Contempt, Respect, and Recognition

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In the early modern period philosophers began to give increased attention to the question whether it was ever morally permissible to treat other human beings with contempt. Although these philosophers disagreed on many details, there was a broad consensus on at least two points: that to contemn a person was to demonstrate a lack of respect for her and that the moral wrongness of contempt was closely linked to this fact. Today we tend to associate these views most closely with the work of Immanuel Kant, who states explicitly that to contemn others is "to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general."[i] Because we may not "deny all respect even to a vicious man as a human being," it is "in every case contrary to duty" to treat others with contempt.[ii] But Kant was certainly not the first to articulate these views. Almost eighty years earlier, Christian Wolff had characterized contempt as "an act through which I give another to understand that I have little respect for him, or a sign of disdain."[iii] And the same idea is strongly suggested by Samuel Pufendorf, who argues that the appropriate legal remedy for someone who has been treated with contempt is for the magistrate to require the offender to show him public signs of respect.[iv]

In recent years a number of moral philosophers have written in defense of the moral appropriateness of contempt. These writers, including most prominently Michelle Mason, Macalester Bell, Kate Abramson, and Alexandra Couto, agree that contempt is a kind of disrespect, but disagree that this fact renders contempt

morally impermissible. To defend their view that the kind of disrespect involved in contempt is morally appropriate, at least in certain circumstances, Mason, Bell, and Couto all invoke the distinction between appraisal respect and recognition respect, which was first introduced by Stephen Darwall in his influential paper "Two Kinds of Respect." Their arguments depend on the claim that contempt is best understood as a denial of the former kind of respect and not the latter. If contempt were understood solely as a denial of recognition respect, then all of these thinkers would agree that contemning others was morally impermissible. In order to clarify our thinking about the ethics of contempt, then, it will be necessary to determine precisely what we are denying people when we treat them with contempt.

My goal in this paper will be to argue that contempt is best understood as the denial of neither of these two kinds of respect but rather as the denial of recognition, specifically as this concept is articulated by Axel Honneth and by other Critical Theorists who have been inspired by his work. In what follows I will begin by describing Darwall's distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect. I will then evaluate various arguments in favor of treating contempt as a denial of recognition respect and as a denial of appraisal respect, showing how neither of these understandings captures what is most important in the phenomenon of contempt. Finally, I will argue that we can best capture what is morally at stake in contempt by understanding it as the denial of recognition in Honneth's sense of the term. In doing so, I aim only suggest a conceptualization of what contempt is and of what we do when we contemn others; I do not mean to

address the normative question whether or in what circumstances it is morally permissible to treat people with contempt.

I. Recognition Respect and Appraisal Respect

If contempt is best understood as a denial of respect, as so many philosophers since the beginning of the early modern period have argued, then it will be essential for our reflection on the ethics of contempt to determine precisely what respect means. This task is rendered difficult, though, by the fact that we use the term in everyday English to refer to a variety of attitudes that are importantly different from one another. In some cases we use the word to refer to a distinctly non-moral attitude. We say, for example, that it is important to respect a particular basketball player's jump shot. To do so is to take into account the fact that the player is a good shooter and thus to defend him closely whenever he has the opportunity to take a jump shot. The goodness of respecting the player's jump shot is entirely prudential: it is valuable as a means to the defender's end of winning basketball games. In other cases, though, we use the word to refer to a specifically moral attitude. We say, for example, that we respect a person for keeping a promise at unforeseen expense to herself or that we respect a person's right to make a particular decision even though we strongly disagree. When philosophers characterize contempt as a denial of respect, it is clearly this moral kind of attitude they have in mind.

But the distinction between moral and non-moral kinds of respect is still not sufficiently fine grained. As Darwall has argued, we need to make a further distinction within the category of moral respect between what he calls recognition

respect and appraisal respect. Recognition respect, on Darwall's account, is "a disposition to weigh appropriately some feature or fact in one's deliberations."[v] To have recognition respect for a judge within the context of a criminal trial, for example, is to regard the very fact of his being a judge as placing certain limitations on how I may permissibly engage with him: I ought not to ignore, insult, interrupt, or try to bribe him. Similarly, to have recognition respect for the performers in an opera is to regard myself as prohibited from carrying on telephone conversations during their performance or from joining them on stage and singing along. Most importantly for our inquiry into the meaning of contempt, we can also have recognition respect for persons simply *qua* persons. The mere fact that others with whom we engage are persons imposes limitations on the ways in which it would be morally permissible to treat them. This idea, of course, is central to Kant's ethics:

> Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is *in turn* bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end.[vi]

Persons do not need to do anything to earn this recognition respect; as we have already seen, Kant believes that we may not deny respect even to persons who have shown themselves to be morally very bad. This idea has been taken up and developed by many moral philosophers after Kant. Although these philosophers disagree about what recognition respect for persons requires of us, the basic idea

that everyone is owed a baseline level of respect has become an important part of our contemporary moral understanding.

But this is in stark contrast to another of our commonsense views, which is captured in the popular saying that "respect is earned, not given." When people talk about respect in this way, they seem to have something very different from recognition respect in mind. They almost certainly do not believe, for example, that it would be morally permissible to treat others like things, purely as means to their own ends, just as long as those others have failed to impress them as having earned the right to be treated as persons. What they have in mind, rather, is the idea that they are not obligated to value others for having good qualities unless they actually have those qualities. The kind of respect at issue here is what Darwall calls appraisal respect. As the name suggests, it "consists in a positive appraisal of a person, or his qualities."[vii] When we say that we respect a person for her honesty or for her conscientiousness, it is this kind of respect that we have in mind. Appraisal respect is different from recognition respect in three important ways. First, as we have already seen, it is the kind of respect that must be earned. Second, appraisal respect comes in degrees. If a student who is clearly on track to earn an A in my course informs me that I forgot to deduct one point from her exam, I will certainly respect her for her honesty. But if another student who is right on the border between passing and failing tells me the same thing, I will respect her for her honesty even more. Recognition respect is not like this: either I take someone's being a person (or a judge, a teacher, etc.) appropriately into account in my deliberations about her or I do not. Finally, "one may have appraisal respect for someone without having any

particular conception of just what behavior *from oneself* would be required or made appropriate by that person's having the features meriting such respect."[viii] This is because appraisal respect just is the positive appraisal. By contrast, to have recognition respect, say for a judge, is something more than merely recognizing that she *is* a judge or that she is a good judge; it is also to recognize certain determinate acts as called for by the fact that she is a judge.

II. Contempt as Denial of Recognition Respect

Which of these two kinds of respect do we deny people when we treat them with contempt? Do we contemn people simply by having or expressing a low appraisal of them as persons? Or must we go further than this, denying people the baseline level of respect owed to them simply in virtue of their being persons? There are strong arguments in favor of both of these understandings of contempt. In this section I will put forward two arguments supporting the latter view, that to contemn a person is to deny him recognition respect. I will conclude, though, by attempting to show that we have more compelling reasons not to understand contempt in this way.

The idea that contempt is a denial of recognition respect for persons as such can be traced back to Immanuel Kant. Writers prior to Kant, including Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf, may have had a similar understanding of contempt, but among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers, it was Kant who gave the clearest expression to the idea. For Kant, as we have seen, contempt is a denial of "the respect owed to human beings in general." The words "in general" are especially revealing here: the respect at issue is plainly not the kind that people

must earn by living up to some standard of behavior. This point is made even more explicit when Kant writes that we may not "withdraw at least the respect that belongs to [a vicious person] in his quality as a human being, even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it."[ix] Although it may be very hard for us not to *think* of such a person as having forfeited his right to respect, it is always wrong to express that thought.[x]

Among contemporary philosophers, the most prominent defender of a broadly Kantian view of contempt is Thomas E. Hill. According to Hill, "contempt is a deep dismissal, a denial of the prospect of reconciliation, a signal that the conversation is over."[xi] To contemn another person, in other words, is to treat her as if she were no longer a member of the moral community. When we engage with someone whom we do think of as a fellow member of the moral community—even someone who we think has acted very badly—we address ourselves "to a person, acknowledged as 'one of us': perhaps delinquent, misbehaving, outrageously deviant from our common standards, but still 'one who can be reached', or so we presume."[xii] To contemn a person, by contrast, is to deny her the respect of treating her as someone who is capable of moral reasoning at all and thus as someone who is accountable for her own acts. Of course it is possible that some people really are beyond the pale and have therefore forfeited the right to be treated as members of the moral community.[xiii] Nonetheless, Hill argues in a Kantian vein that the moral worth of others' acts is often difficult to discern and that it is best therefore to err on the side of giving rather than withholding basic respect.

One of the strongest reasons to accept this account is that it makes good sense of many of the examples of contempt that are given in the early modern literature. One of the most widely discussed of these examples is the one that Kant presents in Section 39 of the Doctrine of Virtue, immediately following his claim that we must not deny respect even to persons who have rendered themselves unworthy of it. This principle is taken to rule out the kinds of excessively cruel punishments "that dishonor humanity itself," including "quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, [and] cutting off his nose and ears."[xiv] To punish people in these brutal ways is clearly more than to demonstrate a low appraisal of their characters. It is, in Darwall's terms, to fail to regard the fact that the victims are persons "as requiring restrictions on the moral acceptability of actions connected with [them]."[xv] It is to engage with them, in other words, as if they were no longer members of the moral community, signaling as forcefully as possible that the conversation with them is over.

A second reason to accept the understanding of contempt as a denial of recognition respect is that it accounts well for a fact about contempt that is discussed by nearly every early modern writer on the subject: that its targets respond to it with anger. According to Thomas Hobbes, for example, there is nothing more offensive than being treated with contempt, and "nothing that triggers a stronger impulse to hurt someone."[xvi] Nicolas Malebranche agrees, arguing that, "nothing is more divisive among men than contempt."[xvii] And according to Pufendorf, with contempt "the feelings of men are aroused as in no other way."[xviii] There are many persons, he thinks, "who prefer to expose their life to danger, and to

break the peace with another man, rather than allow [such] an insult to go unavenged."[xix] These descriptions of people's responses to being contemned would be plainly false if contempt were simply the denial of appraisal respect. Surely there are many things more offensive and more divisive than expressing a low opinion of another's character. But it is not hard to imagine people breaking the peace and exposing their lives to danger in response to having their dignity as persons disrespected.

These two arguments point to the conclusion that contempt is best understood as a denial of recognition respect and not of appraisal respect. But there are also some strong, and I believe ultimately compelling, reasons to believe that this understanding of contempt misses the mark. First, although it accounts well for many of the examples of contempt put forward by early modern philosophers, there are others that it accounts for much less well. According to Samuel Pufendorf, for instance, we contemn a person when we insult her by giving "some inappropriate or cheap gift"[xx] The insult in this case would surely not consist in the failure to respect the recipient's status as a person. The more plausible interpretation of the insult is that it demonstrates a lower appraisal of the recipient's status or character than she thinks is appropriate. Likewise, in the Doctrine of Virtue Kant suggests that we contemn a person when we judge her errors in reasoning too severely, "calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth."[xxi] It is easy to see how the other person would find such remarks insulting, but the insult seems to consist in the contemnor's setting too low a value on the person's ability to reason. It would be difficult to argue that the contemnor fails to respect the fact that his interlocutor is a

person merely by telling her that she has judged poorly. Again, the contempt here seems to consist in a denial of appraisal respect and not of recognition respect.

A second and more compelling argument is advanced in slightly different forms by Michelle Mason and Alexandra Couto: in certain cases of contempt—specifically, the kind that Thomas E. Hill has in mind when he speaks of deep dismissal and of signals that the conversation is over—we demonstrate recognition respect for wrongdoers *precisely by* holding them in contempt. Mason acknowledges that this conclusion "has the ring of paradox" given that contempt is the "apparent antithesis of respect."[xxii] But her suggestion begins to look much more plausible when we ask ourselves the question, what kind of message would we send to people who have done serious moral wrongs if we chose not to treat them with contempt? The answer, it seems, is that we would be telling them that we do not regard them as members of the moral community and therefore that we do not believe it is appropriate to respond to their wrongdoing with reactive attitudes like contempt. From this perspective, it is the refusal to contemn that looks like a deep dismissal. When we do treat wrongdoers with contempt, by contrast, we treat them as second-personally competent, capable of internalizing the legitimate demands of others and of determining their own wills accordingly. If we truly did not believe the wrongdoers were competent in this way, then the feeling of contempt would not even arise.[xxiii] And so to contemn others for serious wrongdoing is to weigh appropriately the fact that the wrongdoers are persons.

This argument obviously does not apply to all cases of contempt. Surely we do not treat another person with recognition respect when we quarter him, cut off

his nose, or have him torn by dogs, for example. Neither do we respect a person by giving him a cheap and inappropriate gift. But the argument certainly does shed valuable light on the kinds of cases that we most likely have in mind when we ask ourselves whether it is morally appropriate to treat someone with contempt. Do we commit a moral wrong, for example, if we deeply dismiss and forgo the possibility of reconciliation with a financial advisor who has tricked our elderly and vulnerable grandparents out of their life savings? Do we wrong a manipulative, psychologically abusive former romantic partner by signaling to him unambiguously that the conversation is over and that we want nothing more to do with him? Of course few could doubt that we would wrong them if we arranged to have them quartered or torn by dogs. But what if we simply cut them out of our lives, judging that they have violated our legitimate expectations so severely that they have forfeited any claim to continued good-faith discussion? Or what if we castigate them sharply for their errors in moral reasoning, "calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth?" Perhaps it would be wrong to do these things, but even if it is, it seems that Mason and Couto are right to argue that the wrongness would not consist in our denying recognition respect to the fraudster or the abuser. In sending them the signal that they have used their rational agency badly and that we had expected better of them, we weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in our deliberations about them. If this is right, then I believe we have good reason not to understand contempt simply as a denial of recognition respect.

III. Contempt as Denial of Appraisal Respect

The argument that we have just examined strongly suggests that contempt is better understood as a denial of appraisal respect. And this is exactly what contemporary defenders of the moral appropriateness of contempt believe. Michelle Mason, for example, suggests that contempt is best understood as "presenting its object as low in the sense of ranking low in worth as a person in virtue of falling short of some legitimate interpersonal ideal of the person…."[xxiv] Macalester Bell characterizes contempt as "a demoting emotion that presents its target as having a comparatively low status."[xxv] And Kate Abramson describes contempt as being directed toward "persons held in low esteem simply as persons."[xxvi] For each of these writers, to contemn someone is to think of him as low *qua* human being in virtue of his having failed to live up to some standard of conduct. All of these writers emphasize the fact that contempt manifests itself as a desire to withdraw from social interactions with the contemned. We withdraw from them precisely because we had a legitimate expectation that they would live up to some standard and they failed to do so. Jean-Luc Godard's film *Le mépris* provides Mason with a valuable example of the point. In the film, Camille Javal is married to Paul, a screenwriter who has just been hired by the boorish American producer Jeremy Prokosch to rewrite the script for his cinematic adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey.* What becomes clear as the story develops is that Prokosch has hired Paul primarily because it gives him an opportunity to seduce Camille. At a number of points throughout the film Paul is oblivious, or pretends to be oblivious, to Prokosch's barely disguised designs. Recognizing that Paul is facilitating the seduction and that he may be doing so for the sake of his own career, Camille begins to look down on him, judging him to be

"not a man." Her contempt for Paul becomes manifest slowly throughout the film as she withdraws from him both physically and emotionally. This "paradigm case" of contempt is very clearly a denial of appraisal respect for Paul, and not a denial of recognition respect.[xxvii]

One reason to believe that this account is correct, of course, is that we have good reason to believe that contempt is not the denial of recognition respect. But there are other reasons as well. One of the most important advantages of the account given by contemporary defenders of the appropriateness of contempt is that it more closely matches the accounts given in the literature on the psychology of emotions. Although psychologists of emotion do not typically refer to the distinction between the two kinds of respect, their descriptions of contempt tend to resemble the case of Camille and Paul. According to Agneta Fischer and Ira Roseman, for example, to feel contempt is to "appraise the other person as unworthy or inferior."[xxviii] As Mason and Couto argued, this appraisal happens as a response to the wrongdoing of someone whom the contemnor regards as responsible for her acts.[xxix] This suggests that the contemnor does not adopt what P.F. Strawson calls the objective attitude, suspending the engaged, second-personal relationship with the contemned and viewing him third-personally as an object "to be managed or handled or cured or trained."[xxx] The contemnor, in other words, does seem to weigh appropriately the fact that the wrongdoer is a person. And finally, psychologists of emotion tend to treat contempt as a "cool" emotion that results in the target's being treated with less empathy, respect, and consideration.[xxxi] Unlike anger, which inclines us to confront others and to try to change their bad behaviors,

contempt belongs to the exclusion family of emotions, manifesting itself in avoidance or social distancing of the contemned.[xxxii] All of this is consistent with what we see in Mason's paradigm case of contempt.

It would be misleading, though, to suggest that all of the literature in the psychology of emotions supports the idea that contempt is a denial of appraisal respect. Carroll Izard, for example, writes that "the feeling of contempt toward a human being tends to depersonalize the individual, to cause the person to be perceived as something less than human."[xxxiii] And Nick Haslam links contempt to a specific form of dehumanization that involves denying uniquely human attributes to specified others, viewing them instead as non-human animals. The behavior of these others is explained by the contemnors "in terms of desires and wants rather than cognitive states."[xxxiv] Both of these ways of relating to others go well beyond viewing them as "low in the sense of ranking low in worth as a person in virtue of falling short of some legitimate interpersonal ideal of the person."

A second worry about understanding contempt as a denial of appraisal respect is that doing so seems to include too much. To illustrate the difference between resentment and contempt, for example, Michelle Mason suggests that "if you find yourself cursing your roommate's sloppiness, it may be that you resent her leaving the apartment in such a state…. If you find yourself cursing 'that slob,' however, you likely have traversed into the domain of contempt."[xxxv] And according to Kate Abramson, Patricia Ireland expressed contempt for Bill Clinton when she complained about his tendency to divide women into two classes: those who were deserving of respect and those whom he could "use and toss aside like tissue

paper"[xxxvi] These are certainly examples of low appraisal respect, but it is not so clear that they are examples of contempt. Like many people, I have had roommates whom I regarded as slobs. I believed they were responsible for their messiness and that I had a legitimate expectation that they should be tidier, but I would not characterize my attitude toward them as one of contempt. I would characterize it, rather, as a run-of-the-mill, moderately negative judgment. Of course my own intuitions about the meaning of contempt are no more dispositive than anyone else's, and I certainly acknowledge the possibility that many competent speakers of English would take these as examples of contempt. But even if my own intuitions are wrong, another problem remains: if cases of low appraisal respect like these are the kinds we have in mind when we question whether it is morally permissible to treat others with contempt, then it seems to me that the answer is too easy. It seems clear to me, for example, that I would do no wrong in thinking of my roommate as a slob or in saying that Bill Clinton viewed some women as people he could use and toss aside like tissue paper. Alexandra Couto, a defender of the moral permissibility of contempt, seems to agree when she writes that "there is nothing problematic about experiencing low *appraisal respect* towards some individuals, as it is after all the whole point of appraisal respect to regard individuals differently according to their merit."[xxxvii] Context suggests that Couto regards this point as uncontroversial. But this, I want to argue, is a problem for the view that to contemn is to have low appraisal respect for someone, for it also seems uncontroversial that the question whether or not it is morally permissible to contemn is quite difficult. The argument I have in mind here, then, is a simple modus tollens: if to contemn is to have low

appraisal respect for someone, then the question whether it is morally permissible to contemn is easy. But the question is not easy. Therefore, it is not the case that to contemn is to have low appraisal respect for someone.

IV. Contempt as Denial of Recognition

With this I hope to have shown that we have good reasons to understand contempt neither as a denial of recognition respect nor as a denial of appraisal respect. In this final section, I would like to argue that we can understand contempt more adequately if we conceptualize it in terms of recognition. Although this concept has been the focus of a great deal of philosophical reflection over the last twenty-five years, different philosophers, including most prominently Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, Avishai Margalit, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Paul Ricoeur use the term to mean somewhat different things. The sense of recognition that I will make use of here is the one that Axel Honneth articulated in *The Struggle for Recognition* and that has been further developed by Critical Theorists inspired by Honneth's work. In what follows I will begin by describing this concept in broad outlines, emphasizing the ways in which it differs from recognition respect. I will then attempt to show how understanding contempt as a denial of recognition allows us better to capture what is morally at stake in contempt while avoiding many of the disadvantages of the other two accounts.

In explicating Honneth's understanding of recognition, it will be helpful to begin by describing the experience of someone who believes he has been done a moral wrong. In order to even have this experience, the person must be able to distinguish between misfortune or bad luck on the one hand and a specifically moral

kind of injury on the other. If my home is hit by a tornado so that I lose all the cash I had not yet deposited in the bank, for example, then I will have suffered a misfortune. If I lose the same amount of money because I had been defrauded in a website misdirection scheme, though, I will have been wronged in a moral sense. According to Honneth, the moral injury in the latter case does not consist in the loss of money itself, but rather in "the accompanying consciousness of not being recognized in [my] own self-understanding."[xxxviii] I am an autonomous human being with my own sense of who I am, of what matters to me, and of what is worth doing. In my relations with other persons there is an expectation, typically unstated and in the background, that they will take this fact about me seriously and that I will take seriously the same fact about them. When this expectation, which I take to be legitimate, is not met, I experience myself as having been morally wronged. This is exactly what happens when I am defrauded.[xxxix]

So far this looks very much like what Darwall called recognition respect for persons, as the moral wrong consists in the fraudster's not having taken sufficient account of the fact that I am a person in his dealings with me. But there are three important ways in which the concept of recognition as it has been developed by Honneth and other Critical Theorists differs from recognition respect for persons. First, the idea of recognition is inseparable from a conception of the practical self as intersubjectively constituted. Following George Herbert Mead, Honneth argues that human subjects gain the ability to participate in norm-governed interactions by internalizing the action-expectations of a variety of others.[xl] Mead's own well known example involves learning to play the game of baseball: in order to become a

competent player, a person must learn to guide his own action by internalizing the practical points of view of the other people in the game. Once a person has successfully internalized these action-expectations, he will have a determinate sense of what he can expect from others and of what they expect of him. The baseball player will come to be recognized within the social space of the game insofar as he recognizes the others. The same point applies at higher levels of social interaction: a person's secure sense of himself as a valued member of a community with corresponding rights and obligations comes from his being recognized as having internalized the action-expectations of the generalized other.[xli] The broader point that we can take away from these examples, according to Honneth, is that people "can construct and maintain a positive self-relation (*Selbstbeziehung*) only with the help of agreeing or affirmative reactions on the part of other subjects."[xlii] To deny someone the recognition he expects, then, is not just to fail to weigh appropriately the fact that he is a person; it is to harm the person in his positive self-relation. This is what the specifically moral injury consists in.

A second important difference is that recognition in Honneth's sense is multidimensional, pertaining to three different aspects of a person's positive self-relation: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. To have self-confidence is to experience oneself as a stable, discrete being with needs and emotions that matter, both to oneself and to others. Self-confidence, understood in this way, is a necessary condition for autonomous selfhood: without it, people would lack "the basis for leading their life in accordance with their most basic convictions."[xliii] Importantly though, this precondition for autonomy can be achieved and sustained only

intersubjectively, beginning with loving relations between infants and their parents. If parents fail to instill in the infant a basic confidence that her bodily and emotional needs matter, even during those times when the parents are not actively caring for her, then it will be extraordinarily difficult for the infant ever to view herself as center of agency. Her practical selfhood depends, then, on her being recognized by those closest to her as someone whose needs and feelings count. The second positive form of self-relation, self-respect, builds on the relation of self-confidence. To have self-respect is to view oneself as authorized to make and to defend claims in one's own name and to have them taken seriously, irrespective of one's position within the social order; it is, as Joel Feinberg put it, to "feel in some fundamental way the equal of anyone."[xliv] This kind of relation to self, Honneth thinks, is sustained within legal orders that effectively recognize members of the political community as bearers of rights. *Qua* rights bearers, persons are recognized in a manner that abstracts from their personal characteristics: a person's enjoying the right to participate in public deliberations or to engage in economic activity, for example, does not depend on her being especially intelligent, virtuous, wealthy, or well liked. But the third form of self-relation, self-esteem, does pertain to a person's particular qualities. Specifically, to have self-esteem is to view one's talents, personal qualities, and ways of life as socially valuable.[xlv] This kind of relation to self is sustained by intersubjective relations of solidarity in which we "view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis." Such relationships "inspire not just passive tolerance but felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person."[xlvi] We expect

to be recognized in all of these ways and we can be harmed in our positive self-relations if we are not.

Finally, recognition in Honneth's sense differs from recognition respect in that the latter begins with the recognition of a fact while the former does not. When I show recognition respect for a judge, for example, I first recognize that she is in fact a judge and then I act accordingly. But the theory of the intersubjective constitution of practical identity entails that the relevant fact is created in part by its being recognized. This is especially clear in the case of self-esteem: we do not first recognize that someone's personal qualities are valuable and then treat her accordingly. Rather the valuableness of the person's qualities is constituted in part by their being recognized as such. It is always an open and contested question which qualities, talents, and ways of life are worthy of being esteemed. Those who believe that their qualities are not appropriately recognized within their community—for example, immigrants, sexual minorities, or people who do what has traditionally been regarded as women's work—*demand* recognition. They do so because their positive self-relation depends in large part on receiving it. But the legitimacy of these demands is not something that is determined in advance.

I want to argue, finally, that understanding contempt as the denial of recognition of important aspects of others' identities helps us to capture the moral dimensions of the phenomenon better than the other two accounts. First, it makes the best sense of the fact, emphasized in almost all of the early modern literature, that people who are contemned feel that they have been gravely wronged. As we have seen, Thomas Hobbes believes that nothing is more offensive than being

treated with contempt. And Nicolas Malebranche goes as far as to insist that contemning others is not only wrong, but "the greatest of wrongs."[xlvii] How can we explain why people are so vulnerable to this form of treatment? Samuel Pufendorf suggests that we react so strongly because contempt "violates that possession in which the soul takes its greatest pride, and for which it has so sensitive an affection—his glory and esteem, in the preservation and vigour of which rests all the satisfaction of his spirit."[xlviii] But again, why do we care so much about our glory and esteem? Why do we perceive the deprivation of these as so great an injury? We can find part of the answer to these questions in a passage from Jean de la Bruyère's *The Characters*: contempt, he writes, "attacks a man in his last intrenchment, namely, the good opinion he has of himself; it aims at making him ridiculous in his own eyes."[xlix] How can contempt produce this effect? This is exactly what the account of contempt as denial of recognition makes such good sense of: it is because our practical identities are constituted in our relations to others, and because being denied the recognition we expect from others harms our ability to relate positively to ourselves.

A second advantage of the recognition-based account that I would like to examine is that it applies well to a wide variety of the examples we find in the literature on the ethics of contempt. For one, it makes better sense than its rivals of Kant's example of censuring others' errors in reasoning too severely. Although we do not fail to treat someone as a person when we characterize her errors as "absurdities, poor judgment and so forth," we do deny her recognition as someone who is capable of making valuable contributions to our common deliberations.

Surely the idea that our thoughts matter and are worth taking seriously is an important part of our positive self-relation. This same idea makes good sense of an example of contempt that we find in much of the early modern literature: laughing at others.[l] For context, it should be noted that nearly all early modern philosophers accepted what we now call the Superiority Theory of laughter, which, as the name suggests, treats laughter as expressing the laugher's feelings of superiority to the target.[li] When we laugh at people (as opposed to laughing with them), we deny them recognition as people whose qualities or ways of life are worth taking seriously. Again, it is easy to see how this would do harm to a person's positive self-relation. For exactly the same reasons, the recognition-based account captures our intuition that we contemn others when we roll our eyes at them or when we tell them to "talk to the hand."[lii]

A third advantage of the recognition-based account is that it sheds more light on the kinds of pressing, real-world cases that ethical theory should help us to think through. I will focus here on two examples, both of which bring out the way in which the multidimensionality of the recognition-based account helps to clarify our thinking about contempt. The first example pertains to claims of excessive police violence against African-Americans. In response to protests against this violence and to demands for the recognition that Black lives matter, it is often pointed out that the victims of violent crimes committed by African-Americans are frequently other African-Americans. The argument is clearly meant to go something like this: since African-Americans do not value the lives of other African-Americans, they have no standing to demand that the police value their lives. This kind of argument

certainly expresses contempt toward African-Americans in general. But the accounts that treat contempt as a denial of appraisal or recognition respect are not able to capture in a sufficiently fine-grained way what the contempt consists in. Of course the argument expresses a low appraisal of African-Americans, but that is not what makes it so morally problematic. And while people making this argument surely fail to fully respect the personhood of African-Americans, we should prefer an account that specifies precisely what the wrong of doing so consists in. The recognition-based account has a plausible answer to this question: the wrongness of the contempt consists in the refusal of the kind of recognition that sustains what Honneth calls self-respect. African-Americans are treated as having effectively forfeited their status as addressors of potentially valid rights claims against the political community.

We can recognize a similar dynamic at play in a second contemporary example. In recent years it has become common in the United States for participants in debates broadly concerning distributive justice to invoke a distinction between makers and takers, with the latter being understood to include those who do not earn enough money to pay federal income taxes or those who receive some kind of government assistance. Those who invoke this distinction clearly perceive the takers as low: they are presented as "moochers," as parasites appropriating the production of the good, hard-working makers. They are viewed as lazy, uneducated, and entitled. Once again, I believe the recognition-based account helps to bring out the morally most salient dimension of this attitude. As in the case of police violence, the contemnor denies the "takers'" status as legitimate addressors of claims within

the political community: their views concerning distributive justice are not to be taken seriously because they resemble irresponsible children who constantly demand "free stuff." They lack the standing to make legitimate economic claims and ought rather to be grateful to the makers for the benefits they deign to confer. Those who invoke the distinction thus deny the kind of recognition that sustains self-respect. But they also refuse to recognize the targets of their contempt as contributing anything of value to the community. Indeed, this refusal of recognition is made explicit in the name "takers:" not only do they not contribute anything of value, they parasite the value that other, better people produce. In this sense, then, the contempt consists in refusing the kind of recognition that sustains self-esteem.

Finally, a fourth advantage of the recognition-based account is that it makes the best sense of our intuition that the question of the moral permissibility of treating others with contempt is a difficult one. Again, it is the multidimensionality of the account that is largely responsible for conferring this advantage. On the one hand, as critics of Honneth's ethics of recognition have often pointed out, there are many people who have no legitimate claim to having their talents, personal qualities, and ways of life seen as socially valuable. We are obviously not morally obligated to view virulent racists, sexists, homophobes, etc. in the light of values that allow their abilities and traits "to appear significant for shared praxis." Indeed, supporting the social conditions of their self-esteem would be morally pernicious, as it would contribute toward undermining the self-esteem of women, people of color, and sexual minorities.[liii] And so it seems clear that the sexists, racists, and homophobes ought to be contemned. But on the other hand, we know that our

judgments about which people are "obviously" worthy of contempt have changed, sometimes radically and in relatively short periods of time. This can happen because the intersubjective norms with reference to which we grant or deny recognition do not enjoy any kind of timeless validity. And these norms can be contested, sometimes successfully, by the very people who are disadvantaged by their being in force. This point is developed especially clearly by Emmanuel Renault in his book *L'Expérience de l'injustice*. The experience of injustice, he argues, is not necessarily the experience of having been disadvantaged by the incorrect application of an interpersonally recognized norm. In at least some cases we feel wronged precisely by the correct application of the norm. When this happens, we cannot demonstrate the legitimacy of our feeling by referring to the established norm, since the validity of that norm is exactly what the feeling calls into question. What the experience of injustice calls for in these cases, then, is "a recasting of the socially instituted principles of justice."[liv] We cannot know with certainty whether this recasting will be successful, and thus whether the experience of injustice will turn out to have been justified. Neither can we know for certain, then, whether or not we owe it to people to grant them the various kinds of recognition they demand. And so the question whether or not it is morally permissible to treat someone with contempt is difficult, since in contemning others we always run the risk of wronging them by failing to take seriously norms and values whose validity we do not already acknowledge.

At this point I believe I have demonstrated that the account of contempt that treats it as a denial of recognition makes sense of many of our intuitions about the

phenomenon: that its targets often experience it, correctly or not, as a grave moral wrong; that it is difficult to know whether or not its expression is morally permissible; and that it is manifest in a very wide variety of cases. Of course the account I have given here still leaves numerous questions unanswered. For example I have not attempted to answer the normative question whether or in what circumstances it is morally permissible to treat others with contempt. And I have not made the account precise enough to determine unambiguously whether a particular case is an example of contempt or of some other negative attitude. What I do hope to have shown, though, is that the recognition-based account captures the moral dimensions of the phenomenon better than the accounts that treat it as a denial of recognition respect or of appraisal respect.

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[i] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals,* 579 [6:463]. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition.
[ii] Ibid., 580 [6:463]; 579 [6:463].
[iii] Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedanken*, 561. Translation mine.
[iv] Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae*, 280-281.
[v] Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 39.
[vi] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 579 [6:462].
[vii] Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 39.
[viii] Ibid.
[ix] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 580 [6:463].
[x] Ibid., 579-580 [6:643].
[xi] Hill, *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice*, 60.
[xii] Ibid.
[xiii] Ibid., 88.
[xiv] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 580 [6:463].
[xv] Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 40.
[xvi] Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 27.
[xvii] Malebranche, *Treatise on Ethics*, 175. Translation modified.
[xviii] Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae*, 167.
[xix] Ibid., 340.
[xx] Ibid.
[xxi] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 580 [6:463].

[xxii] Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," 270.

[xxiii] Couto, "Reactive Attitudes," 98-102.

[xxiv] Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," 241.

[xxv] Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 128. Italics omitted.

[xxvi] Kate Abramson, "A Sentimentalist's Defense," 205.

[xxvii] Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," 240.

[xxviii] Fischer and Roseman, "Beat Them or Ban Them," 104. Cf. Smith, "Assimilative and contrastive reactions," 188; Wagner, "Accessibility of the term," 695; Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota, "Social Functionalism," 121.

[xxix] Smith and Ellsworth, "Patterns of Cognitive Appraisal," 833.

[xxx] P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 9.

[xxxi] Izard, *Human Emotions*, 90; 340; Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," 858.

[xxxii] Fischer and Roseman, "Beat Them or Ban Them," 103-104; Mackie, Devos, and Smith, "Intergroup Emotions," 612; Oatley and Johnson-Laird, "Communicative theory of emotions," 380.

[xxxiii] Izard, *Human Emotions*, 340. Cf. Sternberg, "Duplex Theory of Hate," 308. People who feel contempt may view "the target as barely human or even as subhuman."

[xxxiv] Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," 262.

[xxxv] Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," 247.

[xxxvi] Abramson, "A Sentimentalist's Defense," 199.

[xxxvii] Couto, "Reactive Attitudes," 99.

[xxxviii] Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation," 23.

[xxxix] Cf. Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect," 187-190.

[xl] In works following *The Struggle of Recognition*, Honneth will no longer ground his account of recognition in Mead's social psychology, which he comes to regard as too naturalistic to shed sufficient light on the moral aspects of recognition. But this fact does not affect the general point about intersubjectivity that I am outlining here. See Honneth, "Grounding Recognition," 502-503.

[xli] Mead, "Play, the Game," 154.

[xlii] Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation," 24.

[xliii] Anderson and Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition," 134.

[xliv] Feinberg, "Nature and Value of Rights," 151. Quoted in Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition,* 120.

[xlv] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 128.

[xlvi] Ibid., 129.

[xlvii] Malebranche, *Treatise on Ethics*, 173. Translation modified.

[xlviii] Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae*, 340.

[xlix] de la Bruyère, *The Characters*, 299.

[l] Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 49; Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae*, 340.

[li] Thomas Hobbes gives an especially clear expression to this idea when he writes that "laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly." Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 42.

[lii] Stephen Darwall gives the example of rolling one's eyes in Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint*, 42. The example of telling someone to "talk to the hand" is given in Abramson, "A Sentimentalist's Defense," 204.

[liii] Nancy Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?," 28.

[liv] Renault, *L'Expérience de l'injustice,* 36. Translation mine.