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Contempt as the absence of appraisal, not recognition, respect

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In response to: **On the deep structure of social affect: Attitudes, emotions, sentiments, and the case of “contempt”**

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Abstract

Gervais & Fessler's defense of a sentiment construct for *contempt* captures features distinguishing the phenomenon from basic emotions and highlights the fact that it comprises a coordinated syndrome of responses. However, their conceptualization of *contempt* as the absence of respect equivocates. Consequently, a “dignity” culture that prescribes respect does not thereby limit legitimate contempt in the manner the authors claim.

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Gervais & Fessler's (G&F) defense of a sentiment construct for *contempt* captures features distinguishing the phenomenon from basic emotions. Although their case against an attitude construct is more tenuous, it highlights that the phenomenon comprises a coordinated syndrome of responses, with an attitude modulating discrete emotions across situations. However, their conceptualization of *contempt* as the absence of *respect* invites equivocation. Consequently, a "dignity" culture that prescribes respect does not thereby limit legitimate contempt in the manner the authors claim.

Contempt: Reactive attitude, nonreactive attitude, and sentiment

G&F correctly distinguish contempt from basic emotions insofar as contempt is a phenomenon of more lasting duration, is associated with more complex appraisals, has no apparent correlate in nonhuman hominids, and may, indeed, mute emotional responses to its target. Although the authors further argue against attitude theories of *contempt*, their reasons suggest deficiencies of current attitude theory more than they defend positing a distinct psychological kind.

In adopting the term *attitude*, my early work on contempt signaled a debt to the philosopher P. F. Strawson, who dubbed an admittedly motley class of affective phenomena the "reactive attitudes," prototypical among them resentment (Mason 2003; Strawson 1962). For Strawson, to say that an attitude is "reactive" is to say that it responds to the quality of will (good, ill, or indifferent) that a person (perhaps yourself) manifests toward you or those of concern to you. It is less clear why Strawson calls resentment an "attitude." My usage is intended to position contempt as an evaluative stance toward a person, one that is more enduring than an occurrent emotion and that includes an "evaluative presentation" – or appraisal – of its target as "low" in the sense of ranking low in worth in virtue of falling short of an interpersonal ideal that the contemnor endorses, if not one that she herself meets (Mason 2003; 2014). Although nothing in my use of "attitude" is incompatible with the authors' observation that an attitude of contempt moderates discrete emotions across situations (sect. 1.3), philosophical work on the reactive attitudes has not sufficiently attended to this feature. If using "sentiment" as a term of art helps us keep track of it, all the better.

In pursuing the sentiment construct, however, the authors must render the relation between the sentiment and its constituent attitude(s) more precise. Whereas the construct posits a one-to-many mapping from the sentiment to discrete emotions across situations, the mapping

between sentiment and attitude remains ambiguous. The folk concept “contempt” refers to either of at least two phenomena, which I call reactive contempt and nonreactive (or objective) contempt (Mason 2014). For an example of the former, consider the attitude expressed by many of those who joined the January 2017 Women's March on Washington to call U.S. President Donald Trump to task for his sexism and racism (cf. Bell 2013). For an example of the latter, consider the utter disregard that others felt toward a man they found beyond reform and, thus, “beneath (reactive) contempt” – a proper subject for therapy, perhaps, but not for rational engagement or accountability-seeking attitudes. The two phenomena are unified by their constitutive appraisal of their target as “low”; they are distinguished by their emotion-modulating effects and emotivational goals, among other features (Roseman 1984; cf. Frijda 1986).

How does the sentiment *contempt* map onto these two related but distinct phenomena? Do we have a one-to-one mapping where a single attitude modulates the protest marchers' emotions toward Trump in one way and mutes others' accountability-seeking responses toward him? If so, is the suggested model perhaps one where the attitude tends to mute certain emotional responses to its target when previous emotional engagement has been denied uptake? Alternatively, do we have a one-to-many mapping to two related but distinct attitudes? In either case, reactive contempt emerges as one form that the sentiment *contempt* may take.

Appraisal respect tracks worth; recognition respect acknowledges dignity

G&F conceptualize the sentiment *contempt* as the absence of the sentiment *respect*. However, as they note, “respect” is notoriously equivocal (sect. 5.1). Philosophers employ “recognition respect” as a philosophical term of art for a respect universally owed all persons because they possess what Kant calls a “dignity” (*würde*), as opposed to the “price” of fungible objects (Kant 1786/2012). “Dignity cultures,” G&F note, are committed to universal respect. That is to say, in dignity cultures, each person has an inalienable claim right on the recognition respect of each other.

English usage allows that “respect” must be earned. This is so of what philosophers call “appraisal respect” (Darwall 1977) – a mode of valuing a person grounded in a positive appraisal of the person's good features of character (Darwall 1977; 2004).

Contempt, “dignity” cultures, and relationship dissolution

The accounts of recognition and appraisal respect in hand, we see that G&F arrive at a fallacious conclusion. One cannot infer, from the fact that a dignity culture affords all persons equal, inalienable rights to recognition respect, that the culture thereby limits those legitimately and publicly contemptible to “only those universally viewed as morally depraved” (sect. 6.1, para. 6). This is a *non sequitur* on either disambiguation of “respect.” Understood as the absence of recognition respect, contempt is *never* legitimate in a dignity culture; even the morally depraved possess dignity. Understood as the absence of appraisal respect, contempt may be legitimate in response to those other than the morally depraved (for a detailed example and defense, see Mason 2003). In close interpersonal contexts, for example, one may be warranted in giving priority to certain aspects of others' characters for the purpose of appraising their suitability for continued relationship; when they prove grossly substandard, one's reactive contempt may signal to them a need for reform. Ultimately, the corrosive effects of a reactive contempt that decays into nonreactive contempt may serve the important emotivational goal of dissolving the relationship (Frie & Shaver 2002; Gottman & Levenson 1992). Not only the morally depraved but also those more mundanely bad are thus, even in a dignity culture, legitimate targets for contempt.

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