

***Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt.* By MACALESTER BELL. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 292. Price £34.49.)**

Contempt appears to be making something of a comeback in public discourse. The 2016 US Presidential Elections saw both mainstream candidates accused of contempt. Hillary Clinton and her supporters were claimed by Republicans to be contemptuous of 'ordinary Americans'.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, was seen by many to be treating the entire political process and state apparatus with contempt.

Is it good to feel contempt towards others? Not according to the general view to be found in the opinion pieces decrying the rise of contempt among one or another set of political actors. Nor according to many of the moral philosophers who have addressed the question. An illustrious list of philosophers including Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant have all expressed their concerns about contempt. Contempt has even been claimed to be at the heart of racist and sexist oppression. Bucking this trend, Macalester Bell's *Hard Feelings* argues in favour of contempt and explains the situations in which it is a morally valuable emotion.

Bell begins by examining the nature of contempt, claiming that it has four necessary and sufficient conditions. First, contempt is directed towards a person that is viewed to have failed to meet an important standard and as a result to have compromised her status (p.37). Second, contempt is a globalist emotion, meaning that it takes whole persons as its object (p.40). Third, contempt involves a comparison between the contemnor and the contemned (p.41). In contemning someone we see the object of our contempt as inferior to ourselves in some way. Finally, contempt involves withdrawal (p.44). When we feel contempt for someone this involves

disengaging with them. We may stop listening to the contemned person, inviting her to social occasions or returning her calls. In this way contempt functions differently to anger or resentment, which typically motivate us to engage with our target in order to protest the way in which they have mistreated us.

Bell then goes on to argue in support of contempt, claiming that it is the best response to what she terms “the vices of superbia”. This terms covers a number of vices, including arrogance, hypocrisy and racism (p.98). Bell claims that a person possesses superbia when they believe they have a comparatively high status, they desire that this status be recognized and through these beliefs and desires they manifest ill-will (p.109). For example, imagine Katherine is an excellent neurosurgeon and Sebastian a mediocre and bumbling doctor. Katherine may be justified in believing that she has a comparatively high status compared to Sebastian. However, if she continually brags to Sebastian about her latest achievements in order to get him to recognise her superior status then her behaviour expresses ill will towards Sebastian and she possesses the vice of arrogance (p.114). The vices of superbia are negative character traits for those that possess as they serve as barriers to valuing. Hypocrisy, for example, involves self-deception and this self-deception frustrates the hypocrite’s capacity to value (p.121). These vices are also bad for others, as these vices take advantage of and undermine the social system through which we aim to assign esteem to praiseworthy people (p.125). Bell claims that our justified objections to a wrongful distribution of esteem may make us cynical towards the whole practice of esteeming anyone, leaving us unable to appreciate the valuable qualities of the genuinely praiseworthy.

If these vices are so damaging then how should we respond to them? According to Bell, the best response to the vices of superbia is contempt. Contempt serves to demote its targets.

Contemning those who display the vices of superbia then serves to undermine their sense of superiority by presenting them as being comparatively low in status (p.128). Bell's claim is that this contempt not only causes those displaying superbia to have a less exalted view of their own status, it also provides good reason for them to do so. Through experiencing the contempt of others, those displaying superbia come to get a sense of what it feels like to be at the receiving end of another's superbia, putting them in a better position to understand the need to change their ways (p.130).

Bell then goes on to examine the value of contempt. It is, Bell claims, instrumentally valuable, in serving as a valuable form of protest (p.153), in providing us with a better understanding of the vices of superbia (p.155) and in providing an important source of motivation to withdraw the object of our contempt (p.158). It is also non-instrumentally valuable as possessing contempt is sometimes necessary to maintain one's integrity and to hold people to account (p.163). Bell explores this valuable role through an in-depth discussion of the value of responding to racist contempt with counter-contempt (Ch. 5). Finally, Bell explores the connection between contempt and forgiveness (Ch. 6), arguing that overcoming contempt can be a genuine form of forgiveness.

There are several places where I felt Bell's arguments could have been strengthened. First, Bell claims that through experiencing contempt those with superbia will come to see the error of their ways. Though Bell makes clear that her contempt does not merely cause this recognition of error (p.129), in that it provides reasons for the contemned to change their ways, it seems that her claim is in part an empirical one. After all, it is far from clear that we should value those with superbia being presented with these reasons if it turns out that they never in fact change their

ways as a result. Given the importance of this claim for her argument, it would have been useful to provide some empirical support for it. Second, the concept of ill will plays an important role in Bell's argument and it seemed to me as if more could have been done to explain exactly how this concept should be understood.

In addition, it seemed to me that a number of interesting questions about contempt were left unaddressed. For example, it would have been good to consider whether contempt could ever be a morally permissible response to non-moral faults. Is it ok that my teenage self felt contempt for fans of Nickelback? Or is contempt only ever a permissible response to moral failings?

Similarly, it would have been interesting to consider the morality of a disposition towards feeling contempt. A recent psychological study of contempt by Roberta Schriber and colleagues claims that such dispositions exist and can plausibly be seen as a personality trait. Given that Bell's book precedes this work it would be unfair to criticize her for failing to discuss it. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting to consider the possibility of such a disposition. Could this trait ever be considered a virtue or a vice?

Despite these concerns *Hard Feelings* makes a substantial, valuable and timely contribution to the moral psychology literature and will be essential reading for anyone working on the nature or ethics of contempt. It is also likely to be of wider interest to those interested in moral philosophy more generally.

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