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Krista K. Thomason

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# Shame and Contempt in Kant's Moral Theory

KRISTA K. THOMASON

Swarthmore College

E-mail: kthomas2@swarthmore.edu

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## Abstract

Attitudes like shame and contempt seem to be at odds with basic tenets of Kantian moral theory. I argue on the contrary that both attitudes play a central role in Kantian morality. Shame and contempt are attitudes that protect our love of honour, or the esteem we have for ourselves as moral persons. The question arises: how are these attitudes compatible with Kant's claim that all persons deserve respect? I argue that the proper object of shame and contempt is not the humanity within a person, but rather her self-conceit, or the false esteem that competes with love of honour.

**Keywords:** contempt, Kant, love of honour, shame

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## Introduction

The emotions of shame and contempt seem decidedly un-Kantian. Regarding shame, Bernard Williams writes: 'In the scheme of Kantian oppositions, shame is on the bad side of all the lines' (1993: 77). Williams's claim is that shame seems to undermine some of the basic tenets of Kantian moral theory. Shame cultures, for example, appear to locate one's value in external features like social standing or economic class. Kant argues that the worth of a person is not determined by such things, and so shame morality seems to be the sort of framework he exactly wants to reject. Additionally, shame seems, as Williams points out, to be a genuine compromise to autonomy: since the experience of shame is usually tied to social expectations, the agent who feels it is allowing herself to be determined by something other than her own will (1993: 97). Along with Williams, Annette Baier adds that the things about which we feel shame – our stupidity, lack of wit, or inarticulateness – tend to fall outside the scope of our will (1993: 447). Not only is a trait like a lack of wit not something we choose, it is of no consequence in measuring one's moral worth: one could lack wit without also lacking dignity.

Like shame, contempt also seems to be at odds with Kantian principles. Thomas Hill claims that an attitude of contempt is a ‘deep dismissal’ of another and that it precludes the kind of respect that Kant claims we owe all human beings (2000: 60). According to Kant, we are required to treat all moral agents with respect even when they seem not to deserve it. Hill argues that an attitude like contempt is precisely ‘a denial of the prospect of reconciliation, a signal that conversation is over’ (2000: 60). In other words, we refuse to further engage with those we find contemptible. If an attitude of contempt really means that we no longer respectfully interact with another moral agent, it too seems to fly in the face of fundamental Kantian commitments. These features of shame and contempt might reasonably lead us to agree with Baier that Kantian moral theory is a guilt morality (1993: 438). Although Baier is critical of Kant on these grounds, the characterization is initially plausible. Unlike both shame and contempt, guilt is a moral emotion that can comfortably coexist with familiar Kantian concepts like autonomy and responsibility.<sup>1</sup> As Allen Wood writes: ‘Guilt ... is the judgement that we have committed some actual deed that violates the moral law and renders us punishable’ (2008: 189). Wood’s characterization of guilt fits perfectly with Kantian principles. We feel guilt when we realize that we have done something contrary to the moral law and so are rightly self-critical. Guilt is not a threat to autonomy because the act that violates the moral law is intentional and not involuntary like a lack of wit. Likewise, the source of our guilt is not social expectations, but simply the knowledge that we have violated our duty. Unlike an attitude of contempt, others will take an attitude of resentment towards us when we do something wrong.<sup>2</sup> As Hill writes: ‘Furious argument and accusation ... leave some space to resume communication’ (2000: 60). Resentment, although it is unpleasant, is still compatible with respect for persons because it still involves the communication of reasons. Since guilt and resentment can coexist comfortably with Kantian commitments, one might conclude that emotions like shame and contempt have no place in Kantian moral theory.

My aim in this paper is to show not only that Kant does incorporate shame and contempt into his moral theory, but that he holds a central place for them. I argue that, according to Kant, both contempt and shame are intimately linked to two key concepts in his theory of virtue, namely self-conceit and love of honour. Self-conceit is an unwarranted form of self-regard, which causes agents to believe that they ought to be respected not simply as fellow moral persons, but because of some talent or trait. By contrast, love of honour is the proper form of regard

that we are entitled to claim simply because we are moral persons. I argue that Kant believes moral agents must be liable to both shame and contempt in order to ensure that they value themselves and others under the proper description – in virtue of their love of honour and not in virtue of self-conceit. In my view, Kant rightly holds that shame and contempt are important moral emotions, but one could object that these emotions are incompatible with the basic tenet of Kantian ethics that all persons deserve respect. I work to resolve this tension by showing that the object of these attitudes is an agent's self-conceit rather than her moral personality. While we are bound to respect another's moral agency, we are not (and indeed should not be) bound to respect another's self-conceit. Thus, contempt and shame are still compatible with Kantian respect for persons.

The role that both contempt and shame play in Kant's theory requires both interpretation and reconstruction. I begin by examining the passages where Kant makes reference to contempt and then construct a definition of contempt from them. The discussion of contempt relies on the concepts of love of honour and self-conceit. By understanding what love of honour and self-conceit are, we can also glean a definition of Kantian shame. Once both contempt and shame are clearly defined, I then show how their role is central to combating self-conceit and to protecting love of honour.

## 1

When Kant addresses contempt directly in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS), his position seems to be exactly what one would expect.<sup>3</sup> In section 39 of the Doctrine of Virtue, he claims that to be contemptuous of others is 'in every case contrary to duty' because it denies them the respect 'owed to them as human beings in general' (Kant 1996a: 579; MS 6: 462). Kant admits, however, that one cannot help 'inwardly looking down on some in comparison with others', but that 'the outward manifestation of this is nevertheless an offence' (1996a: 580; MS 6: 463). Kant also believes there are punishments that reflect contempt for the offenders, which are contrary to duty as well.<sup>4</sup>

Yet section 39 is not the first place contempt appears in the Doctrine of Virtue. When Kant discusses the duties to oneself as a moral being, he claims the vices of lying, avarice and servility are 'contrary to one's character as a moral being', which means that 'they make it one's basic principle to have no basic principle and hence no character, that is to

throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt' (1996a: 545; *MS 6*: 420). In other words, these vices somehow undermine our moral personalities, making us the object of others' contempt. When Kant discusses each of these vices in detail, the threat of contempt resurfaces. In the section on lying, Kant specifically distinguishes a lie under the Doctrine of Right from one under the Doctrine of Virtue where no one's rights are violated. Even if we do not violate anyone's rights when we lie, the result is 'dishonour (being an object of moral contempt) that ... accompanies a liar like his shadow' (Kant 1996a: 552; *MS 6*: 429). Moreover, Kant distinguishes between external and internal lies. An external lie 'makes [the liar] an object of contempt in the eyes of others', whereas an internal lie 'makes [the liar] contemptible in his own eyes and violates the dignity of humanity in his own person' (Kant 1996a: 552; *MS 6*: 429). According to Kant a liar 'throws away' and 'annihilates' his dignity, and has 'even less worth than if he were a mere thing' (1996a: 553; *MS 6*: 429).

This section reveals an apparent tension in Kant's claims about contempt. He seems to think that the liar is *rightly* contemptible. But if the liar is rightly the object of contempt, then it cannot be an offence in every case, as he claims in section 39. We might be able to attribute Kant's remarks about the contemptibility of liars to his reputation for rigorism, but he appeals to contempt again in his discussion of the duties to self and the vices of respect for others. Regarding duties to self, Kant claims that we are commanded by these duties to know ourselves – we should introspect to know whether our motives are pure and whether our intentions are good. Kant writes that this type of moral cognition is meant to 'dispel *fanatical* contempt for oneself as a human being', since it is through 'the noble disposition to the good in us which makes human beings worthy of respect, that one can find one who acts contrary to it contemptible (the human being himself, but not the humanity in him)' (1996a: 562; *MS 6*: 441, Kant's emphasis). In other words, the duty to know oneself is meant to ensure that we do not appear contemptible to others. Yet having this duty implies that, like the liar, the person who acts contrary to her noble disposition is correctly seen as contemptible. That is, if we fail in our duties to have self-knowledge and thus do not act in accord with our noble disposition, it is not simply that others will see us as contemptible, but that they are justified in seeing us as contemptible.

To further complicate the discussion, Kant appeals to contempt again in the sections on the vices of respect for others, which are arrogance,

defamation and ridicule. All of these are offences to what Kant calls others' love of honour. In section 40, Kant addresses love of honour specifically:

Respect for the law, which in its subjective aspect is called moral feeling, is identical with consciousness of one's duty. This is why showing respect for a human being as a moral being (holding his duty in highest esteem) is also a duty that others have toward him and a right to which he cannot renounce his claim. – This claim is called *love of honour* ... (1996a: 580; MS 6: 464, Kant's emphasis)

Kant claims earlier that the love of honour is the central virtue against which lying, avarice, servility (in the case of self-respect), arrogance, defamation and ridicule (in the case of respect for others) are vices (1996a: 545; MS 6: 420). Arrogance offends love of honour because the arrogant person 'thinks he is entitled to treat [those from whom he demands respect] with contempt' (Kant, 1996a: 581; MS 6: 465). Defamation (which Kant distinguishes from slander, which is a matter for the courts) is the inclination to expose the flaws or shortcomings of another.<sup>5</sup> Kant claims that defamation is an offence because it detracts from one's honour and 'diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy ... or contempt the prevalent cast of mind' (1996a: 582; MS 6: 466). Finally, ridicule is to expose others to mockery and laughter. Holding up someone's faults for ridicule is an attempt to 'deprive [someone] of the respect he deserves' (Kant 1996a: 583; MS 6: 467). Kant claims, however, that we are permitted to '[brush] aside with contempt an insulting attack of an adversary, by which the mocker ... is himself made a laughing stock', because such a practice is 'a legitimate defence of the respect one can require from him' (1996a: 583; MS 6: 467). Combining this remark and the preceding discussion with the comments from the duties to self, not only does Kant seem to think that we can sometimes correctly be seen as contemptible, in at least one circumstance he seems to voice approval of treating someone with contempt.

What should we make of this recommendation in light of Kant's condemnation of contempt in section 39? A closer examination of the passage and the remark that follows suggests that Kant's aim in section 39 is to explicate the proper way to conceptualize vice rather than to condemn the attitude of contempt completely. In the passage, Kant

contrasts having contempt for the vicious with seeing the vicious as dangerous, and he follows up that section with a remark about not treating mistakes in reasoning or moral vices with contempt. First Kant claims that what is dangerous cannot be an object of contempt and thus neither is the vicious man:

What is dangerous is no object of contempt, and so neither is a vicious man; and if my superiority to his attacks justifies my saying that I despise him, this means only that I am in no danger from him, even though I have prepared no defence against him, because he shows himself in all his depravity. (1996a: 580; MS 6: 463)

With this claim, Kant explains what taking an attitude of contempt towards the vicious reveals, namely an implication that the vicious are not to be taken seriously. If we look down on someone, we believe ourselves to be superior to that person and thus not threatened by her. Kant denies that we should have this attitude: the vicious should be taken seriously as morally dangerous or threatening. Similarly, in the remark Kant says that we ought not to assume that someone's mistake is automatically due to poor judgement, but instead we ought to try to assume she has something to say and simply misstated it:

For if, by [calling errors 'absurdities or poor judgement'], one denies any understanding to someone who opposed one in a certain judgement, how does one want to bring him to understand he has erred? – The same thing applies to the censure of vice, which must never break out into complete contempt and denial of moral worth to a vicious human being; for on this supposition he could never be improved, and this is not consistent with the idea of a *human being*, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good. (1996a: 580; MS 6: 463, Kant's emphasis)

In other words, we ought not to assume that a mistake in reasoning automatically means the person making it is stupid. Likewise, we also ought not assume that a vicious person is automatically beyond hope of reform. Notice, however, that this is a claim about the right sort of attitude to have about vice and the vicious generally. Even if we concede this point, it need not preclude Kant's recommendation for brushing off the attack of an adversary with contempt. We can engage in individual displays of contempt while at the same time not thinking that vice

generally deserves contempt. This interpretation explains why Kant says that to have contempt is to 'deny [others] the respect owed to human beings *in general*' (1996a: 579; *MS* 6: 463, my emphasis). It is true that we cannot have contempt for humanity as such, but taking an attitude of contempt towards an individual for a specific incident does not amount to contempt for humanity in general.

If the focus of this passage is about the overall attitude we should take towards vice rather than specifically about contempt, Kant can coherently hold both views I ascribe to him. While we cannot show contempt for the vicious as a whole, there are some individual cases where contempt seems to be justified. In the case of lying, for instance, he thinks the contempt people feel for the liar is correct: by his lie he is rightly judged by others to be worthless because he throws away his dignity (Kant 1996a: 545, 552; *MS* 6: 420, 429). It also seems to be an important part of the duty of self-respect not to appear contemptible in our own eyes or in the eyes of others (Kant 1996a: 562; *MS* 6: 441). In the case of defamation, we are allowed to expose people to ridicule if they attack first (Kant 1996a: 583; *MS* 6: 467). Although the language of section 39 is strong, given the context of the section and the other remarks about contempt from the duties of respect, I think it need not be read as a blanket objection to contempt, but instead a point about the right way to conceptualize vice.

By examining the preceding passages, we can now glean a definition of contempt. For Kant, contempt is a dismissive attitude. Contempt is precisely not hatred as Kant suggests in section 39. To hate someone or to think someone dangerous is to take that person seriously as someone threatening, but the contemptible person is someone we snub or rebuff. We brush off the attacks of our adversaries as though they are insignificant or laughable. The liar is an object of contempt not because he is hated, but because he is worthless: if we cannot believe what he says it is nearly pointless to even interact with him. Thus to be contemptuous of someone is to think that she is not worth taking seriously. But if I am right about this definition, one could object that I have traded one ambiguity for another. That is, although I can explain why Kant seems at times to approve of contempt and at other times condemn it, I am now left with the task of showing how Kant can claim that we are sometimes permitted to see others as worthless while at the same time claiming that we should always respect them. Even if Kant claims that the liar is rightly contemptible, are we not still required to respect him as a moral agent? If so, how are we to do that if seeing him as



contemptible is seeing him as worthless? The key to resolving this tension lies, I argue, in Kant's concept of love of honour.

Love of honour is that which is violated when others show us unwarranted contempt and when we make ourselves the object of others' contempt. But exactly what love of honour is and why it is so important remains mysterious. Given some of Kant's other remarks, there is reason to think that he takes concerns of honour seriously.<sup>6</sup> For instance, textual evidence in the *Doctrine of Right* suggests that honour is a serious concern for moral agents with which the law must contend. There, Kant claims that killing in order to protect one's honour does not deserve capital punishment. He thinks that the state is in a quandary because it must choose between not instituting the death penalty in these cases, which is either 'cruel or indulgent', or it must 'declare by law that the concept of honour (which here is no illusion) counts for nothing and so punish with death' (Kant, 1996a: 477; *MS* 6: 336).<sup>7</sup> Kant also claims that a crime committed by someone concerned with honour is 'undeniably less deserving of punishment' than someone who commits the same crime for private interests (1996a: 475; *MS* 6: 334).

Honour seems to be as equally un-Kantian as shame and contempt. It is tempting to explain Kant's remarks about honour in terms of his historical context. While concerns about honour may still have been prevalent in Kant's day, our moral concerns have progressed and honour does not hold a prominent place in our modern ethical lives. Given that the bulk of Kant's moral theory relies on respect for all persons independently of their social status, one may continue, the remarks he makes about honour need not be accommodated in our interpretations. Yet I am sceptical of this line of reasoning. I think it is hasty to attribute Kant's claims about honour to his entrenchment in eighteenth-century Prussian culture. The remarks in the *Doctrine of Right* and the repeated references to love of honour in the *Doctrine of Virtue* simply provide too much textual evidence to ignore. In the following sections, I will pursue an interpretation of love of honour that can be incorporated into Kant's broader moral theory. Once we better understand love of honour, we will see how Kant can approve of both contempt and shame.

## 2

We now see that love of honour is violated by the unwarranted contempt of others and it is violated when we do things that make

ourselves rightly contemptible. But love of honour arises also in connection to shame. In the *Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics*, Kant provides an example of a moral catechism between teacher and pupil to demonstrate proper moral education. After the dialogue, he writes:

It is the *shamefulness* of vice, not its *harmfulness* (to the agent himself), that must be emphasised above all. For unless the dignity of virtue is exalted above everything else in actions, the concept of duty itself vanishes and dissolves into mere pragmatic precepts, since a human being's consciousness of his own nobility then disappears and he is for sale and can be bought for a price that seductive inclinations offer him. (1996a: 595; *MS* 6: 483, Kant's emphasis)

In this passage, Kant is not concerned with the fact that vice is bad because it fails to respect others. Rather, Kant's point here is to make clear why vice is somehow detrimental to the agent himself. His claim is not that vice is harmful to the agent, but instead that it is shameful. In fact, he seems to claim that, without a sense of an agent's 'own nobility', the concept of duty 'vanishes and dissolves'. Here Kant makes a close connection between the agent's sense of honour, her liability to shame and the concept of duty. But how exactly are these three connected?

Love of honour is central to the duties of respect in the *Doctrine of Virtue*: we violate another's love of honour when we violate the duties of respect and we violate our own when we fail to respect ourselves in the right ways. Duties of respect for others are those by which 'I put only myself under obligation; I keep myself within my own bounds so as not to detract anything from the worth that the other, as a human being, is authorised to put on himself' (Kant 1996a: 569; *MS* 6: 450). Since Kant talks about the worth of persons here, it is tempting to think that love of honour is synonymous with dignity, but Kant uses different terms for each concept.<sup>8</sup> I suggest that, while dignity refers to the unconditional worth that moral persons have in virtue of being moral persons, love of honour refers to the kind of esteem or pride we ought to have once we realize that we have dignity. Having love of honour means that we take pride in ourselves as moral persons rather than as someone who is beautiful, intelligent or talented. Arrogance, defamation and ridicule are all ways of detracting from this esteem that other moral agents should claim for themselves. Likewise, lying, avarice and servility are all ways of detracting from

the love of honour we should claim for ourselves. Kant illustrates this using an analogy to the Doctrine of Right. In the same way that those who violate another's rights assert claims to things to which they are not entitled, those who ridicule or defame another are claiming more esteem than they are entitled to. Kant writes: 'a duty of free respect toward others is, strictly speaking, only a negative one (of not exalting oneself above others) and is thus analogous to the duty of right not to encroach upon what belongs to anyone' (1996a: 569; MS 6: 449). In other words, claiming esteem from others in virtue of something other than one's moral personality is to detract from their own rightful honour. If, for instance, someone tries to claim that others ought to esteem him not simply because he is a moral person but instead for his superior intelligence, he claims that his intellect is the most important way to value him, even more important than his moral personality. If others were to esteem his superior intellect, they would acquiesce in his claim that his intellect is the most important way for him to value himself. By doing so, they would as moral persons pay him respect for something that is in reality less important than his moral personality. For this reason, they dishonour themselves: they fail to protect their own love of honour because they give the man of superior intellect undeserved respect. In this way, vices of disrespect like arrogance are essentially other-directed. For Kant, the reason arrogance is a vice in the first place is because it is a failure properly to respect others, since it involves an illegitimate claim on others that they respect a non-moral and thus less valuable aspect of our identities.

According to Kant the source of these illegitimate claims is self-conceit. Kant writes: 'But lack of modesty in one's claims to be respected by others is *self-conceit (arrogantia)*' (1996a: 579; MS 6: 462, Kant's emphasis). In other words, when we claim that others ought to respect us in virtue of something other than our moral personality, we fail to properly circumscribe our self-conceit. Self-conceit appears in several places in Kant's writings as the culprit behind many of our moral failings. In particular, it makes an important appearance in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.<sup>9</sup> According to Kant, cognizance of the moral law '*strikes down* self-conceit altogether, since all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted because certainty of a disposition in accord with this law is the first condition of any worth of a person' (1996b: 199; *KpV* 5: 73). When we become aware of our capacity to respect the moral law, our self-conceit is deflated because we realize that our true value comes

from our moral selves rather than sensible selves. In particular, Kant claims that the respect for the moral law 'humiliates' self-conceit:

Now what in our own judgement infringes upon our self-conceit humiliates. Hence the moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature. If something represented *as a determining ground of our will* humiliates us in our self-consciousness, it awakens respect for itself insofar as it is positive and a determining ground. (1996b: 200; *KpV* 5: 74, Kant's emphasis)

In other words, for Kant, respect and humiliation are two aspects of the same phenomenon. That which humiliates self-conceit in the sensible awakens respect in the human being considered as a moral person. Kant writes: 'the lowering of pretensions to moral self-esteem – that is, humiliation on the sensible side – is an elevation of the moral' (1996b: 203; *KpV* 5: 79). And so, respect for the moral law has as one of its key components the humiliation of self-conceit, understood as a kind of pretence of our own worth.<sup>10</sup> Self-conceit causes us to value ourselves in terms other than moral terms.

In my view, shame is the feeling we experience when our self-conceit is struck down – that is, for Kant shame and humiliation are the same.<sup>11</sup> To call this experience shame may seem counterintuitive because this account bears little resemblance to the account found in the literature of moral psychology.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary accounts of shame liken it to disappointment: we feel shame when we fail to live up to some virtue or excellence. In other words, we see ourselves as lesser or lower than we had hoped to be and this experience gives rise to feelings of shame. Given Kant's emphasis on honour, however, I suggest the humiliation we experience before the moral law is the kind of shame that is more akin to a feeling of disgrace – in this way it resembles the familiar honour/shame dichotomy of honour cultures. Understanding the striking-down of self-conceit as an experience of shame explains Kant's reference to shame in the moral catechism (1996a: 595; *MS* 6: 483). Stressing the shameful rather than the harmfulness of the lie reinforces the way in which the student should properly value himself. By seeing the lie is shameful, the student realizes that lying detracts from his love of honour. It also explains why Kant claims in the *Lectures on Ethics* that we succumb to ingratitude because we are 'ashamed at receiving favours' (1997: 197; *LE* 27: 439). This passage parallels the passage in the Doctrine of Virtue where Kant discusses the

vices of ingratitude, envy and malice. Ingratitude arises because we feel our pride wounded because we are made beholden to another. In being beholden to someone, we feel shame because we incur obligations, which means that we are bound to show deference to someone (Kant, 1997: 197; *LE* 27: 439). In these cases, we feel that showing gratitude is an offence to ‘real self-esteem (pride in the dignity of humanity in one’s own person)’ (Kant, 1996a: 577; *MS* 6: 459).<sup>13</sup> This real self-esteem is love of honour. Here again shame is connected to love of honour: in being beholden to another we are made to feel inferior, which is what we feel when the moral law strikes down self-conceit.

Kantian shame, then, arises when we believe ourselves to be better than we actually are and are then made to realize that we think too highly of ourselves. This form of shame arises any time we come to realize that we are less important than we assumed: we think an idea is brilliant and we see later that it is nonsense or we believe we are being the charming party-goer only to realize later we looked clownish. In Kantian terms, self-conceit causes us to see ourselves as important under one description, but once we realize that our true value comes from our humanity, the way we valued ourselves when we were full of self-conceit suddenly seems insignificant and trivial – not worth the importance we once ascribed to it. Because the importance of the moral self makes the sensible self look trifling by comparison we cannot help but feel inferior once we have this realization. Put colloquially, Kantian shame is the feeling of being taken down a notch. But for Kant there are times when we should precisely feel this way. In order to value ourselves under the right description – as moral persons – we must first realize that the other descriptions under which we value ourselves are less important. It is for this reason that when we have respect for the moral law we experience humiliation of our self-conceit at the same time.

We can now see the way in which shame and contempt are central to love of honour and self-conceit. In the second *Critique* Kant refers to the shame we experience before the moral law as ‘intellectual contempt’ (1996b: 201; *KpV* 5: 75).<sup>14</sup> Recall that for Kant to take an attitude of contempt towards something is to see that thing as insignificant. Additionally, Kant is clear that we can experience shame before the moral law not just within ourselves, but within another: he claims that a moral person ‘holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my own conduct’ (1996b: 202; *KpV* 5: 77). I suggest that once we realize the importance of our moral selves, we also have a kind of contempt for our sensible selves because we see how trivial

that way of valuing ourselves truly is. I can come to have this experience either when I recognize the moral law within myself or within another. Thus, when others take an attitude of contempt towards the self-conceited agent, they attempt to inspire in her the same shame that she feels before the moral law. It is in this way that contempt is a legitimate defence available to others to protect their own love of honour. Taking an attitude of contempt towards self-conceit is precisely the right attitude to take because the self-conceited agent ultimately claims esteem for something insignificant. But in order to claim the right kind of esteem, the self-conceited agent must realize the insignificance of the way she currently values herself. When that self-conceit is struck down, she simultaneously experiences respect for her moral self (or the moral self of another) and shame at having once valued herself for something so trivial.

For Kant, love of honour, self-conceit, contempt and shame are all part of the same phenomenon: having pride in our moral selves rather than sensible selves.<sup>15</sup> And having this sort of pride is an important aspect of the theory of virtue. In the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant often refers to virtue as a form of strength or courage (1996a: 513, 516, 525; *MS* 6: 380, 384, 394). Key to virtue, in other words, is to have a strong sense of self. For Kant, that sense of self must necessarily be a sense of one's moral self: it is our moral agency that makes us who we are. This self-conception is what allows us to better know what our duties are and have the fortitude to do what the moral law requires. Having love of honour means we have realized that the most valuable aspect of ourselves is our moral personality. But realizing that means we experience shame at having once valued ourselves for something ultimately unimportant (our self-conceit). Self-conceit is that which causes us to try to claim esteem from others in light of some sensible aspect of ourselves. Others may rightly show contempt for us for such behaviour because in demanding this kind of esteem we ask that they give up some of their own love of honour. They have no obligation to do that because as moral persons they are bound to esteem themselves under that description. To pay homage to someone for some sensible feature would be to incorrectly treat that feature as more important than the moral self. The contempt that others are permitted to have towards the self-conceited agent is a legitimate kind of moral self-defence for their own love of honour. Additionally, the self-conceited agent ought to have contempt for his own sensible self because doing so means that he realizes that it is ultimately insignificant and not the right way to value himself. Thus contempt and shame are intimately a part of cultivating the self-conception that Kant counts as virtuous.

While my interpretation explains Kant's remarks about contempt and shame, it faces two objections. First, even if I am right about my interpretation of Kant, one could object that it conflicts with the basic tenet of Kantian ethics, namely respect for persons. One might think that Kant cannot simultaneously approve of shame and contempt and also claim that people are deserving of respect even when they are wicked. Second, just because Kant seems to think that shame and contempt do the work of limiting self-conceit, one could object that the same task can be accomplished by guilt, the more familiar Kantian moral emotion. In the following section, I work to resolve both of these objections.

If we accept the Kantian doctrine of respect for persons, it seems to follow that the moral attitudes we take towards others must be compatible with respectful engagement. In other words, our attitudes towards others must involve reasoning, compromising or negotiating with them. While resentment, for example, is a negative feeling, one can still reason and engage with the resented person even if the interaction is heated or uncomfortable. An attitude like contempt, however, is thought not to be compatible with respectful engagement. And yet there are times when Kant seems to approve of just this kind of behaviour: ending the exchange and simply walking away. He claims that 'even though the law does not punish [the vicious person], one must break off the association that existed or avoid it as much as possible, since continued association with such a person deprives virtue of its honour' (Kant 1996a: 588; *MS* 6: 474). Kant seems to approve of at least two actions that would count as dismissal: brushing someone aside and simply washing your hands of someone. But how can we dismiss someone while at the same time treating her with respect?

I suggest that these contrary assertions are compatible because the object of contempt is not the humanity within a particular person (the proper object of unconditional respect), but rather the self-conceit that is the source of the false respect he tries to claim. In the second *Critique*, Kant writes that: 'the representation of the moral law deprives ... self-conceit of its illusion' (1996b: 201; *KpV* 5: 75). Here, I suggest that self-conceit functions as a kind of false persona: it (wrongly) stands in the place of the moral persona as the way in which an agent believes he should be valued.<sup>16</sup> In this way, we do not offend the dignity of another in showing contempt for him because our contempt is directed towards the false persona he puts forward. This interpretation explains why Kant qualifies the contempt we have for the person who acts contrary to his moral

personality by saying that what we find contemptible is 'the human being himself, but not the humanity in him' (1996a: 563; *MS* 6: 441). It is not the moral person that we find contemptible, but rather the sensible aspect of himself in virtue of which he tries to claim respect.

To illustrate, consider the example of a pseudo-intellectual. The pseudo-intellectual pretends to be something he is not: a well-educated, cultured person with unique and thoughtful insights. He is exactly a pseudo-intellectual because he actually possesses none of these qualities, and yet he demands of others that they offer him the respect that goes with that persona. In other words, he demands from others a kind of respect that he is not entitled to claim. In dismissing the pseudo-intellectual, others refuse to engage with him under his false pretence. To do so is an affront to their own self-respect: they are not bound to humour him by playing along. Others can legitimately refuse to engage with a sham even if they cannot refuse to engage with another as a moral agent. So, once the pseudo-intellectual abandons the persona (and thus his illegitimate claims for regard under that description), others are bound to interact with him once again. When he lets go of the false front, he stops demanding that others respect him for credentials he does not possess. In abandoning the pretence, he then demands only the respectful engagement that any person deserves.

Self-conceit is clearest in cases of arrogance, but I believe it can manifest itself even in an unwarranted form of self-loathing. I have two cases in mind: a case of false servility (e.g. a toady colleague) and a case of someone who genuinely believes he is not worthy of others' concern. First, it may be, as Kant seems to suggest, that the falsely servile person is being falsely humble. Kant writes: 'Humility *in comparing oneself with other human beings* ... is no duty; rather trying to equal or surpass others in this respect, believing that in this way one will get an even greater inner worth, is *ambition*' (1996a: 557; *MS* 6: 435, Kant's emphasis). In this way, the servile person would share the same vice as the arrogant person. He thinks himself entitled to a greater feeling of self-worth because he is more humble than his peers, and so can claim that they ought to feel contempt for themselves in his presence. Valuing oneself as more morally pure than others would be the same as valuing oneself for one's fame or power.

Suppose, however, that someone actually believes himself to be of less importance than all other persons. Such a person need not be engaged in false humility; he may genuinely believe himself to be lowest of all



people and that others merely humour him when they treat him with respect. We may think it sounds cruel to assume that he is full of self-conceit – indeed the opposite seems true. But I suggest that the self-loathing person detracts from his love of honour because he fails to have pride in his moral self. Kant claims that a moral agent has a ‘duty of self-esteem’ in virtue of which he must ‘pursue his end ... not abjectly, not in a *servile spirit* (*animo servili*) as if he were seeking a favour, not disavowing his dignity’ (1996a: 558; *MS* 6: 435, Kant’s emphasis). This duty of self-esteem requires that we take our moral personalities to be of the highest value. As human beings, Kant writes that we may be ‘of slight importance’ in the ‘system of nature’ (1996a: 557; *MS* 6: 434). But when we are considered from a moral perspective, our value is, for Kant, ‘exalted above any price’ (1996a: 557; *MS* 6: 435). By engaging in self-loathing, one sees oneself as merely a human being – a small and unworthy speck in the vast universe – and thus violates one’s duty of self-esteem. So the self-loathing agent still has the incorrect view of his own worth, just as the arrogant agent does. Both agents fail to see that their moral personalities demand that they claim their due respect: in one case, the agent fails to claim it at all (the self-loather) and in another the agent claims too much (the arrogant person). Both cases, however, are manifestations of self-conceit because the agents have a form of self-concern that stems from their sensible rather than their moral personalities. Moreover, we can dismiss arrogance and self-loathing in different ways. While arrogance may call for a snub or a brush-off, self-loathing may call for a simple refusal to engage. Until both agents claim the right sort of respect for themselves, it is detrimental to our rightful honour to engage respectfully with them.

One could argue, however, that even if contempt and shame serve the functions I ascribe to them, there is no reason they *must* serve those functions. In other words, why not assume that guilt can accomplish the task of limiting self-conceit just as well? Although it is the more recognizably Kantian moral emotion, Kant avoids talking of guilt as the proper means to combat self-conceit. He consistently resists using language like ‘guilt’ and ‘transgression’. The reason why Kant avoids this language, I believe, is that the prospect of blaming someone or encouraging him to feel guilty for his arrogance is to misapply the internal logic of blame. First, inviting someone to feel guilty provides the possibility for justification and explanation, but we do not seek explanation and justification for self-conceit. Imagine, for example, someone trying to justify his own arrogance: ‘I am, after all, more educated than you are and I have great personal wealth – why should you not esteem me more than

you esteem yourself? We do not care why the agent thinks he is better than others; the fact he thinks he is better is always unjustified – no possible justification would suffice because it could never outweigh our own claims to our love of honour. While guilt calls for a kind of critical self-reflection, an attitude of contempt calls for deflation or abandonment of an unwarranted self-conception. We do not want the arrogant person to merely blame himself; we want him to think less of himself, which is to say that we want him to judge his worth appropriately. Blaming himself would not necessitate that he stop being arrogant. Guilt, of course, is supposed to cause us to stop doing that which causes the guilt, but it is frequently not sufficient. I could, for example, feel guilty whenever I am late without then taking steps to become a more punctual person. Occasionally, we even say to people: 'I do not want you to feel guilty; I want you to stop!' Feeling guilty and coming to have the right kind of self-awareness are separate events, and it is the new self-awareness that matters the most in the case of self-conceit.

Second, the attitudes of guilt and resentment presuppose that the parties involved already see themselves and others as moral agents. For these attitudes to be appropriate, one must already think of oneself and one's peers as targets for blame and justification.<sup>17</sup> But the self-conceited agent does not see herself or others as moral persons in the requisite ways. As Kant writes, the arrogant person 'thinks he is entitled to treat [others] with contempt' (1996a: 581; MS 6: 465). If the arrogant person believes that he is permitted to treat others as worthless, then he does not see them as important. But attitudes like blame assume that the object of the attitude is important in some way. For instance, offering someone a justification implies that such a person is owed some kind of reason. But those from whom a reason is thought to be owed to us cannot also be people we judge to be worthless – otherwise, we would feel they owed us nothing. Similarly, to reverse the perspective, the arrogant agent would likely interpret any resentment from others as jealousy because he sees them as inferior. An agent's self-conceit precludes attitudes like blame from applying because it does not allow him to see others as important enough to blame him. Moral agents are the targets of attitudes like blame in virtue of the same feature that allows them to claim respect from others: in Kantian terms, their love of honour. If the self-conceited agent fails to acknowledge that others can claim respect from him in this way, he will also fail to acknowledge that they are the targets of blame or justification. It is for this reason that others may legitimately dismiss the self-conceited agent with contempt: he does not relate to them as moral persons.

In the case of the self-loathing agent, we may wonder whether an attitude of dismissal is not hopelessly cruel to him. After all, he already thinks he is not worth anyone's attention. But to engage with someone in the servile mindset would, I claim, be very much like engaging with the arrogant person. He too is unable to be a target of blame or guilt because he refuses to see himself as a moral agent worthy of respect. No amount of convincing would change the self-loather's mind: our words of encouragement would sound to him like mere humouring in the same way our admonishment of the arrogant person would sound to him like mere jealousy. He believes that others need not justify or explain themselves to him; his self-conception prevents blame and guilt from applying. Attempting to engage with someone who is immersed in self-conceit – whether that manifests itself in arrogance or self-loathing – is to interact with someone who does not see himself or us in the morally appropriate ways.

I have argued both that shame and contempt play an essential role in Kantian moral theory and that they cannot be adequately replaced by guilt. In having a liability to contempt and shame the Kantian moral agent can value herself and others in the right ways. When we feel self-conceit struck down, we rightly feel shame: it is morally appropriate for us to feel our sensible selves taken down a notch. For Kant, it is morally appropriate to take an attitude of contempt towards the merely sensible side of ourselves because it is radically insignificant when compared to our true moral worth. Thus, those who try to claim esteem in virtue of their sensible natures are also rightly the objects of contempt, and they ought to experience shame when confronted with the moral law in themselves or another. For Kant, love of honour is the awareness of ourselves as moral persons and contained within that awareness is a form of pride in that which makes us truly valuable. Gaining and maintaining this moral self-conception in the face of the always tempting self-conceit requires a liability to both contempt and shame.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Michelle Mason (2003) has taken on contempt as a moral emotion and argues that it can be compatible with respect. As I understand it, however, she does not seek to explicate Kant's definition of contempt. My account may be compatible with hers, but my aim is not to specifically argue for that conclusion.
- 2 Strawson (2003), Wallace (1994) and Darwall (2006) offer extended discussions of this account of resentment.
- 3 All references to Kant are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. I use the following abbreviations: MS = *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996a), KpV = *Critique of Practical Reason* (1996b), and LE = *Lectures on Ethics* (1997).

- 4 'So there can be disgraceful punishments that dishonour humanity itself (such as quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, cutting off his nose and ears).' (Kant, 1996a: 580; MS 6: 463)
- 5 'By defamation (*obrectatio*) or backbiting, I do not mean *slander (contumelia)*, a *false* defamation to be taken before a court; I mean only the immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others' (1996a: 582; MS 6: 466, Kant's emphasis). Kant claims that slander is punishable 'not by a criminal court but by public opinion, which, in accordance with the right of retribution, inflicts on him the same loss of the honour he diminished in another' (1996a: 442, n.; MS 6: 296).
- 6 The punishments that show contempt cause us to 'blush with shame' (1996a: 580; MS 6: 463). Honour killings are done to avoid disgrace (1996a: 476–7; MS 6: 336) and suffering dishonour makes one an object of contempt (1996a: 442; MS 6: 295).
- 7 For an in-depth discussion of this passage and its implications, see David Sussman (2008).
- 8 Kant uses different terms for dignity and love of honour. 'Dignity' is *Würde* and 'love of honour' is either *Ehrliche, Ehrlichkeit* or *Die rechtliche Ehrbarkeit*.
- 9 Kant distinguishes self-conceit from self-love: 'All the inclinations together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then called one's own happiness) constitute regard for oneself (*solipsismus*). This is either the self-regard of *love of oneself*, a predominant *benevolence* toward oneself (*Philautia*), or that of *satisfaction with oneself (Arrogantia)*. The former is called, in particular, *self-love*; the latter, *self-conceit*' (1996b: 199; *KpV* 5: 73, Kant's emphasis).
- 10 Kant claims self-conceit is a kind of illusion: 'the representation of the moral law deprives self-love of its influence and self-conceit of its illusion' (1996b: 201; *KpV* 5: 75).
- 11 John Deigh (2006) argues that shame and humiliation are two different experiences. But his argument rests on the premise that the agent who feels shame must avow herself as having done something shameful and this claim is undefended. It is common e.g. for someone to feel shame if she is caught having sex while at the same time not believing that sex is in fact shameful. One might believe that the source of shame in this case is some false belief that the agent secretly holds, but in order to claim this, one would need to show that feeling shame about something and yet not avowing that thing as shameful is some kind of psychological impossibility.
- 12 For examples of this account of shame, see Rawls (1999), Taylor (1985), and Deigh (1993).
- 13 Kant goes on to say that, even if we feel inferior, we are still bound to show gratitude to others out of a duty to love humanity because to show ingratitude would be to spurn a kindness (1996a: 577; MS 6: 459; 1997: 197; *LE* 27: 439).
- 14 'As the effect of consciousness of the moral law, and consequently in relation to an intelligible cause, namely the subject of pure practical reason as the supreme lawgiver, this feeling of a rational subject affected by inclinations is indeed called humiliation (intellectual contempt)' (Kant, 1996b: 200–1; *KpV* 5: 75).
- 15 Grenberg (2005) argues quite convincingly for a similar conclusion. She characterizes the relation between shame, contempt, love of honour and self-conceit as part of what she calls a 'meta-attitude' of humility (2005: 159). I take it that my account here is compatible with her conclusion. I believe that my account adds two things to Grenberg's account, namely (1) the way in which honour is a part of this structure and (2) how the virtuous agent does not only limit self-conceit, but also has a kind of pride in herself in light of her love of honour.

- 16 Stephen Darwall has argued similarly that self-conceit is a kind of fantasy (2006: 135–8).
- 17 Extended discussions of the nature of reactive attitudes appear in Wallace (1994) and Darwall (2006).
- 18 Special thanks to the reviewers and editors of *Kantian Review* for their helpful suggestions in revising this paper. I have also greatly benefited from conversations with David Sussman and Helga Varden in developing these ideas.

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