



Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt

Macalester Bell

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At a time when respect is widely touted as an attitude of central moral importance, contempt is often derided as a thoroughly nasty emotion inimical to the respect we owe all persons. But while contempt is regularly dismissed as completely disvaluable, ethicists have had very little to say about what contempt is or whether it deserves its ugly reputation. Macalester Bell argues that we must reconsider contempt's role in our moral lives. While contempt can be experienced in inapt and disvaluable ways, it may also be a perfectly appropriate response that provides the best way of answering a range of neglected faults.

Using a wide variety of examples, Bell provides an account of the nature of contempt and its virtues and vices. While some insist that contempt is always unfitting because of its globalism, Bell argues that this objection mischaracterizes the person assessments at the heart of contempt. Contempt is, in some cases, the best way of responding to arrogance, hypocrisy, and other vices of superiority. Contempt does have a dark side, and inapt forms of contempt structure a host of social ills. Racism is best characterized as an especially pernicious form of inapt contempt, and Bell's account of contempt helps us better understand the moral badness of racism. It is argued that the best way of responding to race-based contempt is to mobilize a robust counter-contempt for racists.

The book concludes with a discussion of overcoming contempt through forgiveness. This account of forgiveness sheds light upon the broader issue of social reconciliation and what role reparations and memorials may play in giving persons reasons to overcome their contempt for institutions.

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