2010) argument against the view that contempt is necessarily globalizing. She writes:

The central worry at issue here thus remains: globalizing attitudes preclude appreciation of someone's redeeming qualities. Save for barely conceivable cases of monolithically shameful, contemptible, and/or disdainful characters, it seems reasonable to think that the global forms of these attitudes—those directed toward a person as a whole, or the whole of their character—are always morally inappropriate. And contempt, shame, and disdain only come in the global form, or so the thought goes. (194)

In fact, Abramson argues, common contempt does not necessarily target a person. It can target some trait, deed or aspect of a person instead, which is not the same as targeting the person because of that trait. In other words, while her allusion to "monolithically rotten characters" may seem to allow for some "barely conceivable" exceptions (198), her discussion focuses on common rather than global contempt.

But this leaves open the question of contempt's moral worth. Is it ever morally right to target the person rather than the person's act or trait? Christians preach, though rarely practice, the doctrine that one should "hate the sin, but love the sinner." If, as Abramson argues, it is possible for contempt, as for hatred, to target the sin, not the sinner, are we always obligated to limit ourselves in that way?

CONTEMPT AS A REACTIVE ATTITUDE

There is reason to think that contempt differs in this regard from other attitudes that can target either the sin or the sinner. The reason, adduced by both Mason and Abramson, is that contempt is a reactive attitude. In the sense elaborated by Peter Strawson (1962), reactive attitudes are responses that treat another human being as an autonomous rational agent who expects to be held responsible for what she does. A reactive attitude is independent of the opinion one might have as to the objective reality of free-will, or on the causes that explain the behavior for which an agent is being held responsible. Thus, "regarding someone as within the scope of the reactive attitudes is constitutive of regarding him as a moral agent" (Mason 2003, 245). In a spirit of existentialist aspiration, one might go further and say that in adopting a reactive stance we assume that ought implies can, but without being committed to its contrapositive: although ought implies can, cannot does not exonerate from ought. Respect for another as an autonomous agent entails granting them a right to be blamed (Houston 1992), even if they couldn't really help themselves.

One further differentia, according to Abramson, distinguishes contempt from other reactive attitudes such as anger or resentment: the latter are essentially second person attitudes, in the sense explored by Stephen Darwall (Darwall 2006):

When we are angry or resentful toward someone, we do not simply make a claim about her responsibility; rather . . . we hold her accountable. To do so . . . we adopt a second-person standpoint. The relevant contrast here is with aesthetic judgments of persons or spectator's judgments . . . To regard someone as "ugly" I need not think of myself as someone who does, or even could, interact with her. The standpoint from which properly moralized contempt is felt is not spectatorial in this way. Properly moralized contempt presents someone as "to be avoided" with respect to specific sphere(s) of interpersonal interactions. (Abramson 2010, 208)

If this is right, then there is indeed something special about contempt. Even if it can be local rather than globalizing, it affects one's second person connection to another person. Strong contempt, in particular, excludes the target person altogether from being held responsible as an autonomous human agent. Although it is directed at a person, contempt breaks from the second person point of view; it shifts into a spectatorial perspective in which the other is no longer seen as a possible interlocutor.

An objector might interject: does not common contempt admit of degrees? A person might be regarded as lower than one person but not as low as another. In an aristocratic or caste culture, the target of one person's contempt can usually find someone lower still whom they may comfortably hold in contempt. Corresponding to this common notion of contempt is a notion of appraisal respect which also admits of degrees.⁴ A person might earn appraisal respect by their talent or achievements, and having earned it, they might also forfeit it; but although I might no longer respect an artist who has, as we say, "sold out" for money or fame, that does not necessarily amount to (or warrant) a radical dismissal of that person from the basic form of recognition respect. But respect can admit of degrees even when it isn't earned. That is the point of rank or "degree / Whereto we see in all things nature tends," says Iago—who should know. As William Miller characterizes it, aristocratic contempt looks like the contempt of complacency, never doubting their superiority of rank. It is the contempt of the master for the man, the lord for the villein, the lady for the maid. Those who are lower simply do not merit strong affect. They are noticed only sufficiently to notice that they are not notice worthy (Miller 1995, 482).

In contrast to common contempt, strong contempt does not admit of degrees. It is a radical rejection of the target from the respect normally due to a fellow human

being. To hold someone in contempt in this sense is to deem them to have forfeited their claim to be treated as responsible autonomous agents. It is to withhold from them basic recognition respect, as opposed to appraisal respect, either of the earned kind or the sort that comes with social rank.

Although strong contempt is absolute, the difference between it and common contempt, which correspond roughly to the loss of these two forms of respect, may look like a difference of degree. While the master really does tend to lose sight of the humanity of the serf, he may, like Tolstoy, be subject to occasional fits of Christian fellow-feeling. Strong contempt is like a mathematical limit that can be indefinitely approached without ever being reached. But when it is achieved, one can think of it as effecting a radical break between two qualitatively different states. I will shortly say more about the question of how absolute, on-or-off, strong contempt might relate to grounds that can be more or less strong. First, however, I turn to the views of Michelle Mason, our second champion of contempt.

CONTEMPT AS A "MORAL EMOTION"

Drawing again on Strawson's criteria for reactive resentment, Mason lists four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for "properly focused" contempt:

1. It is directed at a person as a response to his violation of an interpersonal ideal of the person,
2. which violation stems from a morally evaluable character trait,
3. the expression of which character trait is one for which the agent is appropriately held responsible, for example,
 - a) the agent was not on the occasion of acting innocently ignorant of causing offense or injury, compelled, or forced,
 - b) the agent was not on the occasion of acting "not herself,"
 - c) the agent is not psychologically abnormal or morally undeveloped, and
4. there exists a legitimate expectation or demand that the agent approximate the interpersonal ideal. (Mason 2003, 250)

Like Abramson, Mason is careful to avoid the notorious "moralistic fallacy" against which D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) have warned: "although contempt may be fitting a person in virtue of evidence concerning his or her character, that is not sufficient to establish its moral propriety; there may be overriding moral reasons that make it morally objectionable in the circumstances" (Mason 2003, 237). She goes further, however, in characterizing contempt as a "moral emotion."

The term moral emotion invites confusion. First, it might be construed evaluatively, contrasting with immoral. Some have spoken of compassion as a "moral emotion," for example, meaning one that is morally good. Generosity would be a moral emotion in that sense; by contrast, most of us are inclined to think of some emotions, such as envy or spite, as being *prima facie* morally reprehensible. Contempt has sometimes been counted among the latter sort; but in the recent literature, as I noted above, some have been eager to rehabilitate such *prima facie* nasty emotions in general (Tappolet et al. 2018). If Mason intends the above phrase evaluatively, she is directly contradicting the view that contempt is inherently nasty. In the categorial sense, however, a morally evil emotion would also be a moral emotion—that is, one that it makes sense to evaluate from the moral point of view. In this sense, spite might also be a "moral emotion"; and the application of the term to contempt would amount simply to asserting that it can be assessed in moral terms. This is not true of just any emotion: fear, for example, may be irrational, as in fear of flying, but it wouldn't make sense to say it is immoral. Cutting across this source of ambiguity, it can also be unclear whether the qualifier "moral" pertains to the judgment implicit in the emotion, or whether it constitutes a judgment on the emotion itself. (Blame might be said to be "moral" in the first sense; compassion might claim to be a moral emotion in the latter sense.)

Mason seems to construe the term "moral attitude" in both these last senses. A moral emotion, she specifies, is "moral both in the sense that it is an attitude possessing moral content and in the sense that it can be, in what I dub its properly focused form, a morally justified attitude to take toward another" (Mason 2003, 235).

The list quoted above purports to give us criteria for making contempt fitting to its target. Two more requirements that must be satisfied if the attitude is to be morally justified are as follows:

5. The attitude is directed by an agent who does not possess a similar fault or, if he does, is committed to regarding himself in the relevant circumstances as likewise contemptible in virtue of it.
6. The attitude is responsive to evidence that would count in favor of forgiveness or some other relevant change in attitude. (Mason 2003, 253)

As for whether contempt is "globalizing," or whether it can selectively target some attribute of the target, that is not determined by Mason's list of conditions.

We can infer from condition 6, however, that strong contempt will never be morally justified. For strong contempt dismisses the other as a second-person interlocutor. It is therefore by definition not "responsive to evidence," including evidence of change.

Such responsiveness might still, however, be compatible with common contempt. As we have seen, common contempt admits of degrees; and one might think of strong contempt as just the maximal degree of common contempt. In fact, however, the two seem to be different in kind. To explain why, let me draw a parallel between the dismissal of another as an autonomous agent involved in strong contempt, and the dismissal of potential counter-evidence to a settled view.

THE EPISTEMIC PARALLEL

As we saw a moment ago, there is a qualitative break between the grounds for contempt, which admit of degrees, and strong contempt, which is either on or off. The sort of break I have in mind might be compared to a familiar problem in epistemology: the question of when we can legitimately ignore a view or theory. Just as it is always logically possible for some crackpot view to turn out to be true, it might be suggested, so it is always possible for someone who has demonstrated their "monolithically rotten" character to surprise us. When are we entitled to give up on someone, and shift from low appraisal respect to a withdrawal of recognitional respect?

Many of us regard some questions as definitively settled: the earth is not flat; astrology is not a science; humans are products of evolution; there are no gods or immaterial souls. Taking that stance exposes us, from those who disagree, to charges of closed-mindedness.⁵ Yet there comes a time when the balance of evidence is such, on some issue, that it would seem irrational—a waste of precious time—to continue assessing fresh evidence. Something like this constitutes Hume's argument against the reasonableness of believing in any particular miracle: however large the number of those who claimed to have witnessed that miracle might be, it is always inferior to the weight of evidence that supports the law of nature or generalization contradicted by the alleged miracle. Alternatively, if the weight of the evidence for the law is wanting, it may be that there was no genuine law there in the first place, and so its supposed violation is no miracle (Hume 1975, Sec. 10).

One can quibble about the criteria for such a refusal to consider new evidence: obviously they can be more or less reasonable. But, actually, the two states correspond to qualitatively different mental functions, both misleadingly called "belief." One, sometimes called Bayesian belief, subjective probability, or degree of confidence, relates to what you do when you make decisions in accord with your wants or desires (Jeffrey 1965). It can approach certainty only asymptotically. The other, which you might call acceptance or assent, is the one used when we assume that a proposition can be taken as a premise in an inference. It is unqualified by probability, even when it

is accepted on the basis of less than conclusive evidence (de Sousa 1971). Attempting to set a threshold sufficient to warrant certainty leads to the well-known "lottery paradox": for any level at which you might set the threshold for full-fledged assent, you can arrange a fair lottery selling at least that number of tickets (Harman 1967). You are then warranted in assenting to "this ticket will lose" for every ticket; and the conjunction of those assertions contradicts your knowledge that some ticket will win. For purposes of efficient reasoning, however, a combination of probability and explanatory power on the one hand with a certain level of risk on the other is treated as sufficient to assert or deny a proposition without qualification.

Despite the analogy between the dismissal of a proposition and the dismissal of a person's claim to recognitional respect, there are three important disanalogies between the two cases. First, a false belief implicates only me, except insofar as what I do on the basis of it may affect others. Second, even the most improbable remains logically possible. That much is true of both sorts of dismissals. Relegating a person to the status of non-person has historically been done in several ways, from ostracism to shunning, to capital punishment; in any given case, it might have been based on an error. Facts don't change, although our information about them may change when the error is discovered. That holds for information about a person as for anything else: new information might earn a revision of one's considered view. Thus far, the objection to strong contempt is analogous to one of the more powerful objections to capital punishment: when a person is relegated to the status of a non-person without the possibility of appeal, there is always the risk that we have made a mistake; and that mistake involves more than merely saddling oneself with a false belief.

In the case of the denial of personhood, however, there is an additional possibility that might warrant a change of heart. For the target of the contempt might also change, in such a way as to produce not new information but radically new facts. This is the third and most important difference: even if I am right about the character of the person for whom I have contempt, I should allow for a change not of evidence but of facts. A person might grow out of being contemptible: "under some circumstances contempt might be overcome by new evidence of attitudes in the target person that deserve forgiveness" (Mason 2003, 256). This third difference seems crucial, for no amount of information about a person at one time can conclusively preclude a change of character or disposition at a later time. Sinners have repented and become saints. (One might have liked them better as sinners than as saints. That is surely illustrated by the fact that between pre-conversion sinner Augustine and post-conversion Saint

Augustine, the latter is so much more repellent than the former. But that does not affect the point.)

These disanalogies suggest that strong contempt for a person cannot be justified as easily as dismissing a crackpot theory. Even if it is possible to have some degree of common contempt for some character or action of a person, the globalizing and dismissive features of strong contempt do, after all, turn out to be incompatible with the Kantian duty to treat human beings as having "dignity" or absolute worth. For strong contempt does undeniably amount to treating as worthless something (a person) that the Kantian regards as having absolute worth. Hence the question posed by Thomas E. Hill: "Even if we grant that everyone is initially owed some respect as a human being, is there any reason to deny that some extremely bad characters, by their immoral deeds, forfeit all respect, justifying our viewing them with utter contempt?" (Hill 2000, 88). He argues that the answer can be positive; but we need to acknowledge that it is hard to refute a more cynical answer.

The reason we are moved by the Kantian objection, the cynical answer might go, is that we fear the consequences of admitting that the notion of unconditional worth, of dignity as contrasted with price, is little more than the ghost of a religious myth. It is a metaphysical fantasy that preserves the traces of the mythical individual soul rather as water for believers in homeopathy preserves the memory of substances of which no molecule remains. Only a conventional superstition supports the myth that "all men are created equal." But we fear that unless human life and dignity are held sacred, we will witness a second death of God in which "everything is permitted." As Yuval Harari has written, "Without recourse to eternal souls and a Creator God, it becomes embarrassingly difficult for liberals to explain what is so special about individual Sapiens" (Harari 2014, 231). And it remains unacceptable, Harari writes on the same page, to deny that humans have a metaphysical absolute worth that transcends their biological nature, because such a denial, with its stance of biological realism, is associated with Nazi ideology.

Before concluding this section, let me note one last important lesson that might be garnered from the epistemic parallel. In practice, how thoroughly we inquire into a crackpot idea depends on its relevance to our lives. About some facts—gossip about celebrities, perhaps, or abstruse details of some historical event—whether or not we get it right may be so unimportant that it is not worth wasting time on further investigation. Even a modicum of evidence might be quite sufficient to decide that a view is not worth giving any more time to, whether one decides to believe it, reject it, or suspend belief. On the other hand, a significant ideology deserves more thorough

scrutiny. Similarly, the importance of our attitude to a person might depend on the nature of the relationship that precedes it. When one encounters someone in an entirely casual way, there is no engagement in the first place; one is therefore not in the presence of any large stakes when one decides simply to ignore them.

Suppose you are at a concert or movie, and there is, in a crowded theatre, just one free seat. Next to it, a man has placed a coat on the vacant seat, and claims that it is taken. If at the end of the evening no one has come to claim it, you might be inclined to think the guarding of it unconscionable. One might deem that a sufficient justification for contempt. Such behavior, in a small way, exhibits a vice of superiority. Who does he think he is? How can he be so churlish? Of course, it's possible that his partner was genuinely delayed—perhaps had a serious accident—in which case you are the churlish one for thinking so ill of him on the basis of so little. But it hardly matters: you weren't about to have an important relationship with this man in any case. On the other hand, if you think you have discovered, after ten years of partnership, that someone has done something despicable, you ought to delve a little deeper before you allow yourself, as Camille does in Godard's film *Contempt* (Mason 2003, 236), to dismiss your partner as simply contemptible.

BELL'S JIU-JITSU

How, then, if we are not simply convinced by the cynical answer, should we argue that there is still some sense in which every member of *Homo sapiens* is a person in the relevant sense? The basis of Hill's neo-Kantian argument is that, well, we might be wrong about the target's contemptible nature, and only God can tell: "Which error would be worse? From a moral point of view, I suggest, it is generally worse to risk denying respect where it is due than to risk granting respect where it is not due" (Hill 2000, 108). I have found some reason, in the course of comparing the denial of respect to the dismissal of a view or theory, to think such a precautionary principle is a wise one. Nevertheless, perhaps we can find in contempt's third champion support for the intuition that contempt is sometimes although rarely justified.

Macalester Bell (2013) defines the formal object of contempt—setting out when contempt is fitting—as follows:

1. The target of contempt has failed to meet some standard that is part of the subject's personal baseline;
2. The failure to meet the standard implicates the whole person;
3. In light of the failure, the target of contempt has been rendered "low";

4. The failing is a reason to withdraw from the target of contempt.
(Bell 2013, 59)

I will not add to the worries expressed above about what the idea of "implicating the whole person" might mean. Assuming we can understand that phrase, Bell's conditions define the formal object of contempt, specifying when it is fitting in its own terms. As expected, these conditions also allow for contempt to be fitting without being morally justified. Like Abramson and Mason, Bell sets further conditions that will turn fitting contempt into justified contempt. But her conditions are more restrictive. In a kind of jiu-jitsu-like move, she argues that it is all and only those who are guilty of vices of superiority that deserve to be regarded with contempt. In effect, contempt is warranted just when it is a response to unwarranted contempt.

Strong contempt, as I have defined it, involves a withholding of basic recognitional respect. It entails treating a person as a non-person. The paradox lurking in this formulation is apparent: while we don't respect inanimate objects, neither do we hold them in contempt. Only a person can deserve contempt; and strong contempt denies its target the essential nature of persons. One who views another as no better than an insect need not hold insects in contempt. So, in the very act of dismissing someone from the class of those humans worthy of basic respect, you have to acknowledge her *prima facie* right to that respect. Contempt is reserved not for things but for people who have allowed themselves to become mere things. In other words, you have to respect someone as a person in order to dismiss them as unworthy of being so respected.

The paradox evaporates, however, if my willingness to treat her as a person is met with a vacuum because she has already withdrawn from the sort of second person connection on the basis of which a community of persons treat one another with mutual respect. That is the community of those that recognize in one another an agent capable of reactive attitudes in the second-person mode. What better reason for contempt, then, than that its target has already withdrawn from participation in the moral community? Those who are guilty of the vices of superiority have done just that. Thus, Macalester Bell's proposal seems to promise a reasonable accommodation, neither condoning contempt as an attitude of superiority, nor relying on abstruse Kantian metaphysics, and allowing her to identify the one sort of situation in which, despite the Kantian duty of respect, one might be justified in withholding respect in the mode of strong contempt.

But might not some other sorts of behavior qualify, on a par with vices of superiority? When the other seems to behave like an automaton, for example: in

fanaticism, or in a profound inability to regard others with minimal respect. Those things, if anything, seem to call for contempt. The answer is that again, in such cases, the contemptuous response might be mitigated by doubt, if not by compassion. We can never exclude the possibility that the other's weakness, or their aggression, or their lack of empathy, might stem from some trauma or some deficiency for which they bear no responsibility. In that case, settling for contempt might itself seem contemptible. Thus Bell's jiu-jitsu move might be effective in placing vices of superiority in a category of their own, which alone might make contempt morally acceptable.

TWO ODDITIES: UPWARD CONTEMPT, AND SELF-CONTEMPT

In general, then, I have failed to talk myself out of a qualified endorsement of the Kantian verdict on contempt. It remains, in almost all cases, a nasty emotion that is not to be condoned. The cases that satisfy Bell's conditions appear to be the only plausible exceptions. But there are two cases that might undermine the very notion of strong contempt: upward contempt, and self-contempt.

Upward contempt is "the contempt that the low have for the high . . . the contempt teenagers have for adults, women for men, servants for masters, workers for bosses, Jews for Christians, Blacks for Whites, uneducated for the educated, and so forth" (Miller 1995, 477). Here is Miller's vivid description of his confrontation with a mason whose tattoos, vulgarity of style and speech, and macho stance inspire him to contempt:

At the same time I was having feelings of contempt for him I was also . . . indulging in no small amount of self-contempt, for my lack of physicality, for my certainty that I could not win a fight with him, for my doubts about the social value of what I do, and for my feeling contemptuous of him while at the same time realising (or supposing) he was utterly untroubled by his contempt for me . . . I actually had to remind myself that he is of equal value with me, of the same dignity, and so forth. Moreover, he merited respect for the skill he had, and for doing his job well, for which indeed I did respect him. . . . Although I feel a sense of my own failure to live up to some high toned principles about human equality, dignity, and value, I also experience a genuine pleasure in thinking myself superior to those I feel contempt for. (Miller 1995, 478-9)

Two things seem remarkable about this confession. First, the contempt that Miller experiences—and disapproves of—targets the mason on the basis of certain characteristics. The mason also has other characteristics that Miller respects. It is

therefore quite compatible with Abramson's observation that the target of contempt need not be identified with the focal properties that motivate it. Second, Miller's confession implies not only that he resembles the mason in taking social status rather too seriously, but also that he is uneasy about his assumption that certain ranges of qualities are more valuable than others. The mason's acknowledged superiority in strength and brawn, as well as his professional skill, are worth little in comparison with Miller's superiority in intellect, social status and sophistication, of which a crucial mark is his ability to feel embarrassed about his own contempt. There is nothing specifically moral, however, about that particular hierarchy of values. We therefore can understand it as a form of common contempt, making no pretense to being a moral attitude in Mason's sense. By contrast, the second order self-contempt to which Miller owns up does seem to count as a moral attitude, in that it is based on what he himself regards as morally unacceptable.

One reason to object morally to contempt is that it exaggerates merit no less than social position (Hill 2000, 89–90). Miller's mason feels contempt for the educated, well-off, well-dressed, upper-class law professor; he takes him, perhaps, to have had too easy a life, and to be too comfortable with privileges that he hasn't done much to merit. Miller's reciprocating contempt is grounded in class superiority, which is by definition unearned. Far from being ashamed of their unearned privileges, however, aristocrats in hierarchic traditions despised those whose money was earned in the professions, or even worse, in commerce. In this perspective, by Bell's criterion, Miller may deserve contempt for his vice of superiority; the mason does not.

What complicates this is that Miller experiences self-contempt, which in the light of my characterization is a puzzling phenomenon. Michelle Mason remarks that its very "possibility suggests that one who directs contempt at another does not thereby necessarily view himself as superior" (Mason 2003 250). The reason, presumably, is that one cannot be superior to oneself. But this seems unconvincing, even for the ordinary form of contempt. For in many situations we have second order desires, emotions, or evaluations. The second-order I looks down on the first-order desire or emotion as inferior by the standards of the second-order self.

This does not seem excessively paradoxical, though we are not quite sure how to cash out the metaphor in terms of either phenomenology or neuroscience. As for how Mason's remark would apply to strong contempt, that would seem even more problematic. For to deny oneself the status of an autonomous human being seems uncomfortably close to what might be a syndrome known to psychiatry: analogous, perhaps, to Cotard's delusion, the peculiar condition in which people assert that

they are dead (Soniak 2014). So there remains something paradoxical about "self-contempt," if the word is used in my strong sense. For just as hypocrisy, as La Rochefoucauld remarked, is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, so does the moral force of Miller's self-contempt bear witness to the force in him of the standards he blames himself for having violated. Aristotle thought the depraved or *akolastos*, who lacked a desire for the right ends, worse than the akratic, who acted despite such a desire. If either is worthy of contempt, it would be the *akolastos* (Aristotle 1984, vii-4). Miller's attitude is closer to the akratic's.

CONCLUSION

Most of my discussion has zeroed in on strong contempt, which I have argued is not the kind that either Mason or Abramson, unlike Bell, actually defends. But it is not clear how often people actually indulge in strong contempt. The common kind, by contrast, is all around us. It plays a significant role in social life and its regulation. We saw that there is a threshold of probability (and abductive evidence, in the form of inferences to the best explanation) that we deem sufficient in practice for asserting or rejecting a given proposition absolutely for purposes of argument and inference. Similarly, we doubtless apply certain tests, whether consciously or not, before deciding to ignore someone's claim to be human. We do so, for example, when they are completely unwilling or unable to take another person's claim to humanity seriously. This is what I have referred to as Bell's jiu-jitsu move: only for unwarranted contempt is contempt warranted. In other sorts of cases, I have acknowledged that strictly speaking, we are never morally entitled to snap to strong unconditional contempt—or at least, there is no really satisfactory basis for such a verdict. Insofar as strong contempt is an intrinsically moral emotion it is never fitting unless it is also morally right. By contraposition, since it is never morally right, neither is it ever truly apt.

The argument for this conclusion applies strictly only to strong contempt. I have tried to show that both Mason's and Abramson's treatments are aimed at common contempt rather than strong contempt. The former is, in fact, what is usually intended in most contexts. In that weaker sense, it is logically possible for contempt to be warranted, at least as far as the two Kantian objections considered are concerned. The reason is simply that those objections have force only against strong contempt, which neither Mason nor Abramson defends. But just as the conditions under which assenting to a proposition unconditionally vary with the importance of what is at stake in the argument, so the degree of relationship and the importance of what is at stake set up a sort of sliding scale. The more a person matters to us in the first place,

Notes

1. For a taxonomy of "objects of emotion," read de Sousa 1987.
2. That would make sense, perhaps, of the puzzling injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself, which, as Adam Phillips (2015) recently recalled, Jacques Lacan once suggested was a joke, by which Jesus meant to allude to the fact that people actually hate themselves.
3. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.
4. The distinction between appraisal respect and recognition respect is due to Stephen Darwall (1977). Only the first admits of degrees, and is related to the actual qualities of its target. Only the second can be held to be morally required in relation to any human agent.
5. For a comedic take on "You're so sure of your position/But you're just closed-minded," watch Tim Minchin's spoken poem, "Storm" (Minchin 2009).

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