

Macalester Bell
Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt
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Although I found myself rejecting Macalester Bell's main normative commitment---a commitment to defending contempt as an apt response to a cluster of vices that she calls the "vices of superiority"---I found her book to be interesting, thought-provoking, well-written, and enjoyable. Bell's treatment of the topic of contempt seems to be guided by Michelle Mason's "Contempt as a Moral Attitude" (Mason 2003), covering much of the same terrain and even replying to some of the same objections. However, Bell develops the ideas further and applies them in a specific context, which gives her space for original work. Because of her focus on a context of oppression---a context in which one may encounter inapt contempt such as racist contempt---Bell's discussion of contempt is particularly relevant for feminist theory.

For Bell, contempt, which is related to and yet distinguishable from both disgust and hatred, "is a way of negatively and comparatively regarding or attending to someone who is presented as falling below the contemnor's personal baseline. This form of regard constitutes a withdrawal from the target and may motivate further withdrawal" (46). Bell, like Mason, recognizes that negative attitudes can be responses either to what people do or to who they are, and that whereas resentment is a response to a *wrongdoing*, contempt does something that resentment cannot do: it responds to "*badbeing*." This feature of contempt, which Bell comments on in her first chapter in the course of defining contempt, raises some concerns that she addresses in subsequent chapters. For instance, she considers the objection that, by negatively regarding a person's whole self, contempt denies its target the respect due to all persons. Bell dispenses with this Kantian worry as Mason does, by invoking Stephen Darwall's distinction between "moral recognition respect" and "appraisal respect" (Darwall 1977), and arguing that contempt withholds only appraisal respect, which is appropriate because some people have indeed fallen short of an important norm, and are to be appraised accordingly.

Bell, following Mason, inquires first about whether contempt is "fitting" (or, to use Mason's term, "properly focused") and then about whether it is "apt" (or morally valuable). Chapter 2 focuses on the "fittingness" of contempt; an emotion may *appear* to

fit its target only because it does not present its target accurately, so when the inaccuracy is revealed, it becomes clear that the emotion is not fitting. There is reason to suspect that contempt may never be fitting: this "fittingness objection" claims that contempt is a globalist emotion, namely an emotion that presents its target's unworthy traits (the "badbeing" of its target) as global, and that all globalist emotions must be unfitting, because there is empirical evidence that no character traits are global (see Doris 2005). Bell affirms and develops some examples that illustrate Mason's reply to this objection, arguing that "globalist emotions are globalist in the sense that they present some traits as *more important* than others in an overall assessment of the target" (76, italics in original); a person who is the object of one's contempt may have other, contrary, traits, but the bad traits to which one's contempt is a (fitting) response are the traits that, *given one's relationship* to the person for whom one feels contempt, are (rightly) prioritized in one's overall evaluation of the person.

The most original part of the book begins in the third chapter, where Bell proposes that there is a particular set of vices that are contemptible. The idea is this: some vices consist in wrongly elevating one's own status and wanting (or even forcing) this elevated status to be acknowledged by others; Bell calls these vices the "vices of superiority" and uses the term "superbia" to indicate the attitude of someone with these vices, an attitude that involves ill will toward those who are thought to be of lower status and who are perhaps expected to show deference. The appropriate way to counter the wrongful elevation of status exhibited by a person with the attitude of superbia is to answer it with its opposite, namely something that diminishes the person's status and that indicates to the person and to others that the person's status is actually low. Contempt, Bell suggests, does just this. She seems to have two things in mind. The first is that a negative response to badbeing (assuming that this badbeing is the most important feature of the person manifesting it) is morally appropriate, and that superbia is or can be such a form of badbeing. The second is that contempt restores an equilibrium because the falsely elevated status that superbia creates is brought back to a proper level through contempt's debasing effect. Bell never claims that the vices of superiority are the *only* vices to which contempt is an appropriate response, but rather that contempt is *especially* appropriate as a response to the vices of superiority. It is because the attitude of superbia is damaging to relationships (with those who are degraded by the person who thinks him/herself superior) that it calls for a contemptuous response that will both intervene in the damage and pronounce the person's badbeing. It is not only personal relationships but, more widely, relations with anyone in one's moral community that can be damaged by superbia: "the vices of superiority impair our moral relationships insofar as they undermine a social system in which praiseworthy traits are esteemed and objectionable traits are disesteemed" (125).

Bell takes fitting contempt to be the best way (or perhaps the only way) to hold people responsible for their damaging attitude of superbia. The aim is to give the person exhibiting superbia a reason to undergo a change of character. Here Bell makes a claim that I worry may be false, and for which she does not offer empirical support: the claim is that by offering the person who evinces superbia a taste of his/her own medicine, "he gets some sense of what it feels like to be at the mercy of another's superbia, and this puts him into a position to better appreciate reasons to change his ways" (130). This point is

repeated in chapter 4 where Bell identifies the instrumental value of contempt, and states that "being the target of contempt can have motivational value" (158), a claim that is backed only by an example from *Pride and Prejudice*, and not by any empirical studies. It is repeated yet again, this time as a simple cause-and-effect statement later in that chapter: "If a target of contempt believes that the contempt directed at him is apt, then he will respond with shame and an attempt to ameliorate his character" (187). I suspect that human psychology does not tend to work quite so neatly. I am emphasizing this point because the empirical facts matter; if it turns out that some other approach is more effective at instigating character change in people with the vices of superiority, then contempt not only loses its instrumental value, but it may also be unjustified (see below), since its justification rests on its ability to intervene in the damage caused by superbia.

Chapter 4 does most of the normative work of the book, defending a list of the conditions that contempt must meet in order to be morally valuable (contempt's "aptness conditions"). The contempt must, first of all, be fitting by accurately presenting its target in the ways described in chapter 2, namely the target must really have the fault ascribed to him/her and this fault or vice must be, in the context of the relationship between contemnor and target, especially important in who the target is, and also sufficiently serious. The contempt must also be backed by morally defensible reasons; for instance, a racist does not have morally defensible reasons for contemning someone for the color of his/her skin, whereas, in contrast, the fact that superbia is damaging to a moral community is a morally defensible reason for contemning someone for his/her superbia. Furthermore, the contemnor must have evidence in support of the morally good reasons for contemning someone. There are several things that can undermine contempt's moral value. These include hypocrisy on the part of the contemnor, and the contemnor's unwillingness to consider forgiving (in place of contemning) the target should the target change in relevant respects. The moral value of contempt is also undermined when the contempt is unfair. Contempt is unfair when it disregards what should be excusing factors; here Bell gives the example of someone who, despite exhibiting the vices of superiority, cannot be fairly contemned because "her need to exact esteem at the expense of others is the result of feelings of profound shame and self-contempt instilled in her from a young age by her brutally abusive parents" (150). I will return to this last point, for I imagine that many of the vices of superiority have their roots in victimization or similarly bad experiences (including not only brutality, as in Bell's example, but also much milder, and quite commonplace, negative experiences), and it is complicated to determine how one is to treat a person whose present attitude of superbia traces to past abuse or other hardships that he/she has faced.

What, then, is the moral value of contempt that meets all of the "aptness conditions"? There is, Bell argues, both instrumental value (which I mentioned above) and noninstrumental value. The claim to noninstrumental value depends on Bell's assertion that "if you claim to value something but you aren't disposed to feel any negative emotions when what you claim to value is in jeopardy, there is reason to doubt that you actually value what you claim to value" (161); thus a person who has integrity must respond negatively when values are threatened. Because superbia threatens moral communities (because moral communities depend on people being "morally accountable

for their status claims" [163]), and contempt is the negative response that best answers superbia, one cannot, with integrity, value having a moral community unless one at least tries to cultivate an attitude of apt contempt. This whole argument hinges on contempt's being the best way (or perhaps Bell thinks it is the only way) to hold people accountable when their status claims take the form of the vices of superiority.

The last two chapters of the book focus specifically on contempt that is fueled by racism. Chapter 5 argues that "the best response to inapt, race-based contempt is to marshal a robust *counter-contempt* for those who harbor this objectionable attitude" (197; italics in original). Bell thinks counter-contempt is the best response partly because of how it benefits the targets of racist contempt; here Bell makes another empirical claim that she does not support with evidence, but it seems more plausible than her earlier empirical claim: "if targets of racist contempt can disengage and dismiss the racists as low [through counter-contempt], then their self-esteem is less likely to be compromised by the racists' contempt" (206). Chapter 6 engages with literature on repentance and forgiveness, and analyzes attempts by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Bell's graduate *alma mater*) to repent for its history of racism; Bell construes these attempts as a response to people's holding the University in contempt, and asks whether the University's acts of repentance for racist contempt provide a reason for those who have responded with apt contempt to overcome their contempt and forgive.

By the end of the book, Bell had certainly deepened my understanding of contempt, but she did not win my allegiance to it. My sense is that cases in which contempt is morally the best response to the vices of superiority are much more rare than Bell believes; I think of contempt as an attitude of last resort, and not something that one would want to cultivate. In part this is because I am skeptical of the empirical claim that contemning a person will typically prompt this person to change his/her character, and so I would at least need to be shown some data to be convinced of contempt's instrumental value. And in part it is because I think there are often other---and better---ways of expressing a negative judgment about and holding someone responsible for superbia.

I take it that there is often a complex psychological story behind a person's attitude of superbia, and that this story has a bearing on whether it is appropriate to present the trait of superbia as *more important* than the person's other traits when one engages in the kind of overall assessment of the person that globalist attitudes require on Bell's account. If a person's faults are tied to his/her own vulnerability---for instance, think of a person whose tendency to put others down stems from his/her own insecurity---then this underlying vulnerability, rather than the more superficial vice, should be treated as more significant. It is not that someone like this who exhibits the vices of superiority should be *excused* (as Bell suggests), but rather that their vices should never have been given "evaluative prioritization" (77), and deprioritizing them would render contempt unfitting. (Though to Bell's credit, this model of vulnerability underlying superbia may not account for many cases where inapt contempt is directed at a target on the basis of race, for in these cases the attitude of superbia may simply have been learned from other racists.)

Contempt is incompatible with love, but one can still hold people whom one loves responsible for their character. One can love people, *faults and all*, precisely because one does not let their faults become, in the context of one's relationship, their most significant features. I am not suggesting that one love everyone, but one can still approach others sympathetically, and thus with a recognition that people are vulnerable and that moral luck and the prevalence of conflicts in moral life often foreclose the possibility of their avoiding wrongdoing---and badbeing; one can then be willing to negatively assess others' shortcomings (which could include the vices of superiority) *without* allowing the shortcomings to become their most important features. If one does this, one can hold them responsible for superbia without resorting to a globalist attitude such as one of contempt. One can *either* sympathetically *or* contemptuously hold people responsible for their superbia and for the damage that it does to others. One would have to investigate empirically whether the sympathetic or the contemptuous approach had greater *instrumental* value (for example, which one more effectively prompts the target to change), but when it is possible to achieve it, a sympathetic approach strikes me as noninstrumentally more valuable.

Even if my point stands, however, it is only due to Bell's careful analysis of contempt that I could formulate it at all. Her book led me to consider contempt in a way I had never done before, and I found it well worth reading.

References

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