

## Chapter 9

# Contempt: At the Limits of Reactivity<sup>1</sup>

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Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?<sup>2</sup>

—Joseph Welch, to Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Army-McCarthy Hearings, June 9, 1954

As I write this chapter, political discussion and debate in the United States has in many quarters descended into public expressions of mutual contempt.<sup>3</sup> It would be difficult to argue that the country is well served by the spectacle. Contempt's corrosive influence here appears to threaten the bonds of citizenship necessary to hold a people together as a nation. The scene with which I begin dates to a time when the United States was no less polarized and its political discourse no less expressive of mutual contempt. I cite it in this context not on the assumption that anyone needs reminding of Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of bullying, fear-mongering, and contempt, but to attend to the contemptuous reaction of a man whose contemporary double many would welcome as a national hero: U.S. Army Special Counsel and Boston attorney Joseph N. Welch.

In live televised hearings on the afternoon of June 9, 1954, viewers witnessed a remarkable exchange between Welch and McCarthy. The Army-McCarthy hearings had been going on for weeks, when McCarthy revealed, truthfully, that a young legal associate of Welch's (Frederick G. Fisher, Jr.) had been a member of the National Lawyers' Guild, an organization that the House Committee on Un-American Activities had designated a "Communist front." In the context of the "Red Scare," the public revelation had the potential to destroy Fisher's career. In response to McCarthy's gratuitous attack on a man not present to defend himself, Welch let loose: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness.

Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"<sup>4</sup>

As I interpret the scene, Welch's reaction to McCarthy is an expression of contempt, albeit importantly distinct from McCarthy's in being warranted.<sup>5</sup> Welch's public expression of contempt, moreover, was instrumental in stopping McCarthy in his tracks at the pinnacle of his power, thereby ending an earlier ugly era in U.S. history.<sup>6</sup> Welch's exchange with McCarthy thus locates in a public context an attitude whose moral force and import I have defended previously in the context of intimate interpersonal relationships, such as marriage (Mason 2003). Moral philosophers skeptical or wary of such claims of force and import caution us about contempt's deleterious effects.<sup>7</sup> Layman worries about the corrosive effects of contempt in public discourse, meanwhile, find expression in commentary on current events.<sup>8</sup>

I stand by my previous defense of the moral force and import of properly focused contempt in the intimate contexts that have been my primary concern. Here, I respond to lingering concerns about its moral propriety by proposing that they reflect the unique place that contempt occupies among the Strawsonian reactive attitudes. Cognizant of the political climate in which I write, I also acknowledge, and explain why, contempt merits special caution in certain public fora. To anticipate, I shall argue for a conception of contempt that supports its role as a gatekeeper that straddles a morally significant divide between certain reactive attitudes and Strawsonian objective attitudes.<sup>9</sup> On one side of the divide, what I call reactive contempt can, as in the case of Welch's address to McCarthy, do the important moral work of calling the contemptible to account for themselves. Although such reactive contempt may motivate the contemnor to turn away from another in refusal of a form of respect, moreover, this is a respect that the contemptible must earn. Where a target of reactive contempt refuses or otherwise fails to accept accountability for her transgression and consequent need for reform, the other's reactive contempt may decay into a form of nonreactive contempt, a Strawsonian objective attitude that joins other objective attitudes on the opposing side of the divide.

Recalcitrance in the face of another's reactive contempt thus comes at the price of finding oneself the target of the other's contemptuously toned objective attitude and, at best, regarded as a patient when confronted with the contempt-eliciting features of oneself. Moreover, although objective attitudes ultimately are compatible with whatever respect we plausibly hold is morally obligatory, reactive contempt may decay into an objective attitude susceptible to distortion. It is perhaps especially so in public contexts where polarizing influences have induced among opponents mutual demonization. Contempt is a rightly worrisome attitude, then: the reactive contempt of another at best serves as a harbinger that its target has reached the limits of reactivity;

at worst, it prepares a path that terminates with its target banished beyond reactivity's reach.

## CONTEMPT AMONG THE REACTIVE ATTITUDES

Appealing to a taxonomy familiar to philosophers, I previously have defended the inclusion of a form of contempt within the class of what P. F. Strawson dubbed the reactive attitudes (Mason 2003). For Strawson, this is a class of attitudes that responds to the quality of will—good, ill, or indifferent—that we and others manifest to us and those of concern to us, among which he includes gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, "hurt feelings," indignation, a "sense of compunction," feeling guilty or remorseful, shame, and reciprocal adult love (Strawson 1962).<sup>10</sup> Drawing on paradigm examples, as well as semantic clues, and taking as my comparator resentment, my earlier work conceptualizes contempt as a reactive attitude that partly consists in an evaluative presentation of 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," an ideal that the contemnor endorses (Mason 2003).<sup>11</sup> In its properly focused form, I there argued, contempt is morally justifiable.

Although my original account of contempt's moral psychology is consistent with the emerging empirical literature, I begin here with some refinement. The empirical literature supports viewing contempt's cognitive appraisal component to consist in appraising its object as inferior and unworthy in virtue of some feature the subject views as *intrinsically negative* and *socially relevant* (Fischer and Roseman 2007). An *intrinsically negative* feature is a feature viewed as a defect inherent in the object; a *socially relevant* feature is one connected to the subject's relational goals (Roseman 2001). Features that meet such criteria range from immoral character to manifest incompetence and stupidity (Hutcherson and Gross 2011). In the Welch-McCarthy exchange, Welch's reaction to McCarthy indeed is elicited by features of McCarthy that Welch views as both intrinsically negative and socially relevant: McCarthy's cruelty and recklessness. It is in virtue of these features that Welch regards McCarthy as Fischer's and his inferior.

In continuing to hone our understanding of the moral psychology of contempt, it remains useful to proceed in light of comparators for which a larger store of empirical study exists. Here, I propose shame for the role. Why shame? First, the empirical literature on shame remains more extensive than that on contempt.<sup>12</sup> Second, shame suits my example. Although Welch's contempt literally issues an appeal to McCarthy's sense of decency, Welch might as well have asked of McCarthy, "Have you no shame?"<sup>13</sup> Third, shame is the first-person correlate of contempt—by which I mean both that shame is the

attitude typically prompted in a person by the elicitors that prompt another's contempt for that person<sup>14</sup> and that shame is the attitude warranted in a person by conditions that warrant another's contempt for that person (Mason 2010).

### Reactive Contempt and the Call for Shame (versus Guilt)

How might we hone contempt's cognitive appraisal against empirical psychological findings about shame? Philosophers have long noted shame's self-regarding character; psychologists include it among the so-called self-conscious emotions.<sup>15</sup> Not only does the experience of self-conscious emotions require that the subject have a self-concept, the cognitive appraisal component of such emotions requires that one appraise oneself with reference to what psychologists call an "identity goal." One's identity goals need not incorporate—nor even be congruent with—moral standards. For instance, I might have an identity goal of being an accomplished Scrabble player. Confronting a mediocre opponent, perhaps I miss an obvious opportunity for a triple word score. This is an identity-goal incongruent event for me. If I appraise it as such, and (as we shall see) I attribute the cause to some so-called *stable, global aspect* of myself, we can expect the event to elicit my negatively valenced shame. Notably, if I have an anti-social identity goal—perhaps I fashion myself the best safecracker in the lower 48—then I might experience shame if the heist fails to come off due to my fear I've altogether lost my touch. Shame thus need not involve a moralized appraisal of the self, although it may do so if one's identity goals possess moral content. For example, I might aspire to be a patient and loving mother, an attentive and honest spouse, a just citizen, and generous benefactor. Failing with respect to these identity goals might then elicit my shame.

The Scrabble and safecracker examples could be mistaken as offering support for a common dogma of philosophical moral psychology about shame: that shame is promiscuous in its eliciting events as contrasted with guilt (Lamb 1983). Psychological study in fact suggests that it is *not* a difference in type of *eliciting event* (e.g., a moral wrongdoing versus a morally permissible action) but a difference in the *locus of causal attribution* for the eliciting event that predicts whether a subject will experience shame or guilt (Tracy and Robins 2004).<sup>16</sup> All that is necessary as regards an eliciting event for guilt or shame is that the subject appraise the event as relevant to the subject's identity goal(s)—which the subject will do just in case the event is "important and meaningful for who [that] person is and who he or she would like to be (i.e., for one's identity)" (Tracy and Robins 2004). For example, if I miss making the triple word score and appraise the event as incongruent with my identity goal of being an excellent Scrabble player because I attribute the cause of the event to what Tracy and Robins call *unstable, specific*

aspects of myself—for example, to a lack of effort in this instance—we can expect the event to elicit my feeling of guilt. In contrast, if I appraise the same event as incongruent with my identity goal because I attribute its cause to what Tracy and Robins call *stable, global*, aspects of myself—for example, my lexical incompetence—we can expect the same event to instead elicit my feeling shame (Tracy and Robins 2004). The same is true when one views the eliciting event as an instance of moral wrongdoing. That is, my wrongdoing will tend to elicit not guilt but, rather, shame if being moral is part of my identity goal and I attribute the wrongdoing to, for example, my selfishness (a *stable, global aspect* of myself) as opposed to not taking time in this instance to determine a fair distribution (an *unstable, specific aspect* of myself).

According to a second dogma in some corners of moral philosophy, guilt (like resentment) requires as a condition of either intelligibility or fittingness that its target has done wrong or wronged someone; not so of shame.<sup>17</sup> Taken as a condition of intelligibility, this view implies that the combat survivor who reports feeling guilty while acknowledging she did nothing wrong in surviving when her comrades fell misidentifies her feelings as those of guilt. This seems implausible, particularly if the survivor ascribes the causal locus for the identity-incongruent eliciting event to some unstable, specific aspect of herself and exhibits the action tendencies typically associated with guilt (not to mention its familiar phenomenology). To be sure, we may do well to advise the survivor that she should not feel guilty, as she has done nothing wrong. That, however, assumes not that wrongdoing is a condition of guilt's intelligibility but, rather, that wrongdoing is a condition of either guilt's fittingness or its moral warrant.<sup>18</sup> The suggestion as to intelligibility conditions, moreover, is revisionary in failing to conform with the empirical data related to guilt's eliciting events. Finally, the latter position, concerning guilt's fittingness, requires a substantive defense inconsistent with the claim's status as dogma.

In previous work on shame, I distinguish what I call the *wide, esteem evaluation* of the self involved in shame with guilt's *narrow, liability evaluation* of the self (Mason 2010). We now have a finer contrast between shame as a *stable, global appraisal* of the self and guilt as an *unstable, specific appraisal* of the self. The finer contrast helps to explain the distinction I meant to mark in originally contrasting shame as an esteem appraisal versus guilt as a liability appraisal, an explanation that further illuminates contempt.

I take it that to esteem a person, whether another or oneself, is one way to value a person. Specifically, it is to regard a person positively due to some feature thought to manifest the person's excellence when measured against some standard the valuer endorses. Conversely, disesteeming a person, whether another or oneself, is one way of devaluing a person: it is to regard one negatively due to some feature thought to manifest the person's inferiority when measured against some standard the valuer endorses. Bringing this

to bear on our topic: the emotion or attitude of shame is felt self-disesteem. Recognizing that a stable feature of oneself is incongruent with one's identity goal, one values one's actual self less than one does an ideal self who escapes this identity-goal incongruent feature. In doing so, one need make no explicit judgment to the effect that one's actual self is less worthy of esteem than one's ideal self; it is sufficient that the recognition that one possesses an enduring feature of the self that blocks compliance with one's identity goal makes one *feel* bad about oneself in a way that signals a reduction in the esteem one regards as one's due.

Is felt guilt likewise felt disesteem? Here an answer requires more nuanced treatment. This is because we have a conception of guilt according to which it is a binary concept, as well as a conception according to which it is a scalar concept. The binary conception of guilt is familiar from the context of criminal law, where juries are charged with delivering a binary verdict: the accused is either guilty or not guilty as charged. This binary conception of guilt is not amenable to analysis in terms of felt disesteem. When one speaks of *feeling* guilty, in contrast, one instead is best understood to be operating with a scalar conception of guilt as an emotion or attitude, not as indicating that one occupies a particular node in a binary verdict. We thus competently speak of varying degrees of *felt* guilt just as we competently speak of lower versus higher degrees of esteem. There is a case, then, for regarding guilt as, like shame, felt disesteem. In the case of felt guilt, ascribing an identify-incongruent event to some unstable, specific feature of oneself, one feels bad about oneself in a way that signals a reduction in the esteem one regards as one's due.

In addition to the difference in causal attribution, there remains another difference between felt guilt and shame as appraisals modulating esteem: in cases where one feels even very guilty—and does not feel shame—the corresponding impact on self-esteem appears to operate differently than in the case of shame, due to a difference in scope. In the case of guilt, the relevant unstable, specific aspect of oneself to which one causally attributes one's identity-goal noncompliance enables one to largely insulate one's store of esteem against reductions of greater scope, such as those seen in some cases of shame. This is traceable to the fact that the unstable, specific feature of oneself to which the guilt-eliciting event is causally attributed is not viewed as revealing anything about how one is likely to fare in attaining one's identity goal in future; in short, the guilt-inducing event implicates no enduring identity-goal incongruent feature of oneself. This helps explain why, in the wake of guilt, a commitment to act differently functions in relation to the self much as a sincere apology and reparations to make the wronged “whole” again function in relation to another: to elicit a forgiveness that reflects recognition that no greater, possibly irreparable, demerit to the esteem of the target is due.

In short, when one feels shame upon recognizing that one is a bumbling safecracker or that one's lexical powers are too feeble to beat any but the most mediocre of Scrabble players, one experiences an attitude of felt disesteem, an attitude that may be mirrored by the contempt of others who appraise one in light of the relevant identity goals. Any aficionado of safecracking or Scrabble playing, for example, could intelligibly view the incompetent Scrabbler or safecracker with contempt.<sup>19</sup> What is more, one might be accountable to the safecracking or Scrabble aficionados if one occupies some special relationship to them. Perhaps this is true of the safecracker's partner in crime and the Scrabble player's corporate sponsors: they have, due to their relationships, special standing to hold certain others accountable to *them* for complying with the identity goals in question. Thus, although others' contempt may (merely) reflect their low estimation of you as measured in light of some identity goal that they endorse, further, their contempt—or at least its expression—may serve to call you to account for your noncompliance with an identity goal that they have in a legitimate claim on you to meet. The moral psychological points canvassed previously suggest that if you, too, endorse the relevant identity goal, their call will be met by your shame (Mason 2010).<sup>20</sup>

### Moral Contempt and the Call for Moral Shame (versus Moral Guilt)

Not all of us aspire to be expert safecrackers or great Scrabble players. Doing what is morally right and avoiding what is morally wrong, however, is likely to figure in our identity goals and, thus, regulate our moral guilt and shame; likewise with pursuing moral virtue and avoiding moral vice. Such considerations inform those identity goals to which we have reason to expect others to aspire, as well. If it is correct to conceptualize resentment as the second-person correlate of guilt, and contempt as the second-person correlate of shame, then we will be prone to resentment or moral contempt in the wake of others' moral transgressions. Generalizing from the case of shame versus guilt, we would expect cases where one attributes others' moral transgressions to some unstable, specific aspect of themselves to elicit one's resentment, as compared to stable, global attributions, which would be expected to elicit moral contempt.<sup>21</sup> On this model, the feeling of resentment would then involve some disesteem of the wrongdoer, simply in virtue of her having a feature manifest on the occasion of the eliciting event in her culpable failure to do right. If an eliciting event or pattern of eliciting events were taken as evidence that implicated some more enduring, stable aspect of the person's character, moreover, an ensuing moral contempt would involve a disesteem of greater scope: for the person viewed as, for example, a liar, a cheat, an adulterous cad, a cruel and reckless sort, and so on.

To return to my initial example, if Welch's contempt for McCarthy is fitting, then McCarthy's exposure of Fisher indeed can be causally attributed to McCarthy's cruel and reckless character. If we understand such cruelty and recklessness as vices of character, then Welch's contempt is aptly regarded as moral contempt.<sup>22</sup> Welch's contempt is well expressed, moreover, by way of addressing a challenge to McCarthy to demonstrate that he in fact retains a sense of decency, or moral shame. It is so, that is, if we are correct in conceptualizing shame as the first-person correlate of contempt. So conceptualized, McCarthy's responding with shame would indicate that he, too, accurately appraises himself as cruel and reckless and, moreover, that these features of himself are in conflict with an identity goal that he holds himself accountable to meet (Mason 2010).<sup>23</sup>

Now, none of the foregoing establishes what behavior will be motivated by uptake of the appraisals in which contempt and shame partly consist. It is reported that shortly after their exchange, Welch turned and walked out of the Senate Committee Hearings, leaving a shaken McCarthy to ask aloud "What happened?"<sup>24</sup> Welch's behavior here accords with the motivational profile, or action tendency, associated with contempt in the empirical literature (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Whereas angry emotions or attitudes are associated with motivating confrontation and aggression, contempt is associated more with withdrawal from, and exclusion of, its target from the contemnor's social circle (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Because an obstacle to a person's goals—particularly an obstacle whose removal the person can control—is associated with eliciting anger, the emotion's motivational tendency of confrontation and aggression is understandably directed to in fact removing the obstacle. In contrast, it is comparatively difficult for the person who experiences contempt for another to control the manifestation of the stable, global feature to which she causally attributes the other's contempt-worthiness (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Had McCarthy's revelation about Fisher been an uncharacteristic indiscretion, we can imagine Welch responding with angry resentment, demanding an apology or retraction (here understood to remove the relevant obstacle), and continuing the proceedings. Welch instead ascribed to McCarthy an inexcusable cruelty and recklessness, and eventually walked out the door. Despite what such an action tendency might lead one to expect, there is empirical support for the view that it is compatible with inducing its target to reform in the direction of the relevant identity goal (Melwani and Barsade 2011).<sup>25</sup> To be sure, McCarthy's faults of character would have taken, optimistically, a very long time to correct and his acknowledgment of them, if achieved, would have come late. But Welch's expression of contempt and subsequent social exclusion of McCarthy arguably affected a recognition of his faults to which McCarthy had previously remained blind. The eventual ramifications for McCarthy perhaps mark one respect in which

my example encourages pessimism where, however, a more optimistic view has a place.

### An Initial Objection and Response

Although I submit that the foregoing account of reactive contempt tells in favor of including it among Strawsonian reactive attitudes, it remains an odd fit in view of prominent contemporary philosophical accounts of the reactive attitudes as a class. In particular, my suggestion that reactive contempt is an accountability-seeking attitude invites challenge from influential interpretations of Strawson's reactive attitudes due to R. Jay Wallace and Stephen Darwall. Darwall, for example, defends an account of the reactive attitudes where they resemble Austinian speech acts in having the illocutionary force of addressing a demand to the target of the attitude, a demand that calls for response (Darwall 2006). Among the so-called felicity conditions for such address, moreover, is that the attitude's target has violated a moral obligation that the subject has authority, as a representative person, to press. I challenge this deontic, imperative interpretation of the reactive attitudes elsewhere (Mason 2017a). The relevant point for my purposes here is that whether an account of the reactive attitudes as accountability-seeking forms of address to their targets provides a principled reason for including resentment and guilt in the class of reactive attitudes while excluding contempt.

Such an interpretation of the reactive attitudes threatens to exclude contempt for two main reasons: First, the aversive motivational profile of contempt, like that of shame, appears to preclude its even implicitly addressing its target: the contemnor excludes, shuns, or otherwise moves to bar the target from his or her social circle (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Second, it seems wrong to characterize the illocutionary force of reactive contempt as essentially imperative, as is purportedly the case of other reactive attitudes. In appraising you as having transgressed some identity goal I assign to you, which transgression I attribute to some relatively stable and global feature of you, I do not thereby hold you to account to an ideal that I necessarily have standing to *demand* that you, as a matter of my right, adopt. Depending both on the identity goal and the nature of our relationship, I might have such standing but it is not required for reactive contempt to be warranted.

In response to the first point, contempt's aversive motivational profile counts as an objection to its status as a reactive attitude only on the assumption that communicative address cannot take aversive forms. Darwall writes of a reactive attitude's address metaphorically, as being accompanied by a RSVP. This genteel manner of calling for a reply—literally, "Répondez, s'il vous plaît" or "Please reply"—seems an odd candidate for a mode of address between malfactors and their victims. A stern expression

of resentment—"You've wronged me and I'm not going to abide such behavior!"—may succeed in addressing a demand that you apologize and otherwise comply with your obligations. I imagine it may do so even as your wronged dinner guest storms out of your home. Likewise, a stern expression of contempt—"Have you no sense of decency, sir?"—can send the signal that some self-examination and change is in order on the part of McCarthy, even as Welch walks out of the room. Granting a conception of reactive attitudes as speech acts that address a call for reply, then, does not force one to grant that the call must be placed in a noncontentious, let alone polite, mode.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the second point, concerning the reactive attitudes' purportedly imperative illocutionary force: Note, first, that in some cases contempt's accountability seeking *does* take the form of a (perhaps implicit) demand. For example, suppose McCarthy's cruelty and recklessness lead him to demean and physically abuse his wife. Imagine, further, that her familiarity with his vices contributes to her responding not with resentment but contempt. Here, the eliciting events—the abuse—clearly are violations of moral obligations. Consequently, we can understand McCarthy's wife's contempt as having an imperative illocutionary force. Acknowledging that *anyone* would be warranted in demanding that McCarthy cease and desist from abusing his wife, must their contempt implicate a *demand* that he rid himself of his cruelty and recklessness? As his wife, Jean McCarthy arguably has the legitimate claim on the content of Joe's character required to render such a demand felicitous. I see no problem, then, in understanding her contempt to possess an imperative illocutionary force. The same demand—insofar as it implicates changing the content of Welch's character, as opposed to simply ceasing and desisting from abusing his wife—would be presumptuous for a mere stranger, however, to press.<sup>27</sup> Recall here the example of the Scrabbler. Certain people, for example her corporate sponsors and fans, stand in a relation to the Scrabbler in which I do not. Thus, even if it were apt for me as a Scrabble lover to regulate my esteem for her in accordance with how well she approximates the identity goal I associate with the ideal Scrabbler, the Scrabbler is not properly held accountable *to me* for approximating the goal, however much it may be true that her corporate sponsors and fans may thus hold her to account to them.

Is a mere stranger's contempt in response to the news that McCarthy's cruelty and recklessness led him to abuse his wife, therefore, merely a nonreactive form of grading or necessarily inapt in virtue of presuming an authority the stranger lacks?<sup>28</sup> No. There is conceptual space for a response to wrongdoers and malfeasors that falls between registering a non-accountability-seeking esteem modulation and addressing an accountability-seeking *demand* that orders conduct or character change. Indeed, the metaphor of an RSVP presupposes this space. As noted, an RSVP literally issues a request, not a demand. Indeed, an RSVP could not felicitously issue a demand. The request,

moreover, is one that its issuer is in a position to make and that calls for a reply. Understanding an appeal as a (perhaps urgent) request, there is conceptual space for instances of reactive attitudes that are accountability-seeking in appealing to their targets to reply by holding themselves accountable to a standard, compliance with which the subject has no right, strictly speaking, to demand.<sup>29</sup>

At this point, however, we arrive at two noteworthy distinctions between moral contempt and moral resentment. Assuming that each one of us has a legitimate claim on each other that he or she refrain from moral wrongdoing, each one of us has standing as a representative person to hold each other accountable by demanding they do no wrong. This stance, we have seen, renders either resentment or contempt not only intelligible but fitting responses to moral wrongdoing, depending on the nature of the features to which the person's wrongdoing is causally attributable. However, first, the greater epistemic burdens that accompany a legitimate ascription of an event's cause to stable, global features that warrant reacting to another with contempt arguably are not so easily met as are the epistemic burdens of resentment. Although not altogether precluding the possibility that the former burdens may be met in other contexts, the causal attributions that render contempt fitting are more likely to prove apt when the subject and object stand in some intimate relation to one another, that is, some relationship more intimate than that of stranger to the same. Second, even if causal attribution of a moral transgression to a stable, global feature of a person is apt in a particular instance, it does not follow that morality thereby permits anyone in the epistemic position to make such an attribution to demand that acknowledged moral malfeasors alter their characters, as opposed to their deeds. Thus, whereas moral resentment's connection to moral demands is conceptual, that of moral contempt is contingent on the parties standing in some particular relation to one another, one more intimate than that of generic stranger to the same.

## THE LIMITS OF REACTIVITY

My argument thus far has aimed to bolster the case for a conception of reactive contempt according to which it may, as in the example of Welch's address to McCarthy, do the important moral work of calling the contemptible to account for themselves. In making that case, however, I noted that the nature of the appraisal partially constitutive of contempt as well as its aversive action tendency, are two features of the attitude that elicit worries that do not similarly plague most moral philosophers' view of the moral propriety of resentment. I now want to examine those worries in light of my proposal that we view contempt as occupying a special position among the reactive

attitudes, a proposal that yields lessons concerning how we might do well to regulate our contempt in light of its position at the limits of reactivity.

I describe contempt's position as one that straddles the limits of reactivity because the nature of the appraisal and action tendencies that partially constitute moral contempt as I've described it are such that—absent its targets working to change stable, global features of themselves—the possibility of continued mutual community between the parties is limited, perhaps foreclosed. Empirical studies suggest that a history of interacting with a target who flouts assigned identity goals often begins with a subject responding with anger that, if ineffective in prompting the requisite change in the target, transforms into what I am calling reactive contempt with increasing instances of transgression (Fischer and Roseman 2007). This transformation likely tracks a transformation from attributing the eliciting event to unstable, specific features to stable, global features of the target. Contempt thus may originate in circumstances of increasing doubt that the target is likely to change or reform. My proposal in locating contempt at the limits of reactivity is to suggest that such doubts can fuel a reactive contempt that functions as a “last call” for recognition. That is, in the absence of the targets of reactive contempt taking measures to reform themselves, the only recourse for the contemptor committed to honoring or otherwise upholding the identity goal that the contemptible flout might be to remove them from the circle of persons with whom she reactively engages. To do so is to regard the contemptible as an apt target for the objective attitudes.<sup>30</sup> In this way, reactive contempt can decay into a form of nonreactive contempt, a Strawsonian objective attitude—call it objective contempt—that joins other objective attitudes on the opposing side of an accountability divide.

Common to both positively and negatively toned, fitting, “nonstrategic” instances of the objective attitude is the fact that its targets satisfy conditions that excuse or exempt them from the scope of the reactive attitudes. If the reactive contemptor regards her target's recalcitrance as indicative of an inability to change, the target may satisfy one of the exempting conditions. Perhaps, however, the target is not unable but unwilling to change. The reactive contemptor then may strategically attempt to view her recalcitrant target otherwise than through the lens of the reactive attitudes, thereby avoiding in her view needless emotional strain (Mason 2014). In either event, the contemptor regards the target no longer as a responsible agent but, rather, as what Strawson calls a subject for treatment, “as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided” (Strawson 1962).

Now, in some cases the cessation of a relationship under such circumstances, although it may be tragic, also may be altogether for the best. In the case of a marriage turned toxic due to the reprehensible narcissism of a

spouse, for example, we need find no fault with a wife's reactive contempt on the grounds that it motivated her to file for divorce and be done with her spouse.<sup>31</sup> Neither must we find reason to censure Welch's reactive contempt on the grounds that it served to ostracize McCarthy from public life. For those who remain concerned that the wife and Welch thereby deny their targets a form of respect, I readily concede the point: Reactive contempt may motivate one to literally turn away from another in refusal of a form of respect. The form of respect that is eroded by the negative esteem appraisals that partially constitute reactive contempt is appraisal respect, itself a form of esteem (Darwall 1977). The contemptor's deficit of esteem for his target explains why he is likely to deny the target the trappings of appraisal respect. But in denying the target both this esteem and its trappings, the contemptor does not thereby deny the target the kind of respect plausibly owed to just anyone. As Darwall's discussion of appraisal respect was intended in part to show, whatever respect we can be said to morally owe others, appraisal respect is not it (Darwall 1977; Mason 2017b). Appraisal respect must be earned; finding oneself the object of another's contempt suggests that one is failing in the task.

Why suppose this risks inviting objective contempt? Because whereas the call to moral shame and reform I have associated with reactive contempt presumes its target can exercise agency over the relevant features of her character, a failure to respond with some evident exercise of that agency invites the contemptor's reification of those features into a caricature of the person him- or herself: He is a demagogue; she is a liar and a cheat. This reification can only serve to intensify the contemptor's aversion to her target, who the contemptor now views most prominently as possessing features that render the target constitutionally subpar when measured against a standard to which the moral contemptor presumes any person has reason to aspire. Worse, if confronted with no prospects for controlling the features at her contempt's source or exiting the social space inhabited by her target, the contemptor might be motivated not only to withhold appraisal respect but to jettison a morally obligatory recognition respect for her target, thereby failing to give weight to the consideration that her target remains a person in deliberations that concern her treatment of him. Thus, although the objective attitude ultimately is compatible with affording its target recognition respect, it warrants special caution when emotionally toned with contempt.

It should now be clear that the effect of objective contempt to reify a caricature of another in terms of features in virtue of which she is found contemptible can both block forms of engagement more robust than affording each other the bare minimum we morally owe and risk motivating noncompliance with even such basic moral obligations. I suspect that such distortions of contempt are most likely to appear in contexts where people have already

been primed to caricature others who manifest features incongruent with the features they value in persons. They are so because, in such times, we often find ourselves subject to a rhetoric that aims to portray those who do not share our values as utterly unlike ourselves, as so far removed from all that we value and hold dear that holding them accountable to a valued identity goal appears no more apt than asking the leopard to change its spots. Normatively expecting nothing of them, we regard such persons as “beneath” our reactive contempt and, subsequently, more readily fail to afford them the recognition respect that is properly demanded by all from all. Because the political sphere in a democratic society is (as well it should be) one place where divergent values are likely to be manifest, it is especially susceptible—particularly when polarized by inflammatory rhetoric and demagoguery—to encouraging the reifying potential of contempt to hold sway.

Although I am on record defending prioritizing certain of our intimates’ features when determining whether contempt for them is fitting and morally apt (Mason 2003), the situation is very different in contexts where polarizing influences have induced mutual demonization among those who are otherwise strangers. We already have empirical evidence that contempt is more readily elicited when a stranger is responsible for a transgression than when a friend is responsible for the same transgression (Fischer and Roseman, 2007). Worse, in contexts where certain social groups are stigmatized with low status, contempt is sometimes elicited solely on the basis of a target’s membership in that group (Fischer and Giner-Sorolla 2016). Whenever we inhabit a sphere of stigmatized strangers, then, we should be especially on guard against distorting influences on contempt.

## CONCLUSION

I began with a vignette taken from troubled times in a nation’s history in the hopes of offering a lesson for troubled times of our own. My account of contempt makes clear, I trust, why Welch’s expressed contempt for McCarthy was both fitting and morally apt. Indeed, I find Welch’s reaction morally admirable and, as I write, hope for more who would act such as he in dark times.

At the same time, I have argued that contempt occupies a special role as gatekeeper to a subclass of reactive attitudes that functions to hold us accountable to standards of character and, moreover, that it straddles a morally significant accountability divide. The moral and social costs of a person being located on the objective side of that divide in the wake of another’s reactive contempt are, I cautioned, great. Thus, although we need not demure from a properly focused reactive contempt that calls out the demagogue, the

liar, and the cheat, we must remain vigilant in circumstances that encourage a slide from thus holding another to account for his bad character to viewing him as altogether outside the scope of our moral consideration.

## NOTES

1. For feedback on drafts of the current work and recent conversation on the topic of contempt, I am grateful to participants and audience members at the University of Louisville Neglected Emotions conference and at the Brown University Workshop on the Moral Psychology of Contempt, especially Felicia Nimue Ackerman, Nomy Arpaly, Macalester Bell, Andreas Elpidorou, Bennett Helm, Boyoung Kim, Bertram Malle, Ira Roseman, and David Sussman. I also benefited more generally from discussion on the topics of contempt, shame, and the reactive attitudes with: Bernard Reginster; Brown graduate students Anna Brinkerhoff, Julia Frankh, Tobias Fuchs, and Yongming Han; and students in my 2017 Brown undergraduate seminar on valuing persons, namely, Ameyo Attila, Abel Girma, Ekaterina Kryuchkova, David Moon, and Federico Torti.

2. This exchange between Welch and McCarthy is available for view online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po5GIFba5Yg> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTwDUpbQHJg>. Retrieved Nove. 19, 2017.

3. The run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, provided a rich harvest of examples of contempt and its expression among the candidates. In one hopefully not prescient expression of her contempt for Trump, Hillary Clinton warned, “I’m the last thing standing between you [i.e., the voters] and the apocalypse” (Mark Leibovich, *New York Times*, October 11, 2016). In a less politically wise such expression, she referred to some of Trump’s supporters as belonging in a “basket of deplorables” (*New York Times*, September 10, 2016).

4. For a newspaper report of the exchange, see: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0609.html#article>.

5. After discussing the episode with an attorney who spent much of his career at Hale and Dorr, the storied firm for which Welch worked, I am inclined to believe that Welch’s reaction to McCarthy was a well-orchestrated piece of political theater (personal communication with Stephen Oleskey). If so, then Welch was merely feigning contempt (though I have no reason to doubt he was in any case genuinely contemptuous of McCarthy). I do not think this feature of the example, if true, undermines the argument I use it to launch. I take my interpretation of Welch’s (perhaps feigned) expression being one of contempt to be fairly uncontroversial. As one reporter who witnessed the exchange first-hand writes, “Some 62 years ago, as a young reporter I sat at the press table in the Senate Caucus Room during the historic Army-McCarthy hearings, watching defense lawyer Joseph Welch irately walk out, memorably expressing his contempt for Republican Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy” (Jules Witcover, “Trump Blusters Shamelessly On, Reminiscent of Joe McCarthy,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 2016).

Given recent media comparisons of McCarthy’s demeanor with that of Trump, former FBI director James Comey is likely to come to mind as Welch’s modern-day double.



Just one day shy of the sixty-third anniversary of the Welch-McCarthy exchange, Comey appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee and testified about Trump in a manner that at least one columnist noted manifested “Comey’s barely concealed contempt for Trump, who he said he suspected ‘might lie about the nature of our meeting’” ([http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2017/06/08/the\\_comey\\_hearing\\_was\\_extraordinary.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/06/08/the_comey_hearing_was_extraordinary.html)).

6. Approximately six months later—on December 2, 1954—the U.S. Senate voted to censure McCarthy for “contempt of a Senate Elections subcommittee that investigated his conduct and financial affairs, for abuse of its members, and for his insults to the Senate itself during the censure proceeding” (*New York Times*, December 2, 2011). McCarthy died three years later, at the age of 47, due to liver failure rumored to have been exacerbated by heavy drinking. Given that Welch’s contempt might be said to itself be a response to McCarthy’s contempt for his opponents, the example might serve well the role Macalester Bell (2013) assigns the attitude as counter-measure to the contempt of others.

7. A prominent philosophical contempt skeptic from whom contemporary philosophers may seek support is Immanuel Kant, in his *Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, especially p. 224 (Ak. 463).

8. See, for example, the op-ed, “America Is on Its Way to Divorce Court,” [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-on-its-way-to-divorce-court/2017/06/22/a7610e82-576c-11e7-a204-ad706461fa4f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fa62d0172a80](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-on-its-way-to-divorce-court/2017/06/22/a7610e82-576c-11e7-a204-ad706461fa4f_story.html?utm_term=.fa62d0172a80).

9. As I note elsewhere (Mason 2014), it is a mistake when philosophers refer to P. F. Strawson’s “objective attitude” as if it is a singular phenomenon. Strawson refers to an objective “range of attitudes” and the class includes both positively and negatively valenced instances. For example, on my view, unconditional love is a positively valenced objective attitude and nonreactive objective contempt a negatively valenced objective attitude.

10. Strawson does not use the term “attitude” in distinction to “emotion” or “sentiment” in the way that some psychologists do. Reactive attitudes share with attitudes in the psychological sense the feature of being less fleeting than emotions and not always requiring discrete eliciting events. See, for example, Scherer (2005). Instead, Strawson’s class includes members that psychologists, relying on technical usage, would distinguish as “emotions,” “attitudes,” and “sentiments.” The distinction is not important for my purposes here.

11. I there followed D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) in taking emotions to involve evaluative presentations of their objects—that is, in presenting their objects as possessing certain value-laden features.

12. A search of the PsycInfo database on April 15, 2016, for subject word “contempt” yielded 116 results; a contemporaneous search of the same database for subject word “shame” yielded 3,654 results.

13. In support of the equivalence of usage, consider this precedent: “A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation.

There is a *vestige of decency, a sense of shame* that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation. He is a desperate slaveholder, who will shock the humanity of his non-slaveholding neighbors with the cries of his lacerated slave. Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat.” Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Edited with an introduction by David W. Blight. Boston, MA: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 2003, chapter VI (emphasis mine).

14. Viewing shame as the first-person correlate of contempt, as I do, commits me to the view that shame plays a similar gate-keeping role. However, there is a very important difference here worth noting between how contempt and shame do so. On one hand, whereas ostracism from the community of our fellows is a real possibility in the case of being the target of others’ contempt, it is impossible—short of suicide—to remove oneself from oneself as the target of one’s shame. One might thus conclude that shame is a fundamentally self-abnegating and self-destructive emotion. Yet, as the model of shame I endorse below makes clear, the appraisal component of shame requires that the subject of shame appraise herself from the perspective of an ideal self that endorses the identity goal flouted by the emotion’s eliciting event. That the latter perspective remains open to the subject to occupy indicates that an alternative path available to the subject is to more closely approximate the ideal self with which she thereby identifies.

15. For a philosophical treatment of certain self-conscious emotions, see Gabrielle Taylor (1985). For the use of the construct in psychology, see Tracy and Robins (2004).

16. At least that is where the interpretation of the empirical data is not itself in dispute. For example, whereas Rozin et al. (1999) proposed to distinguish contempt from anger and disgust by showing that contempt was elicited by violations of an ethics of “community,” that association has been challenged by subsequent study that suggests that contempt in fact is similar to anger in also being elicited by violations of autonomy. For discussion of this dispute, and the relevant studies, see Fischer and Giner-Sorolla (2016).

17. “Fittingness” here refers to evidentiary propriety; that is, the emotion’s cognitive appraisal accurately representing its target in light of the evidence.

18. This does not mark a distinction with shame; we likewise correctly advise the short person not to be ashamed of her stature.

19. Such is true, for example, of contempt understood as what Darwall calls a third-personal assessment of another. See Darwall, “Morality’s Distinctiveness,” in his 2013 *Morality, Authority & Law: Essays on Second-Personal Ethics I–II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

20. More specifically, met by your autonomous (vs. heteronymous) shame.

21. Here, then, is one reason why contempt is more prominent in the context of ethics that center on the concept of a virtue: virtues just are conceptualized as causally linked to stable, global features of persons.

22. Understanding “moral” here in an ecumenical sense that does not limit it to the domain of deontic restrictions and permissions on conduct. For a discussion of morality in the “narrow” sense, see Darwall, “Morality’s Distinctiveness.”

23. Again, the shame at issue here is what I call autonomous, vs. heteronymous, shame.

24. George Hodak, *ABA Journal*. Posted June 1, 2010. [http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/june\\_9\\_1954/](http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/june_9_1954/).

25. These effects are complicated by the status and levels of antecedent esteem of the targets, among other factors.

26. Here the law provides another example. Anyone who has read a civil legal complaint can attest that they are not best modeled on polite requests. They do, nonetheless, demand an answer (called, appropriately, the “answer”) to the plaintiff’s complaint from the defendant.

27. On my view, Welch escapes this criticism with respect to his calling McCarthy to account for his character because, in light of their station and context, Welch rightly took himself and McCarthy mutually accountable to upholding gentlemanly virtues befitting public servants.

28. On moral assessment as mere grading, see again Darwall, “Morality’s Distinctiveness.”

29. For example, if I have contempt for the cast of characters that Graham Greene, in his novella *Dr. Fischer of Geneva: Or the Bomb Party*, designates “The Toads,” the illocutionary force of my contempt is not properly imperative—that they cease demeaning themselves is not something it is my right to exact from them. Instead, the illocutionary force of my contempt is that of an appeal, namely, an appeal to an identity goal incongruent with their willingness to degrade themselves if the price is high enough. For a more extended treatment of the example as it bears on the moral propriety of shame and contempt, see Mason (2010). For accounts of other interpersonal attitudes that are essential to our status as responsible agents despite not being tied conceptually to deontic demands, see Darwall (2016) (on trust), Martin (2013) (on hope), and, more generally, Macnamara (2013c).

30. For my understanding of the objective attitudes, see Mason (2014, 146–52).

31. Contempt, more so than anger or guilt, is positively associated with relationship deterioration (Fischer and Roseman 2007; Gottman 1993, 1994, 2000; Gottman and Levenson 1992). Darwall relies on reports of Gottman’s work to draw what I take to be an unwarranted conclusion. Darwall writes: “As I analyze this phenomenon [referring to Gladwell’s report of Gottman’s studies of contempt in the marital context], contempt is the attitude or feeling of being justified in not according someone second-personal authority as an equal, that another does not deserve this respect.” Darwall, “Responsibility Within Relations,” *Honor, History, & Relationship*, 108.

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## Chapter 10

# Contempt as an Other-Characterizing, "Hierarchizing" Attitude<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Darwall

W. E. B. Du Bois first formulated his famous theory of double-consciousness in the following terms:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (W. E. B. Du Bois 1987, 364)

Du Bois' idea was that however they viewed themselves independently, Blacks' oppression required them to keep track of their White oppressors' view of them as well. Whether for reasons of survival, or more insidiously, by emotional vulnerability through empathy, White supremacy intruded itself into the very consciousness of oppressed Blacks.<sup>2</sup> To our nation's shame, it still does.<sup>3</sup>

I begin with Du Bois' powerful image of "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," in the hope it will help us to appreciate important features of contempt by considering what makes it so naturally grouped with pity as attitudes that mediate and enforce a social hierarchy like White supremacy. I shall argue, first, that contempt and pity are alike in being *characterizing attitudes*. By that I mean that they represent their objects as having a certain (contemptible) character or as exemplifying (pitiable) characteristics or situations. Rather than viewing their objects as *individuals*, they regard them as exemplifying *kinds*. And in so characterizing their objects, they take a third-person perspective on them rather than relating to them second personally. They thereby take the person holding the attitude out of relation to the object individuals and effectively "reduce" the latter to characters and kinds.