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Article

Contempt and Invisibilization

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Abstract: Why is contempt seen as potentially lacking in the respect for persons and therefore prima facie subject to negative moral evaluation? This paper starts by looking at a distinctive feature of contempt in the context of thick relationships, such as those of friendship, close professional collaboration, or romantic love: there is an irreversibility effect attached to the experience of contempt. Once contempt occurs in a thick relationship, it seems very difficult to return to non-contemptuous reactive attitudes. The second part argues that the irreversibility effect is due to the fact that contempt is an affective attitude which tends to invisibilize the person who is the object of contempt. The tendency to invisibilize is inscribed in the intentional structure of contempt as well as in its motivational dimension. The final part explores some consequences of this hypothesis, and in particular argues that it also explains why contempt motivated by abject wrongdoing, as opposed to resentment, anger, or hatred, tends to block any process of forgiveness.

Keywords: contempt; moral psychology; emotions; invisibilization; reactive attitudes; subjective irreversibility; forgiveness; Alberto Moravia

1. Introduction

Michelle Mason [1] and Macalester Bell [2], who have addressed the subject of contempt directly from a moral perspective, argue that contempt can be a morally justified attitude. The aim of this paper is not to deny that contempt can be morally justified in some contexts, but to understand why it is at first sight morally problematic, and to seek the explanation in the way contempt works.

As Adam Smith observed, resentment is also prima facie problematic, whereas gratitude is not. He claimed that there was no emotion “concerning whose justness we ought to be so doubtful” as that of resentment. His explanation was the asymmetry between the painful and the pleasurable, which makes it more difficult to sympathize with an angry person than with a grateful one [3] (Li.i.3.8). Can such considerations about the aversion to negative emotions be applied to contempt, or does its case require a separate explanation? I will argue for the latter option.

The philosophical discussion of contempt in recent decades has been strongly influenced by the example of Alberto Moravia’s 1954 novel, *Il disprezzo* [4], sometimes through the rather distant film adaptation by Jean-Luc Godard [5]. It is generally acknowledged that literature and other arts provide us with a repertoire of experiences that can compete with a real-life phenomenology of emotions. Since Moravia’s *Contempt* provides a striking case of this attitude in the context of romantic relationships, I will build on it, as others have done.

Is contempt a reliable reaction to qualities that make its object contemptible, or is it an effect of the subject’s self-overestimation? We know, at least since Book II of David Hume’s *Treatise*, that contempt is both reactive and comparative: it reacts to something contemptible and involves a comparison with oneself. Hume characterized hate as a mere reaction to bad qualities in the object, pride as a comparison of those bad qualities with one’s own, and contempt as both a reaction to the bad qualities and a reflexive comparison¹. Macalester Bell thus uses Hume to introduce the “comparative or reflexive element”, which she claims



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is present in every instance of the attitude [2] (pp. 41–42). Bell may be right when she claims that “contempt is always comparative” [2] (p. 56), but only on the condition that degrees are allowed. The reactive dimension is present alongside the comparative dimension in the various forms of contempt. The difference between contempt as a reaction to what is perceived as contemptible and contempt as the effect of a tendency to overestimate oneself and devalue others seems to be not a difference in kind, as if they were two very different attitudes, but a difference in degree.

I will not be discussing the kind of contempt that is mostly dependent on a sense of superiority, as when people are strongly inclined to despise because of their status or anything that feeds their pride too much. I am interested in a form of contempt that is much more reactive than comparative, that is, an attitude that responds to and is subjectively justified by something perceived as base or worthless in the persons who are the objects of contempt (the attitude may also be objectively justified if the objects have characteristics that make them worthy of contempt). This mainly reactive contempt does not necessarily involve explicit comparison with oneself; at least, it is not centrally caused by self-esteem.

Early modern moralists generally tended to regard contempt as an effect of excessive pride, and would certainly not have accepted the views of Mason and Bell that contempt can be a reliable detector of lack of moral worth, although Mason and Bell also acknowledge that status contempt is often an instrument of social distancing. Both philosophers, while not offering the same picture (Mason sees contempt as essentially reactive, Bell as essentially comparative), aim to show that contempt can be morally appropriate in some cases, a claim I will not dispute.

It is not with the same, moral, agenda that I leave out forms of contempt that are mostly based on a sense of social superiority. My aim is not to isolate morally justified contempt, but to understand how contempt works in order to understand how it tends to make its object invisible, or at least diminish its visibility. What follows is therefore more concerned with the phenomenology of contempt than with its moral evaluation. The reason I focus on a case of contempt that is reactive rather than comparative is that there is nothing obviously paradoxical about the tendency to invisibilize one’s object when contempt is merely an expression of one’s sense of superiority, whereas there seems to be a paradox in the tendency to invisibilize the person to whose qualities one is reacting.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will draw attention to a feature of certain forms of contempt that distinguishes them from various forms of hatred, which I call the irreversibility effect. Next, I will look at the structure of contempt as an emotion to see what might be responsible for this effect. My approach is conceptual and argumentative, and is based primarily on the case provided by Moravia’s novel. I will propose to find the source of the irreversibility effect in the tendency to invisibilize that is inscribed in the structure of the emotion of contempt. This tendency may contribute to making contempt morally problematic.

2. The Irreversibility Effect of Contempt in Thick Relationships

There is a wide variety of attitudes that should be studied under the heading of ‘contempt’. There is an episodic micro-contempt, fleeting and superficial, which consists in showing disdain for a particular comment, attitude, or behavior, and which lasts no longer and is no more important than its object. The phenomenon may be cloaked in the same feelings as disgust or simply expressed by pouting. On the other hand, there is a constant but silent and perhaps imperceptible disposition to hold something in contempt, to which one no longer even pays attention. For example, the way we scorn people we do not know personally (think of certain devotees far from your own parish) for the absurd opinions or prejudices they supposedly hold, at least when we give them some thought. There is also status contempt, which works like status respect. For example, the pupils of a primary school class have contempt for the younger ones in the class below them. It is a disposition that can lead to emotional manifestations, but not necessarily. It may simply

lead to a habitual form of segregation, such as not letting them participate in games. This list should be extended.

However, I will focus on yet another form, properly interpersonal, and try to account for a sense of irreversibility that accompanies the experience of contempt in thick relationships. The irreversibility effect can occur in contempt that is predominantly reactive in nature. In the case of comparative status contempt, such as social class contempt, the attitude is not, strictly speaking, irreversible because it tends to be permanent from the start (it cannot be *reversed* if nothing has ever changed). The notion of irreversibility as I use it applies to changes within a story. For example, it applies to a situation in which two people who love each other, like Riccardo and Emilia in Alberto Moravia's novel, experience the emergence of one's contempt for the other, of Emilia for Riccardo. The original situation is very different from that of stories in which contempt is not something that happens, but a background condition². In the latter sense, it is permanent. What I call irreversible contempt is something that alters relationships and prevents non-contemptuous attitudes from reappearing. This leads me to turn my attention to a contempt that is more reactive than comparative, and also more dynamic than static. Everything that follows should be understood in this context.

I need to make another preliminary distinction. The irreversibility in question is not objective but subjective. It characterizes a situation in which the option of escaping contempt is subjectively absent whether or not it remains objectively accessible. It is still possible for conditions to change so that contempt disappears. For example, people who are scorned might show that they do not deserve the scorn, or not so much. And if they paid attention, the scornful might change their attitude. At least this is what an outsider might say about the situation. And yet, reactive contempt can be experienced as irreversible by the despiser, and sometimes even by the despised. What I call subjective irreversibility can be cashed out in these terms: an affective disposition is subjectively irreversible if it is believed by the person to be irreversible, or if there is a strong desire for it to be irreversible.

Alberto Moravia's case does not seem to be a paradigmatic example of contempt. Emilia's contempt seems almost purely reactive and very little reflexive, even though she confronts her husband's attitude with her own expectations as a wife. In fact, Emilia, whose view of marital relations is highly gendered and even macho, would not be able or willing to embody the ideal that her husband Riccardo (the entire story is channeled through him, as he is also the narrator) fails to achieve in her eyes, simply because it is an ideal of masculinity. Riccardo is so desperate to solve his financial problems that he seems ready to push his wife into the arms of a film producer in order to get them to enter a screenplay contract. Nevertheless, Emilia's contempt is very representative of the subject because it is very much marked by the sense of irreversibility. When Riccardo sees signs of the consequences of his contemptible behavior on their relationship, he wishes he could go back. The narrator remembers saying the following:

"You said, some time ago, that. . . that you despised me. . . that was what you said. I don't know why you despise me. I only know that people get themselves despised when they do despicable things. Accepting this job, at the present moment, would in fact be a despicable thing. . . and so my decision will prove to you, more than anything, that I am not what you believe me to be — that's all."

She answered promptly in a tone of triumph, pleased, one would have thought, at having at least made me fall into a trap: "On the contrary, your decision won't prove anything to me. . . and that's why I advise you to go back on it."

"[. . .] please don't touch me, don't try to touch me again. I don't love you and it will be impossible for me to love you again." [4] (chap. 20, p. 219)

Moravia's *Contempt* is also a story of domestic violence about a husband's abuse of his wife when she refuses him. The wife's contempt is quite peaceful and leads her to walk away rather than attack the object of her dislike.

In her reading of Jean-Luc Godard's film adaptation of Moravia's *Contempt*, Michelle Mason seeks to demonstrate that a properly informed contempt, "evidentially appropriate to its object", can also be "morally appropriate" [1] (p. 235). She thus considers contempt to be a response whose correction depends essentially on the presence in the object of features that give it the value to which the attitude points. By focusing on what I call predominantly reactive contempt, she neglects the comparative (or 'reflexive') dimension that might be a source of evaluative distortion important enough to call into question contempt's capacity to be a correct response. It is therefore not surprising that Mason sees Godard's film as a "paradigmatic case" [1] (p. 240)³.

In Godard's film, as in Moravia's novel, there is no indication that the wife's contempt for the husband is based on a sense of superiority. Mason rightly notes that "we need not assume that a contemner such as Camille [the wife's name in Godard's adaptation] looks down upon her target in virtue of her being superior in the relevant respect" [1] (p. 241). However, Mason arrives at this conclusion through an argument that I find inadequate. If contempt requires a sense of superiority, she argues, this would mean that self-contempt is conceptually impossible. But it is possible. So, contempt does not require a sense of superiority. I doubt that being inferior or superior to oneself is not conceptually impossible. In any case, it seems to me that the same conclusion, that contempt can be mainly reactive, must be reached by a different route. The correct argument, I think, is as follows: The wife cannot be superior in the relevant respect simply because, according to common social expectations, which she endorses, the abilities of a wife and those of a husband are heterogeneous. This is something that the narrator, the husband in Moravia's novel, notices.

"But why do you despise me?"

"Because I do", she cried all at once; "because you're made like that, and however hard you try, you can't change yourself."

"But how am I made?"

"I don't know how you are made—you ought to know. I only know you're not a man, you don't behave like a man."

I was struck by the contrast between the genuineness, the sincerity of feeling that sounded in her voice and the commonplace, sweeping nature of her words. "But what does it mean to be a *man*? I demanded, with a rage in which irony was mingled; "don't you realize it means nothing at all?" [4] (pp. 219–220)

Mason's interpretation of the reasons for the wife's contempt weakens her reading. When the wife finally explains her contempt, she blames her husband for not behaving like a man in certain circumstances. Or, more accurately, she gives him this reason without actually blaming him because she has moved on to a stage (which is contempt) where hatred, blame, or resentment are no longer available. Michelle Mason seems to understand this justification for contempt as if "behaving like a man" here was a synonym for "acting as a moral person", and as if the wife was some sort of Kantian pointing out that her husband had treated her only as a means of obtaining a lucrative script assignment from a film producer [1] (p. 240).

One consequence is that the mainly reactive, rather than reflexive, character of the wife's contempt is related to a contingent feature of the story Moravia tells, rather than to something as general and immutable as conceptual impossibility. It is because the role of the wife and that of the husband are by no means interchangeable, and the social expectations of the one and the other are completely different, that Emilia does not compare her husband's shortcomings with her own possible achievements. She simply sees her husband as failing in his role as a husband.

Something has made Riccardo contemptible: perhaps his cowardice, his servility, vices about which the retrospective narrator (Riccardo today) remains silent, but which are suggested by his behavior towards the film producer and towards Emilia: he is willing to

turn a blind eye to the affair she might have with the producer. This is probably why he does not behave “like a man”. He is not jealous, possessive, or aggressive towards his rival.

By the time Riccardo pretends to remedy the situation, it is too late for Emilia, and thus for him. The question now is: why is it too late?

3. How to Fail to Explain the Irreversibility Effect

There are several possible routes to understanding this phenomenon. I will start with a couple of false tracks.

The first concerns the effects of contempt regarding relational context. When the development and exercise of affective dispositions are strongly structured by a nexus of normative relations and expectations, as is the case in a romantic partnership, certain affective dispositions may conflict with this normative context. As Aristotle suggested, the highest forms of friendship, beyond the mere social bond, involve mutual esteem. It is clear, then, that an attitude such as contempt is alien to the affective repertoire of friendship, whereas resentment (which is a reaction to wrongdoing) is not. Indeed, resentment may be demanded by friendship. It would be a lack of esteem for the friend to refrain from expressing anger when it is justified by a serious wrong. It is part of friendship, as Aristotle noted, to help the failing friend to improve morally [10] (IX.3, 1165b20, p. 229).

It can also be admitted that the adoption of such an attitude, so far removed from what is expected of a relationship, tends to seriously disrupt the affective attitudes that are part of the normal repertoire. Contempt would thus prevent love. In Moravia’s novel, the first manifestation of the marital crisis is not the experience of Emilia’s contempt, but the gradual realization by Riccardo that Emilia has fallen out of love with him. He then begins searching for the cause or reason for the change and eventually discovers that it lies in Emilia’s contempt for him. His investigation is not complete, as he continues to search for the cause or reason for this contempt. Thus, there is reason to think that subjective irreversibility is related to the incompatibility of contempt with the affective repertoire of love and its destructive effects on romantic bonds.

This is all very sensible. But does it explain the irreversibility effect? We can still ask the question: why is it that contempt cannot be digested in the history of a relationship? Why is a little contempt incompatible with a lot of love? After all, a relationship can survive anger, blame, and sometimes even hatred. What is so special about contempt? Why should it be strange and inappropriate for people who are the objects of their partner’s contempt to say to themselves: let us wait, it can only get better, right?

To answer these questions, we need to go further and look at the object of contempt. We know that although one can despise people for what they have done (indeed, because their actions express what is despicable about them), contempt, unlike resentment, is primarily directed at the person and not at the action. There is a consensus to draw a parallel between the distinction between contempt and resentment (at the interpersonal level) and the distinction (at the intrapersonal level) between shame and guilt (on the latter distinction, see [11], pp. 155–156). Contempt and shame are personal emotions in the strongest sense of the term: they respond to perceived qualities of persons, in these cases to failures to live up to ideals, whereas resentment and guilt react directly to wrongful actions (see the discussion in [12]). Moreover, following Teroni [13], we can consider that contempt and shame share the same formal object, that is, they respond to a “distinctive kind of worthlessness”. Thus, a second way of explaining the irreversibility effect is open and seems quite plausible: while guilt is a reversible emotion because it allows access to remedial procedures, shame has the peculiarity that it seems to have no way out. Indeed, we can be ashamed of what we have done and remedy the consequences by taking some action, but if we are ashamed of what we are, we cannot remedy what we are at leisure. Whereas guilt and resentment often involve a motivation to act to restore the previous situation or at least to respond in practice to the injustice (for example, through repentance, punishment or forgiveness), shame and contempt tend to lead to withdrawal [2] (pp. 44–46). It is thus the formal object of contempt, the worthlessness of the person (which is a matter

of being rather than doing), that makes one feel stuck in a contempt situation with no way out. This seems to be the explanation we have been looking for.

But I do not think this is sufficient to explain the irreversibility effect. Let us look more closely at the connection between the personal emotion of contempt and the agential nature of its object. Although it is undeniable that contempt is person-focused, whereas resentment is action-focused [1] (pp. 246–247), the type of character one embodies depends on the way one behaves, and this dependence is expressed in the grammar of personal emotions. They often have two object complements, a person and a behavior. One is ashamed of oneself for the way one has behaved in such and such circumstances. People are despised for the cowardice that their behavior shows. Emilia despises Riccardo for not behaving like a man, without spelling out what she means⁴. More generally, it is quite possible to consider the objects of personal emotion as vices and virtues, as long as one does not give these terms a narrow moral meaning. From this perspective, the language of guilt and the language of shame are not incompatible but can be combined, as can contempt and resentment. The repetition of wrong behavior, which would justify guilt or resentment, produces a habitual vice, which in turn produces, in the long run, a shameful or contemptible character. On the other hand, even if, as Aristotle thought, extreme vice tends to destroy the principle of right action [10] (VI.5, 1140b13–20, p. 180), and thus may have reached the point of no return, it is generally accepted that dispositions, and hence characters, can evolve. For example, when forced by circumstances, characters with a reputation for meanness may reveal a different side of themselves through a series of heroic actions that make them admirable. The rather scarce philosophical literature on contempt does not hesitate to consider situations in which the contemptible coexists with the admirable, so that the contemptuous attitude can and should be revised, according to a principle of the rationality of attitudes formulated by Aristotle (in the case of friendship, see [10] (IX.3, 1165b1–4, p. 229)). Since contempt is an attitude linked to our sense of the agency of others, the fact that it is person-centered does not in itself prevent it from responding to behaviors that can be changed. So, a change in Riccardo's behavior could lead Emilia to revise her attitude. Thus, we still do not have an adequate explanation for the irreversibility effect associated with some forms of reactive contempt.

A third route to consider is a combination of the latter with a tendency towards self-deception. Irreversibility could be accounted for by the fact that, although the object of contempt may be complex or mobile and may have aspects that do not justify contempt or that justify an opposite attitude, one may persist in contempt despite evidence to the contrary. The irreversibility effect would not be due to some feature of contempt alone, but to a combination of contempt and self-deception. For example, Emilia would continue to believe that her relationship with Riccardo is irreparably damaged, even though she sees that he is making great efforts to behave better. She would be acting in bad faith.

But if we accept that an essential condition of self-deception is that the person is aware of the data that constitute contrary evidence, then this condition is often absent from the situation of contempt, simply because the despiser is no longer interested in the despised. This third option is not convincing, but it brings us closer to the solution.

In Moravia's novel, when Riccardo tells Emilia of his good intentions, when he tells her that he is going to give up working for the film producer, in short, when he is starting a new way of behaving, Emilia informs him that it is too late. She will not change her mind. But is it not stubbornness on her part, or perhaps bad faith, if she refuses to face up to the fact that Riccardo is no longer the kind of person he turned out to be and who justified her contempt? I think that the irreversibility of Emilia's contempt, or of Riccardo's contemptibility, is not a matter of bad faith, nor of self-deception, nor of psychological rigidity. The reason is simply that Emilia has become indifferent to Riccardo's possible improvement. His best efforts would not change the situation, because she would be blind to them. This kind of contemptuous indifference is not simply a lack of interest, but a refusal to be interested⁵.

4. Invisibilization as a Typical Effect of Contempt

In this section, I propose to locate the motive for the irreversibility effect in the invisibilization of the object that contempt tends to produce. I also try to show that this invisibilization is based on all dimensions of the emotion and this is what unifies and cements the structure of contempt.

I call ‘invisibilization’ a process by which, if successful, a person would be invisible and inaccessible to ‘regard’ in any sense of the word: in the intellectual sense of attention, or in the literal sense of gaze, or in the moral sense of consideration. Conversely, contempt must be understood as disregard, even literally. There are several ways of making people invisible: treating them as if they were absent, expressing a desire to no longer see them, refusing to look at them, etc.

The notion of invisibilization that I use is more familiar to sociologists [14] or social philosophers [15] than to moral philosophers and psychologists. However, there is a difference between what is being discussed and the images of visibility and invisibility of social actors or groups that are generally used without regard to their individual psychological basis⁶. My whole effort is to inscribe the tendency to invisibilize into the very structure of contempt. Contempt is an attitude that seems tailor-made for social invisibilization, although it may serve other purposes, as a defense against an individual character.

I will now make three claims about the relationship between contempt and invisibilization, and then respond to possible objections.

The first claim is that it is the whole structure of contempt that is designed to make its object invisible, or to seriously diminish its visibility. Briefly, we can go through the various dimensions of contempt according to the now standard (although still debated) distinctions of affective sciences [17]. What I find remarkable is that each of these dimensions cannot be properly described without mentioning the tendency towards invisibilization.

In terms of hedonic valence, the sight of the object of contempt is so painful that its disappearance is a relief.

In terms of bodily manifestations, contempt is expressed by averting one’s gaze or by facial expressions that suggest a desire not to see the object anymore. Of course, to express my contempt, I can deliberately stare into the person’s eyes and I can *fusiller du regard*—as we say in French (which literally means to glare deadly at people)—but this is to get them out of my sight for good.

At the motivation level, the tendency to act is that of a behavior that anticipates invisibility or realizes it through disengagement or withdrawal.

At the intentionality level, the typical object of contempt is the embodiment in a person of a type of character so vile, so low, so worthless that it deserves to be completely invisible, in complete contrast to the object of admiration, which deserves to be exhibited and offered as a model.

My second claim is that the tendency towards invisibilization provides a common outlet for contempt and shame, and highlights their affinity and possible interaction.

As I mentioned earlier, the vocabulary of invisibility has become commonplace in the social sciences to characterize the situation of social actors who are not recognized or who are the object of lack of consideration or even discrimination. The theme is already present in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

“The poor man [...] is ashamed of his poverty. He feels that it either places him out of the sight of mankind, or, that if they take any notice of him, they have, however, scarce any fellow-feeling with the misery and distress which he suffers. He is mortified upon both accounts; for though to be overlooked, and to be disapproved of, are things entirely different, yet as obscurity covers us from the daylight of honor and approbation, to feel that we are taken no notice of, necessarily damps the most agreeable hope, and disappoints the most ardent desire, of human nature.” [3] (I.3.2.1)

Just as the person who feels shame wants to escape the gaze, and (sometimes, in extreme cases) wants to go underground and disappear, so the person who feels contempt

for others wants them to be out of sight and (sometimes, in extreme cases) wishes them to be wiped off the face of the earth. Contempt can be expressed in terms of counterfactual shame: the despiser believes that the despised person should be ashamed of what justifies the contempt, or has some similar belief. Conversely, shame can be reformulated in terms of counterfactual contempt: the shamed believe that others would despise them if they were to consider them, or something similar. As Teroni [13] (p. 402) puts it, contempt and shame share the same formal object, “a distinctive kind of worthlessness”. If this is so, then we must also admit that shame and contempt have in common that they aim at invisibilization, although not in the same way.

One might object that if this was true, then shameful behavior, publicly displayed, would arouse the contempt of the spectators. But we know that ancient shaming practices, such as the pillory, which were designed to make shameful behavior visible to people, usually elicited not contempt but insults, ridicule, and boos from most, and perhaps pity from some. However, this is a confirmation rather than an objection: one purpose of the pillory was to prevent the shameful from hiding and to ensure public humiliation, especially through mockery, which is a way of expressing contempt.

The claim that contempt and shame share the same formal object does not prejudge the way in which these emotions are described by those who experience them. ‘Shameful’ is one possible description. In an experience of violent shame, I may think of myself as ‘contemptible’. Other terms may also be used. Moreover, this characterization says nothing about the defects that make the character or disposition shameful. Finally, the identity of the formal object does not imply that the dynamics of the two emotions are the same.

Incidentally, the consideration of the tendency to invisibilize allows us to capture certain features that are common to quite different forms of contempt and thus may account for the extensive use of the concept. When a person does not see others because their social role or status does not make them visible, without considering them positively and personally contemptible, this is sometimes called ‘passive contempt’ [2] (pp. 48–51); Roberto Keller [18] (p. 62) convincingly identifies it with ‘disdain’. If it is indeed a form of contempt, is it not because, like ‘active contempt’ (which attracts the attention of philosophers who, unlike social scientists, tend to neglect the other form), the attitude is essentially one of invisibilization (even if unwanted or unconscious)? Entire categories of a population can be made invisible in this way, often because of prejudice or what Adam Smith called the distinction of ranks, sometimes for functional reasons, and most often without any affective attitude of contempt being expressed.

I hope that these considerations are sufficient to establish that the tendency to invisibilize is high on the list of contempt’s characteristics. Furthermore, I would argue that this is the main reason or cause for the irreversibility of contempt in a Moravian situation. It is invisibilization that makes contempt subjectively irreversible.

This hypothesis may protect the claim of irreversibility from some objections. A first objection, which has already been met, is that people change or have more complex personalities than it seems. The answer is that even if the person who is the object of my contempt was to change, to display different qualities, to embody the contemptible character somewhat less or not at all, this does not mean that my contempt would disappear. Why is that so? It is so because my attention to the qualities of the person is very much inhibited by contempt, so much so that I might become unaware of those qualities.

Another objection to the irreversibility claim is that contempt can be overcome by various practices, such as forgetting or forgiving. I agree with the objection about forgetting or even the effect of the mere passage of time. Contempt can disappear by force of circumstance and is therefore not irreversible, that is, not *objectively* irreversible. On the other hand, I reject the part of the objection concerning forgiveness on the grounds that the tendency to invisibilize is a source of irreversibility. Even if the objects of contempt were worthy of forgiveness, this is not the reason why they could be forgiven. This is because invisibilization hinders the process of forgiveness, which involves both considering the seriousness of the offense and often addressing the offender.

Michelle Mason identifies several conditions that, taken together, must be met if contempt is not always morally objectionable but is sometimes morally justifiable. One of these conditions concerns access to data that might justify forgiveness rather than contempt. Mason argues that the objection that contempt “colors” the view of the object or “induces a form of interpretive blindness about its object” must be rejected [1] (p. 255). This is an objection, I think a fair one, regarding the ability to overcome contempt with forgiveness. But it is not an objection to the moral relevance of contempt in any context. I think it is hard to deny that contempt tends to block access to contrary evidence. Nevertheless, Mason adds this condition to the list of necessary conditions for the possible morality of contempt:

“The attitude is responsive to evidence that would count in favor of forgiveness or some other relevant change in attitude.” [1] (p. 253)

This condition may sound like an ad hoc fallacy. Mason acknowledges that “an attitude that in effect blinded those who had it to evidence that its object has repented or otherwise changed for the better” would have been “morally objectionable to endorse” (ibid.). That blindness to others makes contempt morally problematic is no reason to deny the fact. Indeed, it is not clear that this would make any form of contempt morally problematic. For example, I have no qualms about admitting that the personality of a demagogue with despotic tendencies deserves contempt. The fact that this contempt may stand in the way of forgiveness does not make it morally questionable, simply because forgiveness does not seem morally relevant in this case.

Mason challenges the objector who rejects this condition to choose between the two branches of a Humean fork: the claim that contempt persists despite evidence to the contrary is either an empirical or a conceptual claim. According to Mason, the empirical claim is open to refutation by everyone’s experience; the conceptual claim is too strong because the concept of contempt does not imply irreversibility: “Common usage [...] does not suggest that it is part of the very meaning of contempt that once one is a contemner, one is a contemner forever” [1] (p. 256). I will not defend the conceptual claim, although I note that the irreversibility not found in the concept of contempt is objective irreversibility, which is not the issue here. We should consider a well-known way of overcoming a Humean fork, which consists in introducing a third branch, that of transcendental conditions of possibility, or, to put it more modestly, of formal and psychological requirements. The claim that contempt persists despite evidence to the contrary, and for this reason stands in the way of forgiveness, can be defended as a claim that deals with the logical and psychological conditions of contempt and forgiveness, respectively. The preconditions for ordinary interpersonal forgiveness include a shared awareness of the seriousness of the fault and the existence of reasons to forgive of various kinds. Now, contempt involves a tendency to invisibilize, which hinders the realization of the logical and psychological requirements of forgiveness. The difference between this interpretation and the conceptual claim is that it is not a necessity internal to the concept of contempt, but a necessity that affects the respective conditions of possibility of the two attitudes.

5. Other Benefits of the Invisibilization View of Contempt

There are further consequences of this understanding of Moravian contempt. According to philosophers who have studied the subject, contempt is compatible with opposite attitudes such as love or even admiration. Some do not hesitate to suggest that these different attitudes can coexist in the same person towards the same object. As Bell puts it, there would at most be a motivational tension between contempt and love [2] (p. 46). The same philosophers believe that contempt can be overcome by forgiveness. By a subtle argument, it can be shown that psychological states that pull in opposite directions can coexist, as long as they are called by traits that coexist in the object person. More generally, we know that psychological coherence or incoherence is not the same as logical consistency or inconsistency, nor do we have any difficulty in admitting that reactive attitudes may be supported by pro tanto reasons, reasons which have more or less weight, and which have weight even though they are not overriding.

But all this seems to be true only on paper. Although contempt is not in principle incompatible with attitudes such as love or admiration, and although contempt can in principle be overcome by forgiveness, the reactive and dynamic contempt I have been discussing in practice excludes the simultaneous attitudes of love and admiration, and makes forgiveness more difficult than the greatest resentment. The tendency to invisibilize effectively removes what seems to be a psychological condition of the attitudes of love and admiration. Love and admiration presuppose not only the contemplation of their object, but an eminently pleasurable contemplation. Forgiveness itself, though far removed from this pleasurable contemplation, presupposes that the forgiver can not only contemplate the serious wrong but also, in time, perhaps regain the capacity to look the wrongdoer in the face.

No one denies that it is difficult for contempt to lead to forgiveness or reconciliation, even more so than resentment. Mason summarizes this common view as follows: “The pervasive character of contempt thus further distinguishes it from resentment by making certain forms of concern, and with them the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, more difficult to maintain” [1] (p. 249). But not everyone can explain this fact. By contrast, I have suggested that what makes the prospect of forgiveness more difficult is the cognitive structure as well as the motivational tendency of contempt.

To despise people is to feel that they are worthless and therefore not worthy of consideration. Contempt motivates shunning the object and looking the other way. This is why it tends to be self-perpetuating, or, more precisely, it tends to make contemptuous people insensitive to anything that might justify their revision. To recapitulate: Contempt is justified by the contemptible nature of its object; the object is made contemptible by underlying values, such as cowardice. If the underlying values change, the object may cease to be contemptible. On paper, then, contempt should be revisable like any other emotion. But at the same time, at the motivational and intentional levels, contempt consists in no longer considering the object, thus depriving oneself of access to what might justify its revision. In this sense, contempt of x is an affective analog of the epistemic prepossession against x .

Contempt, then, is one of those emotions that we lock ourselves into and that can lead to a refusal to see the obvious, and to what looks like self-deception. An emotion such as admiration can also lead to a failure to see the faults of the person being admired, and there is certainly a similarity between the two attitudes in this respect. Similarly, the hater tends to see only what is hateful. But there is also an obvious asymmetry: while admiration draws our attention to the object, contempt draws us away from it. People who admire may no longer see what is not admirable about the object. People who despise tend to look away and not consider what justifies their attitude. This is why I have argued that the contemner is no longer even able to access one of the necessary conditions for self-deception, namely a persistent awareness of relevant data.

Incidentally, this is a clear and striking difference between contempt and hatred. If you hate people, you can very well, without difficulty, look at them with anger, or amusement, or sadness, and so on.

Another result is that the rigid distinction of the dimensions of emotion (intentionality and categorization; phenomenal, affective, or bodily manifestations; motivational scope and tendency to action), although it has the undeniable virtue of analytical clarification, could hinder the understanding of the phenomenon. Only a phenomenology that integrates these different dimensions can account for it. Invisibilization mobilizes at the same time the tendency to act (to withdraw, to look away), the apprehension of the object in the situation and its evaluation (categorized as being worthless or unworthy of consideration), and the feeling (painful to look at, disgusting)⁷. To suffer from this spectacle is also to frown, to look away, etc.

A third result concerns a paradox of personal emotion, that is, emotion that is primarily focused on the person. This is the case with contempt, as opposed to an emotion such as resentment, which is primarily focused on the action. In the case of another personal

emotion such as admiration, but also in that of a non-personal emotion such as resentment, what is called focus is not only a logical characterization but also a phenomenological one, or more precisely, the two coincide as follows: the attitude is focused on the object it takes into consideration. In the case of contempt, the object is avoided and shunned (as in physical disgust). The actual gaze does not coincide with the supposed focus.

This is a rather uncomfortable position⁸. This point may give rise to an objection: reactive contempt is an attitude aroused in presence of the contemptible. Now, according to the view defended, contempt tends to make the contemptible invisible. Contempt should therefore extinguish itself and could never persist. However, contempt usually persists.

It does not mean, however, that the invisibilization claim is false, but that it must be understood in a dynamic and potential way: invisibility is on the horizon of contempt. The oblique relationship of contempt to its object seems compatible with the more or less rapid tendency of contempt to disappear in the absence of active interactions. An attitude that motivates one to look away may persist despite invisibilization, but it eventually dies out because the object is no longer present in the mind. A new encounter may be enough to revive the disposition.

It is commonplace to say that emotions bind us to their objects. But the interest that contempt arouses in its object is paradoxical, since it leads us to distance and dissociate ourselves from it, not only by the behavior it induces (as fear can induce flight), but also by the attitude itself (which tends to consist in refusing to look at the object). Emilia's contempt leads to her indifference. She is no longer interested in what Riccardo may or may not do. In general, contempt promotes distance (as David Hume also noted [6] (2.2.10.10)) and prevents empathy, to varying degrees.

The confusion about the intentionality of contempt can be overcome by looking at it from a dynamic point of view. Contempt can be seen as a disposition to avoid disgust by avoiding situations that are likely to elicit disgust. A simple way of doing this is to anticipate or simulate disgust. It is a way of preemptively looking away. This may shed some light on the often-observed affinity between contempt and disgust.

If contempt is meant to spare us from having to face the good or bad will of the despised, is it still a reactive attitude in the sense of P. F. Strawson, as Mason suggests [1] (pp. 243–244)? In its extreme form, especially when it is based on a devaluation of the human status of the object, contempt could fall into what Strawson called an objective attitude, that is, a way of not seeing the other person as a responsible agent⁹. I did not address the dangerous borders of contempt where invisibilization is taken to its limit: the object of contempt is then treated as non-personal. It would be unfair to think of the whole of contempt in terms of this extreme attitude. There is an important difference between not considering a person and treating someone as a non-person.

We are in a better position to understand why contempt is, at first sight, morally problematic. It is not simply because it is an attitude that is unpleasant to be the object of, nor is it because persons as such deserve to be respected rather than despised. Rather, the reason lies in the tendency of contempt to make its object invisible. Because contempt averts our gaze from the person who is the object of it, it prevents us from revising our attitudes in the light of how that person might change. By blocking the interaction with the other person and thus making it very difficult to access information that conditions the relevance of our reactions, it can contribute to depriving our attitudes of their justification. Contempt can then be seen as the social equivalent of those prejudices that perpetuate themselves by blocking access to contrary data, which is a disposition deplored by intellectual ethics. The result of the invisibilization process is epistemic blindness, but the way in which this result is achieved is not purely mental since it mobilizes bodily attitudes and the anticipation of disgust or the refusal of contact.

This is not to say that contempt can never be justified. It may well be justified by the value of the object to which it is reacting. Nor does it mean that contempt cannot be morally justified or morally good. Sometimes, it is better to stop a social interaction and avoid the object that is hurting or wronging us, and contempt is a powerful incentive to do just that.

However, when contempt is comparative rather than reactive, and when it depends on our belief in our own superiority and a priori assigns an inferior status to its object, there is a great danger that contempt will become a vicious disposition, both morally and intellectually¹⁰.

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Notes

- ¹ “In considering the qualities and circumstances of others, we may either regard them as they really are in themselves; or may make a comparison betwixt them and our own qualities and circumstances; or may join these two methods of consideration. The good qualities of others, from the first point of view, produce love; from the second, humility; and from the third, respect, which is a mixture of these two passions. Their bad qualities, after the same manner, cause either hatred, or pride, or contempt, according to the light in which we survey them.” [6] (II.2.10.2). What Hume calls respect has nothing to do with recognition respect and corresponds to what he also calls esteem or admiration. *Admiration* also sometimes has another (now obsolete) meaning in Hume’s writings: surprise. This is probably why he prefers to use *respect* here.
- ² Think, for example, of Joseph Conrad’s ‘The Return’ [7], in which the husband and wife are both initially driven by excessive pride, or, in a very different vein, of Maupassant’s ‘Mademoiselle Fifi’ [8], which takes a Prussian officer’s status contempt for French prostitutes as its starting point.
- ³ Zac Cogley [9] also challenges Mason’s reading of Godard’s film [5] on this particular point.
- ⁴ However, the reader can imagine that this is because Riccardo is calculating, self-interested, willing to use his wife as a means to seduce someone who is a financial resource, and even willing to turn a blind eye to her affair with the producer; in this sense, the husband lacks pride. The value of the contemptible is secondary in the sense that a disposition or character is made contemptible by more fundamental traits that depend on primary values or normative contexts. This question about the grounds of the contemptible is beyond the scope of this paper.
- ⁵ Emilia’s indifference is indistinguishable from her contempt. It is not the final stage of the dynamics of contempt, but rather its primary expression. Normally, we would say that contempt is more than indifference. This is not the case in the context of a romantic relationship. We should distinguish, in Kant’s idiom of ‘negative magnitudes’, between indifference as a mere privation of concern and indifference as a negation of concern.
- ⁶ James Jardine [16] has tried to anchor social invisibility in a repertoire of affective attitudes, drawing on Edmund Husserl’s conception of ‘blind’ emotional responses, but without paying attention to contempt.
- ⁷ See Aurel Kolnai [19] on contempt as the moral equivalent of disgust, with a defense of the moral importance of disgust.
- ⁸ On this point, I agree with Stephen Darwall’s doubts that contempt is a second personal evaluation [20] (pp. 207–208). See also Kate Abramson’s discussion [12].
- ⁹ It is worth noting that in his list of examples of what it means to adopt the objective attitude, P. F. Strawson includes, in addition to seeing a person as an object of “social policy” or of “treatment”, seeing someone as “perhaps simply to be avoided”, which might suggest an “objective” form of contempt, although Strawson mentions that the gerundive *to be avoided* “is not peculiar to cases of objectivity of attitude” ([21], p. 9). In the rest of his essay, he refers to contempt, in the context of ordinary human interactions, as an attitude of ill will that can elicit the reactive attitude of resentment [21] (pp. 5–6).
- ¹⁰ I started work on this topic as a visiting fellow at CAS LMU (in the group ‘Relationships in Transition: Normative Challenges’). I am grateful for the feedback I received from audiences at the LMU-Munich and the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Special thanks to Carla Bagnoli, Monika Betzler, Simon-Pierre Chevarie-Cossette, Benjamin Lange, Jörg Löschke, and Cain Todd.

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