HARD FEELINGS

The Moral Psychology of Contempt

Macalester Bell

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction: The Moral Importance of Contempt 1

1. What Is Contempt? 25
    1.1 Contempt and Feeling Theories of Emotion 26
    1.2 Intentionality, Rationality, and Cognitive Theories of Emotion 33
    1.3 Contempt's Evaluative Presentation 37
    1.4 Active and Passive Contempt 48
    1.5 Contempt, Hatred, and Disgust 51
    1.5.1 Contempt and Disgust 52
    1.5.2 Contempt and Hatred 55
    1.6 Potential Problem Cases 59
    1.6.1 Contempt for Non-Persons 59
    1.6.2 Self-Contempt 61

2. Contempt as a Fitting Globalist Emotion 64
2.1 Can Contempt Ever Fit Its Target? 65
2.2 Defending Contempt against the Fittingness Objection 73
2.3 Fitting Evaluative Prioritizations 78
2.4 Relationships, Fittingness, and Fitting Attitude Accounts of Value 89

3. Contempt and the Vices of Superiority 96
3.1 Superbia and Vices of Superiority 97
3.2 Hypocrisy and Arrogance 110
3.3 Contempt as an Answer to Vices of Superiority 126
3.4 Cowardice, Stupidity, and Lightheartedness 132

4. The Moral Value of Contempt 137
4.1 Passive Contempt in Aristotle and Nietzsche 138
4.2 Contempt's Aptness Conditions 147
4.3 Contempt's Moral Value 151
4.3.1 Contempt's Instrumental Value 152
4.3.2 Contempt's Non-Instrumental Value 160
4.4 Challenges to an Ethic of Contempt 165
4.4.1 Contempt's Globalism and Aptness 165
4.4.2 Respect-Based Arguments against Contempt 168
4.4.3 Contempt and Comparisons 177
4.4.4 Withdrawal and Moral Address 183
4.5 Do We Have an Obligation to Contemn? 189

5. Contempt, Racism, and Civility's Limits 197
5.1 Contempt and Anti-Black Racism: The Case of the Obama Bucks Cartoon 198
5.2 Race-Based Contempt as a Vice 200
5.3 Race-Based Contempt as Unfitting 208
5.4 Race-Based Contempt as Inapt 213
5.5 Contempt and Civility 217

6. Contempt, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation 227
6.1 A Problem with the Standard Account of Forgiveness 228
6.2 The Fundamental Features of Forgiveness 235
6.3 The Standard Account of Our Reasons to Forgive 238
6.3.1 Repentance 240
6.3.2 Excuses and Good Intentions 242
6.4 Reasons to Overcome Contempt through Forgiveness 245
6.4.1 Character Transformation 245
6.4.2 Shame 249
6.5 Do We Genuinely Forgive in Overcoming Contempt? 254
6.6 Contempt, Symbolic Reparations, and Social Reconciliation 259

Conclusion: "Contempt Is Not a Thing to be Despised" 272

Bibliography *277*
Index *289*

Introduction

The Moral Importance of Contempt

> The subject of ethics is how we ought to live; and that is not reducible to what we ought to do or try to do, and what we ought to cause or produce. It includes just as fundamentally what we should be for and against in our hearts, what and how we ought to love and hate. It matters morally what we are for and what we are against, even if we do not have the power to do much for it or against it, and even if it was not by trying that we came to be for it or against it.
>
> Robert Adams

> A kind Providence has placed in our breasts a hatred of the unjust and cruel; in order that we may preserve ourselves from cruelty and injustice. They, who bear cruelty, are accomplices in it. The pretended gentleness, which excludes that charitable rancour, produces an indifference, which is half an approbation. They never will love where they ought to love, who do not hate where they ought to hate.
>
> Edmund Burke

Injustice and vice are widespread and call for some response; moral agents should, at the very least, *stand against* injustice and vice, and cultivate attitudes of resistance. As the epigraphs above bring out, what we love and hate are important aspects of the

moral life, and when it comes to standing against immorality, it matters who and how we hate.[1] Hatred is, however, a rather blunt instrument. There are many different attitudes that may play a role in standing against someone or something, and other so-called "negative emotions" also offer ways of confronting immorality.[2] In this book I explore contempt's role in standing against a range of faults. Contempt certainly has its dangers, and inapt contempt is at the heart of several vices, but it also has an important defensive role to play in our moral lives.

Over the past thirty years, philosophers have become increasingly interested in the emotions, yet contempt has garnered relatively little philosophical attention.[3] This neglect may be due to the widely held assumption that it is a "nasty" or "immoral" emotion that we ought to strive to extirpate as much as is possible. Moreover, contempt strikes some as a bit passé; discussions of the morality of contempt may seem more at home in the novels of Jane Austen than in current debates within moral psychology.[4]

1. Aristotle articulated a similar idea: "[E]njoying and hating the right things seems to be most important for virtue of character." *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 1172a.

2. Kristján Kristjánsson argues that the term "negative emotion" has six distinct senses. See "On the Very Idea of 'Negative Emotions,'" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 33, no. 4 (2003): 356–357. I use the term to refer to a certain class of emotions that are, as Kristjánsson puts it, "generally evaluated negatively" (357). Contempt is clearly a negative emotion in this sense. But I argue that contempt is not a negative emotion in the sense that it is always irrational, unfitting, or morally inappropriate. For skepticism about the usefulness of distinguishing between negative and positive emotions, see Robert Solomon and Lori D. Stone, "On 'Positive' and 'Negative' Emotions," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 32, no. 4 (2002): 417–435.

3. Three notable exceptions are Michelle Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," *Ethics* 113, no. 2 (2003): 234–272; Kate Abramson, "A Sentimentalist's Defense of Contempt, Shame, and Disdain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion,* ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and William Ian Miller, who has written on the topic of "upward contempt" and democracy in *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4. As Abramson points out, philosophers have not always been reticent to include contempt in the class of "moral emotions"; sentimentalists such as Hume and

I hope to show that contemporary philosophers have been remiss in ignoring contempt. While it may seem old fashioned, and while some varieties certainly deserve their nasty reputations, contempt has an important role to play in how we live our lives today. We should abhor those who are overly contemptuous or contemptuous for the wrong reasons, and we ought to be mindful of contempt's dark side, but we should also recognize contempt's virtues and value. Contempt is the best response to a range of faults that have the potential to impair our personal and moral relations. If we refrain from cultivating apt contempt, we will be unable to stand against these faults.

What is contempt? And what distinguishes the kind of contempt that has a positive role to play in our moral lives from the kind of contempt that is morally abhorrent? If, as many now think, we owe all persons respect qua persons, how could contempt ever be apt? What implications does a defense of the moral value of contempt have for our understanding of the virtue of civility? Do we ever have good reason to overcome contempt through a process of forgiveness? These are some of the questions that I take up in this book.

Contempt is very much at home in, and helps to sustain, rigidly hierarchical societies. If this hierarchy should begin to break down, concerns about the moral propriety of showing contempt are often raised. We can find examples of this across history and cultures. For example, as the West became increasingly egalitarian, we see a marked increase in expressed anxiety about the dangerous consequences of revealing one's contempt for another. Over and over again in his celebrated correspondence with his

Shaftesbury characterize contempt as an important mode of disapprobation. However, these philosophers do not offer much by way of an analysis of the nature of contempt, nor do they take up the question of what contempt does or when it has (or lacks) moral value.

son, Lord Chesterfield cautions the young man about the dangers of inadvertently showing his contempt:

> However frivolous a company may be, still, while you are among them, do not show them, by your inattention, that you think them so; but rather take their tone, and conform in some degree to their weakness, instead of manifesting your contempt for them. There is nothing that people bear more impatiently, or forgive less, than contempt; and an injury is much sooner forgotten than an insult.[5]

And a bit later Chesterfield notes:

> Wrongs are often forgiven but contempt never is. Our pride remembers it forever. It implies a discovery of weaknesses, which we are much more careful to conceal than crimes.[6]

Contempt must be concealed since it has the power to rupture the bonds that help hold society together. Reputed to be a rather contemptuous man himself, Chesterfield clearly takes contempt seriously, and he recognizes both its temptations and its dangers.

Since contemporary Western societies are significantly less socially stratified than Chesterfield's eighteenth century Great Britain, one might have thought that contempt would have, over the years, become less common and less important. But even in relatively egalitarian societies we still harbor, express, fear, and occasionally cheer on contempt. Contempt-talk may have receded

5. *Lord Chesterfield's Letters,* ed. David Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46–47. Also quoted in Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 216.

6. Ibid., 85. The first two sentences are also quoted in Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 295, n. 16.

from the vernacular (people today are more likely to refer to being "dissed" than "contemned"), but contempt and concerns about its expression have not faded away. Many of our everyday moral pronouncements and aesthetic criticisms are expressions of contempt (e.g., "He is such a loser," or "What a jerk," or "He's a tool!" or "Whatever!"), and while psychologists have discovered that American test subjects have difficulty providing a precise definition of the word "contempt," the same subjects have no trouble matching contempt's characteristic facial expression to the appropriate situational antecedents.[7]

The dangers of contempt are familiar, and as Chesterfield astutely warned his son more than 250 years ago, we often negatively assess those who are inaptly contemptuous of others. In the 2004 presidential campaign, for example, several pundits remarked upon George W. Bush's smirk. Commentators were troubled by Bush's half-smile because this particular facial expression is characteristic of contempt. Daniel Hill, a psychologist specializing in the analysis of facial expressions, remarked, "the conundrum for Bush is that on one hand he smiles genuinely quite commonly, which is nice and upbeat, but it's combined often with contempt. You can see that either as cockiness or as smugness, depending on how you're oriented to him."[8]

As in Chesterfield's time, expressing contempt for the wrong person or group can have serious repercussions. In a case that received a great deal of media attention, the radio personality Don Imus lost his job after making what some saw as egregiously contemptuous comments about the Rutgers women's basketball

7. Erika L. Rosenberg and Paul Ekman, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Judgment of Facial Expressions of Emotion," *Motivation and Emotion* 19, no. 2 (1995): 111–138.

8. John Tierney, "Of Smiles and Sneers," *New York Times*, July 18, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/18/politics/races/18points.html.

team, referring to them as "nappy-headed hos." In an editorial in the *New York Times*, Frank Rich writes:

> What Imus said about the Rutgers team landed differently, not least because his slur was aimed at young women who had no standing in the world of celebrity, and who had done nothing in public except behave as exemplary student athletes. The spectacle of a media star verbally assaulting them, and with a creepy, dismissive laugh, as if the whole thing were merely a disposable joke, was ugly. You couldn't watch it without feeling that some kind of crime had been committed. That was true even before the world met his victims. So while I still don't now whether Imus is a bigot, there was an *inhuman contempt* in the moment that sounded like hate to me.[9]

For many, Imus's expression of inapt and unmotivated contempt was so reprehensible that it justified CBS's decision to cancel his radio show.

While many people remarked on the calm and measured way in which the Rutgers women's basketball team responded to Imus's derogatory remarks, we know all too well that targets may strike back at their contemnors in highly destructive ways. In 2005 the world watched with horror as people around the globe were killed in protests after a Dutch newspaper printed cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist with a bomb hidden in his turban. Many Muslims were of the opinion that the cartoons expressed contempt for them as Muslims and even for the Prophet himself. This feeling of offence led to violent protests that resulted in the deaths of more than one hundred people.

9. Frank Rich, "Everybody Hates Don Imus," *New York Times*, April 15, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/opinion/15rich.html?scp=1&sq=Everybody%20Hates%20Don%20Imus&st=cse (emphasis added).

Our sensitivity to expressions of contempt is reflected in many legal systems. The oldest legal prohibition of hatred and contempt comes from the law of seditious libel that prohibits "all writings . . . which tend to bring into hatred or contempt the king, the Government, or the constitution as by law established."[10] In our own legal system, those who express contempt for a presiding judge or for the court more generally can be charged with contempt. Those held in contempt face fines and incarceration. In Great Britain, blasphemy and blasphemous libel were only recently abolished. And while the First Amendment protects expressions of contempt in the United States, a person defamed by contemptuous speech can seek damages through the courts.

But while we are cognizant of its dangers, contempt does sometimes seem to be a *morally apt* response. On February 10, 2011, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak addressed his nation and the world in a highly anticipated speech. Mubarak's address came after three weeks of national protest, following a successful revolution in Tunisia. Egyptian protesters called on Mubarak to step down, and demanded free and fair elections. Throughout the day, it was widely reported that Mubarak's speech would include a declaration of his resignation, but in what some saw as a moment of arrogance and defiance, he boldly proclaimed his unwillingness to heed the protesters' calls for his resignation:

> I say again that I lived for the sake of this country, preserving its responsibility and trust. Egypt will remain above all and above everyone. It will remain so until I hand over this trust and pole. This is the goal, the objective, the responsibility and

10. Henry Coleman Folkard, *The Law of Slander and Libel,* 7th ed. (London: Butterworth & Co., 1908), 371. Quoted in Robert Post "Hate Speech," in *Extreme Speech and Democracy,* ed. Ivan Hare and James Weinstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124.

> the duty. It is the beginning of life, its journey, and its end. It will remain a country dear to my heart. It will not part with me and I will not part with it until my passing.[11]

Many of those gathered in Tahrir Square responded by waving their shoes in the air, and people around the world cheered on what they saw as the crowd's apt response to an arrogant and defiant dictator. In Egypt, as in much of the world, to show someone the sole of your shoe is a paradigmatic gesture of contempt. While those gathered to hear the speech likely felt a complex mixture of emotions, what stood out most clearly was the protesters' scorn for Mubarak and his administration.

Were the protesters right to dismiss Mubarak with contempt? Was it appropriate for others to cheer on the protesters' contempt? Contempt can be a positive moral accomplishment insofar as it answers certain faults, and many seemed to think that Mubarak's arrogance and defiance merited the people's contempt. However, it is difficult to account for contempt's positive value using the tools of contemporary moral theory. Contempt, contemporary critics allege, has no role to play in our moral lives. Ethicists writing today emphasize egalitarian values: everyone, no matter what their gender, race, social position, or history of moral improprieties and vice must be accorded the same kind of basic consideration and regard; everyone has dignity and is owed a modicum of respect. Since contempt is a dismissive and insulting attitude that manifests *disregard* for its target, it has, according to these critics, absolutely no role to play in modern moral theory or in contemporary life more broadly.

I stand with the shoe wavers and their champions, and I will defend an *ethic of contempt* in this book. I will argue that contempt

11. "Egypt unrest: Full text of Hosni Mubarak's speech," BBC News, February 10, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-middle-east-12427091.

is an apt response to those who evince what I will call the "vices of superiority." These vices impair our personal and moral relations, and contempt offers the best way of *answering* the damage wrought by these vices. While contempt may not seem to have a home amid the egalitarian values characteristic of contemporary moral theories, this shows the limitations of the standard interpretations of these theories. As moral agents, we must confront all kinds of immorality, and in some circumstances, we *ought* to harbor (and show) contempt for persons.[12]

Some will resist this conclusion and insist upon an *anti-contempt ethic*. These critics vociferously deny that contempt has any positive role to play in our moral lives. Those who defend an anti-contempt ethic may do so for a number of reasons: some may argue that all emotions are capricious and irrational, and therefore have no place in our moral lives; others may argue that seemingly "positive" emotions like love and gratitude are necessary components of an adequate moral psychology, but "negative" emotions like contempt ought to be driven out. However, these are now minority positions. Many of those who defend an anti-contempt ethic think that other negative emotions, particularly resentment and indignation, do have positive roles to play in confronting injustice. We might describe these theorists as defending an "ethic of resentment" and rejecting an ethic of contempt.[13] Those who subscribe to an ethic of resentment need not maintain that resentment structures all of morality, but they

12. Or, more precisely, we ought to strive to *cultivate* feelings of apt contempt. I acknowledge that we cannot, though sheer force of will, immediately come to have (or eradicate) particular emotions; we are, to some degree, passive subjects of emotion. If ought implies can, then we shouldn't say that people ought to feel (or eliminate) their emotions. Nevertheless, we do have control over whether we choose to cultivate certain emotions, and I aim to show that we ought to strive to cultivate apt contempt.

13. Defenders of an ethic of resentment include R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge,

do see it as having a crucial role to play in an adequate normative system. According to its defenders, resentment is a way of addressing a claim or making a demand: if you intentionally step on my foot and I respond with resentment, I am making a claim about how I deserve to be treated and, through my resentment, I address this claim to you.[14] My resentment presupposes that you are the kind of creature that can be held accountable for your actions, that I am the kind of being that can be wronged, and that in intentionally stepping on my foot, you have wronged me. My resentment seeks an exculpating explanation of your behavior or contrition and reparation for the wrong done. In short, resentment is partially constitutive of the stance of holding people responsible for their wrongdoing.

Defenders of an ethic of resentment are right to stress resentment's important role in holding people accountable for their actions. But an ethic of resentment cannot, by itself, offer a way to confront all forms of immorality. We ought to hold people accountable for who they are as well as for what they've done, and an ethic of contempt offers the best way of answering a range of vices.

The vast majority of those who defend an ethic of resentment consider contempt a pernicious emotion lacking any redeeming features. Why is contempt dismissed even by those who defend an ethic of resentment?

Many think that contempt is always disvaluable because of its tendency to bring about negative consequences; indeed, some persons respond to contempt with violence, and political

MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Stephen Darwall argues that resentment has a special role to play in the second-personal stance characteristic of morality, but he suggests that other emotions may also be second-personal forms of address. See *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

14. See Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*, 72.

theorists have long cautioned their readers to be wary of the dangerous consequences of contempt. Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, warns that a "a ruler must avoid contempt as if it were a reef."[15] Thomas Hobbes was also troubled by contempt. Subjects who hold their rulers in contempt have the potential to topple the monarchy, and given Hobbes's emphasis on the importance of stability, he saw contempt as an especially dangerous emotion. In fact, Hobbes went so far as to declare it a law of nature that contempt should never be expressed:

> But because all signs of hatred and contempt provoke most of all to brawling and fighting, insomuch as most men would rather lose their lives (that I say not, their peace) than suffer slander; it follows in the seventh place, that it is prescribed by the law of nature, that no man, either by deeds or words, countenance or laughter, *do declare himself to hate or scorn another*. The breach of which law is called *reproach*.[16]

We are, Hobbes notes, extremely sensitive to perceived slights. Signs of contempt can be felt in "a word, a smile, a different opinion,

15. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Prince (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 64. Machiavelli's argument here echoes Aristotle's arguments in the *Politics*: Aristotle argues that new monarchies fail when their rulers come to be viewed with contempt or hatred. See *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1312b.

16. Hobbes, *De Cive,* in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. 2, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839), chap. 3, sec. 12. Emphasis in original. Hobbes describes the dangers of contempt in the *Leviathan* as follows: "Again, men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself, and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage, and from others, by the example." *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668,* ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) pt. 1, chap. 13.

and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their Persons, or by reflexion in the Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name."[17] Given our sensitivity to signs of contempt and its tendency to lead to social strife, we ought to do all that we can to avoid expressing contempt for others.

It is not just political philosophers who worry about contempt's negative consequences. Recently, the psychologist John Gottman has shown that married partners who respond to each other with contempt during arguments are far more likely to separate than those who express anger or frustration.[18] Wives whose husbands showed contempt for them believed that their marital problems were severe and could not be worked out, and were more likely to become ill over the course of the study.

Others argue that contempt is intrinsically disvaluable since it is incompatible with the respect we owe all persons as persons. Those who take this position often appeal to Immanuel Kant's criticism of contempt in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: "To be *contemptuous* of others (*contemnere*), that is, to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general, is in every case contrary to duty; for they are human beings."[19] Kant is worried about the types of gruesome punishments that express contempt, such as drawing and quartering, and letting people be torn to pieces by dogs.[20]

17. Hobbes, *Leviathan,* pt. 1, chap. 13.

18. See John Gottman and Robert Levenson, "How Stable is Marital Interaction Over Time?" *Family Process* 38, no. 2 (1999): 159–165; John Gottman, Robert Levenson, and Erica Woodin, "Facial Expressions During Marital Conflict," *Journal of Family Communication* 1, no. 1 (2001): 37–57; and John Gottman, *What Predicts Divorce?: The Relationship Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

19. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, with an introduction by Roger J. Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), AP463. Emphasis in original. As I argue in chap. 4, Kant's own position on the moral propriety of contempt is far more nuanced than this passage suggests. There is, I hope to show, room for apt contempt within a Kantian moral system.

20. Ibid.

Contemporary Kantians are troubled by the fact that contempt involves downward-looking comparative evaluations that appear to threaten the dignity of the target of contempt. Some commentators have insisted that a fully autonomous person ought to be unconcerned with the status of others within the moral community; according to these theorists, it is contrary to duty to look down on some persons in comparison to others.[21]

Other critics have argued against contempt's moral propriety because they claim it is essentially an *anti-social* emotion.[22] While anger tends to motivate direct confrontation with the offender, which can lead to social change, contempt tends to motivate psychological disengagement from the target and thus seems to stand as a formidable impediment to social progress. Given the withdrawal and disengagement characteristic of contempt, some have questioned whether contempt can ever serve as a form of *moral address*.[23]

Still others object to the way contempt presents its target. Contempt takes as its object *whole persons* and not simply persons' actions; it presents its targets as low and as all of one piece. Some see contempt's totalizing quality as a reason to dismiss it as always objectionable: since persons are multifaceted and complex, globalist emotions like contempt would seem to never *fit* their targets.[24]

Finally, there is a worry that members of stigmatized groups are especially vulnerable to the pain of being held in contempt.

21. Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 135.

22. See, for example, Jonathan Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of Affective Sciences,* ed. Richard J. Davidson, L. Klaus R. Scherer, and H. Hill Goldsmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 859.

23. Stephen Darwall raises this issue in *Second-Person Standpoint*, 67.

24. See, for example, John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

In fact, some have argued that contempt is at the heart of racist, sexist, and heterosexist systems of oppression.[25] Insofar as members of stigmatized groups are especially vulnerable to the pain associated with being a target of contempt, contempt would seem to have no place in the psychological repertoire of the morally mature.

Given these concerns about the apparent disvalue of contempt, it might seem reasonable to defend an anti-contempt ethic and strive to drive out all feelings of contempt. Against this, I argue that contempt—like resentment—has a crucially important role to play in the practice of morality. We must confront injustice and vice, and we should do so in a way that best mitigates their damage; given the way in which some vices impair moral relations, we ought to adopt an ethic of resentment as well as an ethic of contempt.[26]

What do critics of contempt mean when they claim it is inappropriate? We assess and criticize emotions along a number of distinct dimensions, and it may be helpful to distinguish these different forms of assessment:[27] first, emotions may be criticized when they do not *fit* their targets: you may, for example, be open to criticism for feeling fear in the absence of danger.[28] Unfitting emotions fail to correctly present the world. Second, an emotion may

25. See for example, David Haekwon Kim, "Contempt and Ordinary Inequality," in *Racism and Philosophy,* ed. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and J. L. A. Garcia, "The Heart of Racism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (1996): 5–45.

26. Nor is there any principled reason why we should exclude other hard feelings from our moral lives.

27. For a similar mapping of the terrain employing somewhat different terminology, see Karen Jones, "Emotional Rationality as Practical Rationality," in *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers,* ed. Cheshire Calhoun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

28. For a discussion of the different forms of affective appropriateness see Justin D' Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61, no.1 (2000): 65–90. As they point out, our emotions can be unfitting in terms of "size" or "shape" (73): an emotion

be open to criticism when it is not based on good evidence or is *unreasonable*. Consider, for example, the person who suffers from arachnophobia: given that most spiders are not dangerous, this person's fear is both unreasonable and unfitting. But even fitting emotions may be unreasonable. One may, for example, be terrified of brown recluse spiders because one believes that they have the capacity to cast spells on people. In this case, one's fear is fitting—brown recluses are very dangerous—yet the fear is unreasonable since it is not based on good reasons. Third, an emotion may be criticized because it isn't *prudent* to feel. We might warn a new parrot owner not to show fear when interacting with their bird since a dominance-seeking parrot can sense fear and will be more difficult to control; fear in this case may be reasonable and fitting given the parrot's powerful beak yet still criticizable as imprudent. Finally, we may condemn emotions as morally disvaluable because of the unacceptable way in which they present their targets. One may, for example, argue that schadenfreude is morally objectionable because it presents the pain of another person as risible.

Against those who criticize it as always inappropriate, I argue that contempt offers, in some circumstances, the best way of responding to persons: it may be a fitting, reasonable, prudent, and morally valuable emotion. Without contempt, we would be ill equipped to stand against what I will call the "vices of superiority", and they would wreak havoc on our personal and moral relations. Contempt can, of course, go horribly wrong and be directed toward those who don't merit it, harbored for the wrong reasons, or maintained for too long, and so on. But rather than dismiss contempt *tout court,* we should carefully consider the conditions under which it does and does not have value.

that is unfitting in terms of its size is excessive or muted. An emotion that is unfitting in terms of its shape presents its target as having qualities that the target does not, in fact, have.

Why is it that contemporary moral theorists have written so little about contempt? Many think that contempt's unique features make it particularly pernicious. In addition, there are several other, more general, reasons why contempt has received little attention in moral psychology.

First, for many years, what we might term "the ethics of action" dominated contemporary moral theory. According to this position, moral assessment ought to be restricted to the *actions* of moral agents: what ethicists ought to do is come up with normative, action-guiding principles, and what we ought to evaluate are agents' actions.[29] If one accepts this position, then one may conclude that the only emotions that have a role to play in our moral lives are those that directly motivate subjects to act and those that take as their objects persons' actions.[30]

If we accept the ethics of action, then we may be tempted to conclude that contempt has no role to play in our moral lives. For contempt is focused on what we might call "badbeing" as opposed to "wrongdoing." That is, contempt is directed toward *persons* and not simply persons' *actions*. I don't think we should assess the value of emotions solely in terms of the actions they motivate. Very often there isn't much that we can *do* about serious immorality and injustice other than cultivate apt attitudes toward it. Moreover, in at least some cases, figuring out what attitude

29. This is, of course, a simplification of a complex variety of positions. There are moral theorists who might subscribe to the ethics of action yet maintain a strong emphasis on character judgments. Humeans, for example, think that we ought to evaluate actions in terms of what they express about a person's character. Nevertheless, most theorists who subscribe to the ethics of action do not advocate this kind of mixed view, and their emphasis on action comes at the expense of considerations of character.

30. Consider, for example, what Allan Gibbard says about the relationship between emotion and action: "Emotions, in evolutionary terms, cash out in action: in the actions to which they lead and in the actions they elicit in others. It is through actions that reproductive prospects are enhanced or diminished." *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 139.

to adopt is actually a precondition for determining what to do. Our actions and practices have affectively expressive dimensions, and because of this, determining the right thing to do cannot be cleanly separated from determining how to feel.

Many moral theorists now recognize that action assessment is not the only type of moral assessment, and even paradigmatic "guilt moralists" have written approvingly of shame.[31] As part of the practice of morality, we can (and should) assess the motives, attitudes, and character traits of persons, and this assessment involves coming to have a range of positive and negative attitudes toward persons and their actions.[32]

Second, philosophers have only recently begun to focus attention on the moral psychology of confronting immorality. There is, of course, a huge literature on moral responsibility and an equally large literature on punishment, but participants in these debates have paid relatively little attention to how moral failings may impair our relationships and what attitudes we should cultivate to respond appropriately to this damage. In the literature on moral responsibly, for example, much of the focus has been on the offender and the conditions under which he is blameworthy for his actions. Whether a person is blameworthy is often thought to depend on answers to familiar metaphysical questions such as whether the truth of determinism is compatible with the kind of freedom thought to be required for responsibility. In focusing on the metaphysical status of the wrongdoer, not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which wrongdoing and badbeing

31. For a discussion of the role of shame in Kant's moral theory see David Sussman, "Shame and Punishment in Kant's *Doctrine of Right*," *Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 231 (2008): 299–317. The ethics of action generally favors a focus on guilt since guilt takes as its object the target's actions whereas shame takes as its object the target herself. Sussman convincingly argues that shame plays a much larger role in Kant's ethics than is standardly acknowledged.

32. Robert Adams forcefully makes this point in the passage that serves as an epigraph to this introduction.

impairs relationships and how best to respond, attitudinally, to this damage.[33] The literature on punishment tends to focus on the offender and the kinds of considerations that could justify depriving persons of their liberty. Philosophical discussions of punishment tend to gloss over the issue of how immorality threatens our moral relations and how we, as moral agents, ought to respond to these threats.

Third, contempt's neglect may be due to the fact that it is commonly associated with "shame" or "honor" moralities as opposed to "guilt" or "respect" moralities. The distinction between these types of moral systems has its genealogy in anthropology, but many moral psychologists have uncritically accepted this distinction. The mark of a shame culture is, according to Ruth Benedict, the role that external sanctions play in regulating behavior: "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasying to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not."[34] If one accepts a sharp distinction between shame and guilt moralities, the lack of attention paid to contempt may not be surprising. An ethic of contempt is conceptually connected to honor codes and shame moralities since it is often thought to be a fitting response to dishonor. For this reason, many believe that contempt has no role to play in our contemporary moral lives. We have been told that moral

33. Of course, not everyone participating in these debates has focused their attention on these metaphysical issues; my own approach to the moral psychology of wrongdoing and repair owes a debt to P. F. Strawson's treatment of moral responsibility in "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962).

34. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Wilmington: Mariner Books, 2006), 223.

systems in the West are guilt moralities, and many insist that we have made moral progress in leaving our former shame moralities behind.[35] In part, my project aims to cast doubt on the supposedly sharp distinction between shame and guilt moralities.[36] An acceptable morality will be one that recognizes the importance of a wide variety of hard feelings including guilt and resentment on the one hand and shame and contempt on the other; these emotions do very different things and answer distinct types of threats. They all have a role to play in our moral psychological lives.

Nevertheless, there are important differences between ethical systems that emphasize guilt and resentment as compared to those that emphasize shame and contempt. The former

35. Not all contemporary ethicists are dismissive of honor and shame. Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently argued that honor has an important role to play in moral revolutions. Progressive social change such as the rejection of chattel slavery was, according to Appiah's argument, driven primarily by concerns about what was *honorable*, rather than by reflection upon what was *right*. While he doesn't emphasize the point, contempt—and anxiety about being the target of contempt—does much of the motivational work in the moral revolutions Appiah discusses; disdain for those who participate in and defend practices like dueling, foot binding, and chattel slavery, rather than an abstract concern regarding one's honor, is what precipitates the moral progress that he describes. If we accept the story Appiah tells about social progress, then an anti-contempt ethic would deprive us of an important tool for bringing about moral progress. See Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

36. While Benedict distinguishes between guilt and shame cultures, she acknowledges that guilt is on the wane and shame is on the rise in American culture: "The early Puritans who settled in the United States tried to base their whole morality on guilt and all psychiatrists know what trouble contemporary Americans have with their consciences. But shame is an increasingly heavy burden in the United States and guilt is less extremely felt than in earlier generations. In the United States this is interpreted as a relaxation of morals. There is much truth in this, but that is because we do not expect shame to do the heavy work of morality. We do not harness the acute personal chagrin which accompanies shame to our fundamental system of morality." *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 223–224.) I agree with Benedict's observations about the decline of guilt and rise of shame in American culture, but I disagree with her interpretation of what this means. As I see it, even moral systems that emphasize guilt, rule following, and wrongdoing, must also make room for emotions that sanction bad attitudes and vice.

characteristically hold that persons are blameworthy only for their voluntary actions, and this has led to the debates about blameworthiness and its metaphysical underpinnings mentioned earlier. An ethics of contempt need not take a stand on these metaphysical issues; contempt makes no claims about the target's freedom or whether the truth of determinism is incompatible with this freedom. Contempt involves an evaluation of the *person* rather than the person's *culpable actions*. Thus whether contempt is a fitting response does not turn on whether free will is compatible with the truth of determinism.[37]

Fourth, contempt's neglect may be due to a general feature of emotions: contempt, like other emotions, is not under the subject's immediate voluntary control. But if our emotions are not under persons' direct control, some may wonder whether they are amenable to moral assessment at all. If we cannot control whether we feel (or do not feel) a particular emotion at a particular time, then it may be argued that we cannot be responsible for our emotions. But if we cannot be responsible for our emotions, then in what sense can they be said to have, or lack, moral value?

It is true that that our emotions are not under our immediate and direct voluntary control: I cannot will myself to experience (or not experience) contempt at this very moment. But acknowledging that emotions are not amenable to this type of control is not to concede that an ethics of contempt is misguided or incoherent. As several philosophers have argued, direct control may not be necessary for responsibility; we may assess a person for her attitudes whether or not they are under her direct control.[38] Moreover, while

37. I do think that persons must have certain, minimal, capacities in order to be *aptly* held in contempt. I discuss this issue in chap. 4.

38. See, for example, Robert Merrihew Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *Philosophical Review* 94, no. 1 (1985): 3–31; and Angela Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115, no. 2 (2005): 236–271.

we lack direct control over our emotions, we do exercise some indirect control over them; whether a person feels contempt at a particular moment is not under her immediate control, yet she did have some control over becoming the sort of person who either does or does not experience contempt or experiences it one way rather than another. Further, no matter what sort of person one now is, one may, indirectly, cultivate one's emotions, thereby exercising some control over one's future emotions. Some may tamp down their feelings of contempt because contempt is often dismissed as a nasty or immoral emotion. In this case, a defense of an ethic of contempt may remove a barrier to an emotional response that is more common than we realize.

My aim in this book is to rectify what I see as the unfortunate lack of attention paid to contempt, and I hope to show that contempt has an important role to play in our contemporary moral lives: despite its bad reputation, contempt is the best response to a range of vices and is an emotion that we ought to cultivate rather than avoid altogether. In chapter 1, I offer an account of the nature of contempt. In offering my characterization of contempt, I review previous philosophical discussions of its central features and canvass the relevant psychological literature. In chapter 2 I consider a common objection that some see as fatal to an ethic of contempt: contempt is a "globalist" emotion that presents its target as all of one piece; some critics insist that contempt's globalism renders it always unfitting—because of its globalism it is thought that contempt *never* correctly presents its target. Against this, I argue that contempt's globalism gives us no reason to dismiss all tokens of contempt as unfitting. Contempt's fittingness conditions are contoured by the relationship between the contemnor and contemned, and I explore the implications of this claim for meta-ethical debates about "fitting attitude" theories of value. In chapter 3, I offer an account of the faults that

most clearly merit contempt: the vices of superiority. These vices impair our moral relations, and contempt offers a uniquely apt way of responding to this damage. I continue my defense of the moral value of contempt in chapter 4 by showing how contempt answers the vices of superiority and in so doing realizes several distinct values. In making my case for contempt, I consider and respond to a number of objections that have been raised against it. In chapter 5, I consider contempt's ugly side and explore its role in anti-black racism: I argue that the best response to being a target of race-based contempt is to marshal a robust counter-contempt. I go on to consider the implications of this argument for debates about civility and its limits; while many are quick to insist upon the value of civility in striving to reach a progressive moral consensus on difficult social issues, I argue that civility's value is limited. Contemptuous criticism can help us achieve progressive moral consensus and does not always betray a lack of respect for the person criticized. Despite contempt's value, we sometimes have reason to overcome apt contempt through a process of forgiveness. In chapter 6, I give an account of the reasons to overcome contempt through forgiveness. This account of forgiveness has important implications for debates about social reconciliation and reparations. Using the example of coming to terms with the history of slavery at the University of North Carolina, I sketch an account of the sorts of reparative activities that give persons reasons to overcome their apt contempt for institutions and the persons associated with them.

The conclusions I draw about the moral value of contempt will strike some as counterintuitive, perhaps even offensive. We live in time where many of our everyday, legal, and philosophical discussions about contentious moral issues are couched in the language of respect for persons. That all persons have a basic dignity and are owed respect on that basis is now a truism, and many people

presume that this respect is incompatible with contempt. Given this starting point and the strong anti-contempt intuitions that characterize much contemporary moral thought, a great deal of the book will be devoted to considering and responding to objections that have been raised, or could be raised, against contempt. There is, I think, no way to fully defend an ethic of contempt other than by systematically considering (and ultimately disarming) the objections that may be raised against it.

While I defend contempt as a "moral emotion," I hope to do so without first articulating and defending a specific moral theory; this will not be a Kantian, Aristotelian, or utilitarian defense of contempt. In part, my decision to proceed in this way is practical: given the scope of this book, it would be difficult to first defend a particular moral theory, and then go on to defend contempt's moral value from within that theory. But my method is primarily motivated by a basic theoretical commitment: I believe that there is far too much attention paid to issues that divide us as moral theorists, and as a result, ethicists tend to downplay the many areas of agreement that exist even between those that defend very different normative outlooks.

I will consider what role contempt ought to play in the lives of persons who subscribe to a *minimally acceptable morality*.[39] A minimally acceptable morality will provide resources for evaluating our attitudes toward other persons as well as our actions. It will acknowledge our value as persons and stress the importance of respect as a response to this value, and it will recognize

39. Although our overarching projects are different, my strategy for defending an ethic of contempt is similar to the methodology Martha Nussbaum employs in her book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Nussbaum articulates what she calls an "adequate normative view" and uses this thin conception of morality to assess the moral import of the emotions. Linda Radzik adopts a similar methodology in *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the significance of our relationships with others. On a minimally acceptable morality, we have good reasons to hold at least some persons responsible for their actions and attitudes, and forgiveness is considered an important achievement. Despite the many differences between various normative theories, any defensible normative view will include these basic commitments, or so I shall assume in what follows.