

The Moral Futility of Contempt: A Response to Macalester Bell's *Hard Feelings* in the Era of Trump

Jessica Li
Swarthmore College

Edited by: Dorian Charpentier,
Galen Hall, Nathan Mainster,
and Ilana Duchan

ABSTRACT

In Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt, Macalester Bell argues that under certain circumstances contempt can be the appropriate—and indeed, even the best—response to answering those who exemplify what she calls the “vices of superiority.” But in grappling with our current political moment, this paper critiques Bell’s ethic of contempt. I argue that expressing contempt for those with whom we disagree is not effective in eliciting remorse or effecting change. In fact, contempt only further polarizes a body politic. Furthermore, I argue that contempt plays the role of holding others responsible less well than Bell thinks it does. Finally, I argue that a culture of contempt encourages in lockstep a culture of moral superiority.

Contempt is in no short supply these days. In a politically turbulent era such as ours, contempt for public figures, institutions, and those with whom we vehemently disagree has become increasingly prominent. Calls to civility warn against this attitude, casting contempt as an ugly and corrosive emotion that damages our relations to one another and defies the respect we owe all persons. In *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt*, Macalester Bell argues intrepidly against this consensus. She contends that under certain circumstances, contempt can be the appropriate—and indeed, the best—response to answering those who exemplify what she calls the “vices of superiority.”¹ Racism, one such vice of superiority, is best responded to with counter-contempt, she argues, because “contempt corrects [the racist’s] status claim and helps to restore the equilibrium between the esteem and deference he takes himself to deserve and the esteem and deference he

1 Bell, Macalester. *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt*. Oxford University Press, 2013. 9.

actually merits.”² Bell concludes that upon further investigation, contempt holds an important and essential place in moral life.

The outpouring of contempt surrounding the 2016 United States presidential election and its aftermath calls into question whether contempt is the *best* way of confronting the vices of superiority. As I will demonstrate, contempt has done nothing to disrupt President Trump’s behavior, who, I argue, epitomizes many of the vices of superiority. Contempt has also made politics more divisive, Americans more narrow-minded, and public discourse more impossible. As many Americans have experienced, talking about politics with friends and family has become so strained that many have decided to avoid broaching the topic altogether. And increasingly, in a public discourse of contempt, people are curating their news and social media to avoid encountering viewpoints that differ from their own.

In grappling with our current political moment, this paper argues against an ethic of contempt. First, I summarize Bell’s account of contempt. Then, against her account I argue that expressing contempt for those with whom we disagree is not effective in eliciting remorse or effecting change. In fact, contempt only further polarizes a body politic. After responding to Bell’s arguments on contempt’s *instrumental* value, I turn to her arguments on contempt’s *non-instrumental* value. Bell claims that contempt is non-instrumentally valuable because it plays an important role in our practices of holding others responsible; but, I argue that contempt plays this role less well than she thinks. Finally, I argue that a culture of contempt encourages in lockstep a culture of moral superiority. My arguments taken together do not defend a strict prohibition against contempt; however, they do demonstrate that contempt is much more morally suspect than Bell admits.

In *Hard Feelings*, Bell begins by examining the nature of contempt. As she prefaces at the beginning of the chapter, contempt is difficult to define and make distinctive from other emotions like resentment, disgust, and anger. Nevertheless, she outlines four of contempt’s central features. First, contempt is a response towards persons who have failed to meet an important standard, and who have as a result compromised their *status*. Second, contempt is a globalist emotion, meaning it takes whole persons as its object. Third, the contemnor “sees the contemned as inferior to her along some axis of comparison.” And fourth, and most paradigmatically, contempt involves withdrawal.³

In contrast with neighboring emotions such as anger or resentment which motivate engagement, contempt motivates withdrawal. Withdrawal, she argues, can look like “refusing to invite someone to a gathering or declining to shake some-

2 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 216.

3 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 37-44.

one's hand"⁴ on the one hand; and radio personality Don Imus' contemptuous comments about "the Rutgers women's basketball team, referring to them as 'nappy-headed hos'"⁵ or the Egyptian protesters who waved their shoes at then-President Mubarak in Tahrir Square, on the other.⁶ The former examples she calls "passive contempt"; the latter examples "active contempt." Passive contempt treats the target as non-threatening, as beneath notice. Passive contempt involves withdrawal in a literal sense: evading or dismissing the target. Active contempt, on the other hand, presents the target as threatening and involves a different sense of withdrawal. With active contempt, the contemnor withdraws from the target by casting her as dangerous and morally less than. Bell writes in a later passage, "contempt is a *demoting emotion* [original emphasis] that presents its target as having a comparatively low status." In other words, the active contemnor purposefully distances herself by portraying the target as someone to be looked down upon, not as someone to be capitulated to or reconciled with. Thus, in expressions of active contempt, there is an aspect of *communication*: the contemnor tries to *communicate* to the target that she is being disengaged, and why she is being disengaged.⁷ Bell's subsequent discussion focuses primarily on "active contempt."

Bell then turns to the looming question: What makes contempt morally valuable? Bell argues that contempt is the most effective way of confronting and defeating the vices of superiority, a term which encompasses a number of vices such as arrogance, hypocrisy, and racism. As she explains, those who exemplify the vices of superiority see themselves as entitled to more esteem and deference than everyone else, and insist that others treat them as such. Bell is skeptical that we can challenge their superbia by simply discussing or reminding them of the equal worth of all persons. She elaborates in a compelling passage:

For those who evince superbia do not have false beliefs about others' moral *standing*; instead, their main fault is taking themselves to have a comparatively high *status* and lording this presumed status over people in a way that expresses ill will. Given this, reminding the arrogant or hypocritical that others are just as worthy of respect won't answer their vices. Such people may concede the point but continue to harbor superbia and see it as justified. In order to properly challenge the target's perception of his superior status, one must attempt to make his *inferior* status felt. That is why contempt's characteristic demotion is such an apt response to the vices of superiority.⁸

4 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 47.

5 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 6.

6 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 8.

7 I am grateful to Professor Krista Thomason for illuminating this distinction in Bell's account.

8 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 129.

Contempt best addresses the vices of superiority, she argues. As she sketches out earlier, contempt demotes the target and presents the target as having a comparatively low status. Contempt “thereby negat[es] his sense of entitlement and undermin[es] his attempts at dishonoring or exacting esteem and deference.”⁹ Moreover, being the object of contempt can “provide us with a morally valuable second-personal perspective and can shake us into the realization that we have failed to meet certain basic standards.”¹⁰ The paradigmatic example is Elizabeth’s contempt for Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy began reflecting on his arrogance and in turn, began changing his ways precisely because he felt Elizabeth’s contemptuous attitude. Bell hedges, however, that contempt does not *cause* the target to feel remorse. Instead, “what apt contempt does is *provide* reasons to change: it puts those who evince the vices of superiority in a position to appreciate their reasons to change; the experience of being put down and disesteemed makes one’s reasons to change particularly salient.”¹¹

Contempt is not only morally valuable as a means of answering the vices of superbia; it also holds non-instrumental value. According to Bell, contempt is “a way for persons to maintain their integrity,” and “a person of integrity is someone who not only does the right thing but also has the right *attitudes* toward her commitments.”¹² Contempt is moreover constitutive of “holding persons accountable for their actions and faults” and ensuring that we hold ourselves to shared standards.¹³ In the brief paragraph in which she makes this argument, she writes: “While resentment demands that its target take responsibility for the wrong done, contempt demands that its target change her attitudes and overcome her superbia. Responding with apt contempt, then, is the clearest way of holding persons accountable for their superbia.”¹⁴ In short, contempt is part of the moral practice of blaming those who fail to adhere to certain standards.

Bell is convincing insofar as she persuades us that contempt can, in some cases, help “put the target in a position to appreciate the reasons he has to change his ways.”¹⁵ The example of Darcy and Elizabeth in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* that Bell gives in her fourth chapter asserts her point forcefully; Elizabeth’s contemptuous rejection of Darcy’s proposal prompts in him a new awareness and inspires him to reform his character. However, Bell is less persuasive as to whether contempt is the *best* way of responding to the vices of superiority, and whether we ought to prefer an ethic of contempt to an ethic of anti-contempt. Does contempt

9 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 128.

10 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 160.

11 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 130.

12 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 161-62.

13 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 162.

14 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 163.

15 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 225.

always serve to jolt a person out of vice? What do we risk in contemning others? The rest of this paper interrogates these infirmities.

As observers note, contempt is rife in contemporary politics. Screaming heads on television, Twitter trolls, and angry campus activists have become commonplace in American life. Yet, contempt has not proven effective in the ways that Bell anticipates. Perhaps the most glaring and well-known example of someone who exemplifies the vices of superiority is President Donald Trump. For example, he boasted about the purported successes of his administration to the United Nations General Assembly: “In less than two years, my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.”¹⁶ He played more than six rounds of golf in his first month in the Oval Office, despite previously criticizing President Obama for doing the same thing. And he routinely fraternizes with white supremacists such as David Duke. Even his own supporters attest to his arrogance, hypocrisy, and racism. Michael Cohen, former lawyer and supporter of President Trump, said of him during his historic testimony before Congress: “He is a racist, he is a con man, he is a cheat.”¹⁷

Treating him with contempt, however, has not precipitated the kind of change that Bell anticipates, or as she argues, has not provided reasons for him to change. Despite the press exposing his hypocrisy for playing golf and the public responding with contempt on Twitter and Facebook, Trump continued to visit Mar-a-Lago for golf course outings.¹⁸ In a Twitter thread rebuking his behavior, dozens of people tweeted at Trump a picture of him tweeting in 2011, “I play golf to relax. My company is in great shape. @BarackObama plays golf to escape work while America goes down the drain,” except they crossed out “@BarackObama” from the picture and named Trump instead.¹⁹ Despite the widespread contempt he earned for his performance as president, coming from even his closest policy advisors, Trump said that “nobody’s ever done a better job than I’m doing as president.”²⁰ In an anonymous op-ed, a senior official in the Trump administration

16 Choi, Matthew. “Trump bragged about his presidency and world leaders laughed.” *Politico*. September 25, 2018. www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-united-nations-brag-839820. Accessed April 7, 2019.

17 Desiderio, Andrew. “Cohen testimony on Trump: ‘He is a racist. He is a conman. He is a cheat.’” *Politico*. February 26, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/26/cohen-trump-racist-conman-cheat-1189951>. Accessed April 4, 2019.

18 Blake, Aaron. “Why President Trump’s frequent golfing is even more hypocritical than it seems.” *Washington Post*. February 22, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/22/president-trumps-frequent-golfing-is-even-more-hypocritical-than-it-seems-at-first-glance/?utm_term=.0199a7da3d9a. Accessed April 4, 2019.

19 Trump, Donald J. (@realDonaldTrump). “I play golf to relax. My company is in great shape. @BarackObama plays golf to escape work while America goes down the drain.” Twitter. December 30, 2011, 10:12 a.m. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1528143329153638840?lang=en>.

20 Bump, Phillip. “Trump: ‘Nobody’s ever done a better job than I’m doing as president.’” *Washington Post*. September 4, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/09/04/trump-nobodys-ever-done-a-better-job-than-im-doing-as-president/?utm_term=.be6e7a1bb7a5. Accessed January 10, 2019.

called the president's leadership style "impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective."²¹ And despite the contempt he received from civil rights organizations like the ACLU, the NAACP, and the Anti-Defamation League, Trump continued to highlight crimes committed by black and brown people, therefore emboldening the alt-right. As just one of many instances, consider how Anthony Romero, the executive director of the ACLU, expresses contempt for Trump in an op-ed piece about the border wall "emergency" when he writes:

Trump's emergency declaration is a blatant abuse of power in the service of his anti-immigrant agenda and a brazen attempt to subvert the constitutional separation of powers.

The federal treasury isn't a bank account that the president can just raid whenever he's in a bind. It's taxpayer money that the Framers specifically left in the hands of Congress. Trump is seeking to thwart Congress' will. Now we are asking the courts to give Trump another lesson in how the Constitution works.²²

In the face of overwhelming contempt, Trump incredulously persists in being hypocritical, arrogant and racist—not once expressing remorse for his actions. Against President Trump, contempt proves unsuccessful in confronting the vices of superiority.

Bell might offer two responses here. First, she might respond that one counter-example does not defeat the instrumental value of contempt. In her account, she did not venture to argue that contempt is *guaranteed* to answer the vices of superiority. If we read her work charitably, sometimes contempt will work, sometimes it will not. But in order to maintain that contempt has instrumental value and that it is the best way of responding to the vices of superiority, Bell must insist that by and large, contempt is effective. Second, she might assert that Trump is incapable of taking up contempt, and therefore treating him with contempt is inappropriate. She explains in a chapter about contempt's characteristic withdrawal:

The target must be able to understand what it means to fail to meet a standard and must be able to change his ways if he comes to accept the claim implicit in contempt. If a person is unable to understand what it means to fail to meet a standard or is utterly unable to take steps to address his fault, then

21 Anonymous. "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration." *New York Times*. September 5, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

22 Romero, Anthony D. "ACLU on border wall 'emergency': We'll see you in court, President Donald Trump." *USA Today*, February 20, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/02/20/aclu-lawsuit-trump-emergency-declaration-illegal-unprecedented-column/2920655002/>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

one could not morally address him through one's contempt.²³

Even if we concede both responses—that presenting President Trump as one counterexample is not fatal to her argument, and furthermore, that her account can accommodate for President Trump and exceptional persons who are similarly immune from expressions of contempt—her account still faces the fact that contempt is ineffective towards ordinary Americans.²⁴ For example, much of America has treated Trump supporters, including those who voted for him more tepidly, with unbridled contempt. Here, I assume that those who adamantly support President Trump and the policies that he advocates also evince the vices of superiority. Take the following headlines: “Trump Won Because Voters Are Ignorant—Literally” which has the subtitle, “Democracy is supposed to enact the will of the people. But what if the people have no clue what they’re doing?”;²⁵ “Maybe They’re Just Bad People”;²⁶ “Racist Americans, Not Trump, Are The Problem. There Might Be A Cure.”²⁷ Trump supporters are seen not merely as incorrect or misguided, but as terrible human beings. They are cast as bigots, uneducated hicks, and even “deplorables.” But liberal contempt has done very little, if anything, to change their minds. In general, Trump supporters still hold the same positions on policy issues, the President’s comportment, and his fitness to lead. As his steady approval rating shows, Trump remains exactly as overwhelmingly popular among Republicans as he was on the first day of his presidency.²⁸ I argue that by and large, contempt has not prompted the national reckoning that Bell would expect on her account, nor has it inspired Trump supporters to rise to the standards that we have accused them of not meeting.

Why is this the case? I argue that a culture of contempt in American politics is not as instrumentally valuable as Bell claims because it does not take effect in the way that she describes. Bell argues that contempt answers the vices of superiority by *providing reasons to change*. To reiterate the quote I cited earlier, she claims that contempt “puts those who evince the vices of superiority in a po-

23 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 187.

24 Sparks, Grace. “How many Americans actually support Trump?” *CNN*. September 27, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/26/politics/actual-trump-support/index.html>. Accessed January 1, 2019.

25 Brennan, Jason. “Trump Won Because Voters Are Ignorant—Literally.” *Foreign Policy*. November 10, 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/10/the-dance-of-the-dunces-trump-clinton-election-republican-democrat/>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

26 Goldberg, Michelle. “Maybe They’re Just Bad People.” *New York Times*. November 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/opinion/trump-supporters-bill-white-bryan-eure.html>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

27 Barlow, Rich. “Racist Americans, Not Trump, Are The Problem. There Might Be A Cure.” *wbur*. November 30, 2018. <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2018/11/30/donald-trump-racism-supporters-rich-barlow>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

28 Higgins, Tucker. “Trump’s approval ratings are low but steady—possibly a good sign for his re-election chances.” *CNBC*. January 2, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/02/trump-approval-low-but-steady-possible-good-sign-for-2020-re-election.html>. Accessed January 2, 2019.

sition to appreciate their reasons to change; the experience of being put down and disesteemed makes one's reasons to change particularly salient."²⁹ Contempt in American politics, however, does not seem to function in this way. Contrary to Bell's account, widespread and strenuous contempt has failed to make white supremacists better "appreciate their reasons to change." Why? I argue that white supremacists do not feel the withdrawing effects of contempt because—and this is crucial—they champion the approval of the President. Although they may feel contempt from liberals, white supremacists are not "put down" or "disesteemed" precisely because they are bolstered by Trump when they witness him repeatedly accusing illegal immigrants of ruining the country. They witness him repeatedly associating himself with racists and repeatedly demonstrating fealty to alt-right groups. Consider how Trump began his 2016 presidential campaign by disparaging Mexican immigrants, saying:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best—they're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.³⁰

Consider how he has retweeted white nationalist accounts with handles such as "WhiteGenocideTM" without apology (Twitter has since removed this account).³¹ In the face of contempt, white supremacists have refuge in Trump, a figure with immense social and political cachet who tacitly approves their actions, and shares their views. Bell argues that contempt is supposed to withdraw from the target and thereby ostracize them from the moral community. But withdrawal is not meaningful if the target has recourse in a president who supports and often urges anti-immigrant rhetoric. Therefore, under the aegis of the president, white supremacists do not feel the withdrawing effects of contempt.

Furthermore, I argue that contempt in American politics has not just been ineffective against the vices of superiority—it has only made matters worse. On all sides of the political spectrum, a culture of contempt has only entrenched the vices of superiority and alienated those whom we want to reform. To illustrate this point with an example, consider Hillary Clinton's contemptuously calling half of Trump

29 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 130.

30 Burns, Alexander. "Choice Words From Donald Trump, Presidential Candidate." *New York Times*. June 16, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/16/choice-words-from-donald-trump-presidential-candidate/>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

31 Holmes, Jack. "Trump's Disgusting Retweets Suggest a Larger Problem is Brewing." *Esquire*. November 19, 2017. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a13974149/trump-retweet-britain-first/>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

supporters a “basket of deplorables.” Ostensibly, this highly controversial remark was meant as a way to answer racist, sexist, and xenophobic behavior demonstrated by those who had vocally advocated for Trump. Instead, her comment was met with public outrage and retaliation. An avalanche of stories commenting on the striking phrase flooded the Internet, conservatives were incensed, and the divide between the Democrat and Republican body politic widened only further. Consider these tweets: “Treating people as subhuman—irredeemable/deplorable—is no way to run for POTUS,” by Tim Miller, a former Jeb Bush spokesman and fervent Trump opponent, and “What’s truly deplorable isn’t just that Hillary Clinton made an inexcusable mistake in front of wealthy donors and reporters happened to be around to catch it... It’s that Clinton revealed just how little she thinks of the hard-working men and women of America,” by Jason Miller, a senior communications adviser during the Trump campaign. As she explained in an apologetic statement that draws parallels with Bell’s arguments for the instrumental value of contempt, she intended for her contempt as a way to stand up to Trump’s turpitude and to commit herself and her campaign to moral values:

But let’s be clear, what’s really “deplorable” is that Donald Trump hired a major advocate for the so-called ‘alt-right’ movement to run his campaign and that David Duke and other white supremacists see him as a champion of their values. It’s deplorable that Trump has built his campaign largely on prejudice and paranoia and given a national platform to hateful views and voices, including by retweeting fringe bigots with a few dozen followers and spreading their message to 11 million people. It’s deplorable that he’s attacked a federal judge for his “Mexican heritage,” bullied a Gold Star family because of their Muslim faith, and promoted the lie that our first black president is not a true American. So I won’t stop calling out bigotry and racist rhetoric in this campaign.³²

But calling millions of people a “basket of deplorables”—people whom she wanted to persuade—only drove them further into Trump’s arms.

The “basket of deplorables” gaffe only made matters worse, and not just because it was said by a presidential candidate trying to win over voters—in other words, not just because it was a bad political play. It was also because using contempt as a means to address the vices of superiority, in general, risks alienating those whom we want to reform. Interviews with dozens of lukewarm Trump

32 Lima, Christiano. “Hillary Clinton walks back ‘basket of deplorables’ remark.” *Politico*. September 9, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/hillary-clinton-basket-deplorables-227988>. Accessed January 9, 2019.

supporters bear this out. A New York Times article reports that incessant attacks on Trump are causing his supporters to rally around the President. Ms. Anders, one of the interviewees, said that when she hears “overblown” attacks on Trump, “it makes [her] angry at them, which causes [her] to want to defend him to them more.”³³ The Times reports that Trump supporters feel *protective* of the President when asked the all too common question “How can you possibly still support this man?”, as well as further removed from the contemptuous liberal. Contempt, instead of addressing the vices of superiority on the other side, has only polarized our politics and cultivated an atmosphere in which contempt is traded back-and-forth, to no end.

Our contemptuous public discourse also casts doubt on Bell’s arguments for the *non-instrumental* value of contempt. Although contempt, I agree, is an important reactive attitude that is part of our practice of holding persons accountable, I argue that contempt does not play that role as well as Bell asserts. Recall that in Bell’s view, contempt holds persons accountable by demanding that its target overcome her *superbia*. How does contempt issue this demand? She explains, “Through contempt’s characteristic withdrawal, its subjects do not simply seek explanations or apologies; instead, the contemnor seeks the target’s *character* change. If the target does not attempt to change his ways, then the contemnor will see him as someone to be avoided altogether.”³⁴ Elizabeth held Darcy accountable for his arrogance by withdrawing from him, and thus morally engaging him. Shunning a person who exemplifies the vices of superiority *can* serve as a sort of punishment, holding persons accountable, but I argue that it is a particularly ambiguous and precarious way of doing so. It seems to me that there is an inherent tension between contempt’s characteristic withdrawal and the demand that it makes on the target—and that this tension undermines, or at the very least severely limits, the non-instrumental value of contempt. By withdrawing from the target, the contemnor does not expressly communicate the demand. The target may misinterpret, or may even be completely oblivious of, what is demanded of him. Moreover, by withdrawing from the target, the contemnor does not enforce the demand. The target is not in any way compelled to comply with the contemnor’s demand, aside from being subjected to the sanction of her ostracism. And as I argued earlier, ostracism is rendered impotent when another person or group embraces the target instead.

Bell anticipates some of these worries when she writes: “It is true that contempt’s withdrawal may be misinterpreted. Silence and withdrawal are multi-

33 Peters, Jeremy W. “As Critics Assail Trump, His Supporters Dig in Deeper.” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/us/politics/republican-voters-trump.html>. Accessed January 8, 2018.

34 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 127.

ply ambiguous in ways that other forms of address are not.”³⁵ But she seems more optimistic about contempt’s successes than wary of its risks. She argues, “But while the ambiguity of withdrawal can be disorientating, this disorientation can also be constructive. As targets think about what elicited the withdrawal, they may, like Darcy, come to recognize contemptible aspects of their characters that they had long overlooked.”³⁶ She is confident that “if a target of contempt believes that the contempt directed at him is apt, then he *will* [emphasis added] respond with shame and an attempt to ameliorate his character,” often arguing as though the target’s response of shame and the target’s attempt to ameliorate his character are empirical inevitabilities.³⁷ But I contend that we should be more skeptical of contempt’s ability to hold persons accountable. The ambiguity and precariousness of contempt that I have been discussing are especially acute in public discourse. Amid the din of daily, back-and-forth contempt about whatever news is dominating the day, it becomes especially difficult to determine what claim an expression of contempt is making and to feel compelled to answer that claim, when instead the target can simply dig in her heels and meet contempt with counter-contempt.

Bell insists that if we reject an ethic of contempt, we would lose “relationships of mutual accountability for our attitudes in which we hold persons to certain standards and are held to certain standards in turn.”³⁸ This seems to me to be an overly pessimistic conclusion. Holding persons accountable does not necessarily require an ethic of contempt; holding persons accountable might involve a myriad of other emotions such as resentment, disgust, shame, indifference, anger, and disappointment. Consider Martin Luther King Jr.’s seminal “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in which he responds to criticisms made by several religious leaders in the South regarding the nonviolent protests against segregation. At different points, Dr. King expresses disappointment, indignation, and anger. For example, he writes, “But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church,” and, “I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed . . .”³⁹ Note however that he does not express contempt for the clergymen. He does not dismiss their concerns or cast them as unforgivable human beings—despite all the good reason he has to do so. Instead, he takes up every line in their statement and thoroughly refutes each concern. By holding the church responsible for its hypocrisy *without* appealing to contempt, and indeed

35 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 189.

36 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 189.

37 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 187.

38 Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 163.

39 King Jr., Martin Luther. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” 26 U.C. Davis L. Rev. 791 (1992): 835.

while remaining charitable, Dr. King demonstrates that “relationships of mutual accountability” are possible absent an ethic of contempt. In fact, one might argue that it was precisely Dr. King’s willingness to engage with his detractors that held them responsible and crucially served the success of the Civil Rights Movement. By countering each of their gripes head-on, relentlessly, it becomes unequivocally clear that their criticisms of the Birmingham demonstrations were made in bad faith and hold no water.

Lastly, I argue that we should reject an ethic of contempt because a culture of contempt encourages in lockstep a culture of moral superiority. In treating those with whom we disagree contemptuously, we make the assumption that we are in the morally superior position to judge whether someone has violated the community’s standards.⁴⁰ We appoint ourselves as arbiters of what is moral and what is immoral. Seeing ourselves as morally superior and others as morally inferior not only compromises our own character but also ignores the complexity of disagreement. Indeed, in expressing contempt for the Trump voter, much of America failed to listen to the many issues that Trump voters cared about—issues that Trump was addressing and Clinton was not. Pigeonholing Trump voters as immoral and bigoted obscured a broader debate about jobs leaving, terrorism, and the nuances of immigration. Ms. Anders, the interviewee whom I cited earlier, laments, “All nuance and all complexity—and these are complex issues—are completely lost... It’s either, ‘Trump wants to put people in cages, in concentration camps.’ Or, on the other side, ‘Oh the left just wants everybody to come into the country illegally so they can get voters.’ We can’t have a conversation.”⁴¹

Contempt has reached a fever pitch in public discourse and has shown no sign of abating anytime soon. In the context of our present political climate, I have argued that contempt is not as morally valuable as Bell claims it to be. Instrumentally, I have demonstrated that contempt is not effective in getting the target to reflect on his character and to make reforms. Moreover, contempt risks further dividing a body politic. Non-instrumentally, I have argued that contempt plays a much narrower role in holding persons accountable, given how ambiguous and precarious contempt is for the target who exemplifies the vices of superiority. I have also shown that it is possible to hold persons morally responsible without appealing to contempt. And lastly, I have argued that a culture of contempt encourages a culture of moral superiority, which not only compromises our own moral selves but also ignores the complexity of those whom we condemn. Taking seriously the arguments that this paper advances requires that our public discourse guards against contempt instead of embracing it.

40 Professor Thomason makes this point in the context of shame in her book *Naked*.

41 Peters, “As Critics Assail Trump, His Supporters Dig in Deeper.”

Works Cited

- Anonymous. "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration." *New York Times*. September 5, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html. Accessed April 7, 2019.
- Barlow, Rich. "Racist Americans, Not Trump, Are The Problem. There Might Be A Cure." *wbur*. November 30, 2018. www.wbur.org/cognoscen-ti/2018/11/30/donald-trump-racism-supporters-rich-barlow. Accessed April 7, 2019.
- Bell, Macalester. *Hard feelings: The moral psychology of contempt*. Oxford University Press. 2013.
- Blake, Aaron. "Why President Trump's frequent golfing is even more hypocritical than it seems." *Washington Post*. February 22, 2017. www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/22/president-trumps-frequent-golfing-is-even-more-hypocritical-than-it-seems-at-first-glance/?utm_term=.0199a7da3d9a. Accessed April 4, 2019.
- Brennan, Jason. "Trump Won Because Voters Are Ignorant—Literally." *Foreign Policy*. November 10, 2016. foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/10/the-dance-of-the-dunces-trump-clinton-election-republican-democrat. Accessed April 7, 2019.
- Bump, Phillip. "Trump: 'Nobody's ever done a better job than I'm doing as president.'" *Washington Post*. September 4, 2018. www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/09/04/trump-nobodys-ever-done-a-better-job-than-im-doing-as-president/?utm_term=.be6e7a1bb7a5. Accessed January 10, 2019.
- Burns, Alexander. "Choice Words From Donald Trump, Presidential Candidate." *New York Times*. June 16, 2015. www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/16/choice-words-from-donald-trump-presidential-candidate. Accessed April 7, 2019.
- Choi, Matthew. "Trump bragged about his presidency and world leaders laughed." *Politico*. September 25, 2018. www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-united-nations-brag-839820. Accessed April 7,

2019.

Desiderio, Andrew. "Cohen testimony on Trump: 'He is a racist. He is a con-man. He is a cheat.'" *Politico*. February 26, 2019. www.politico.com/story/2019/02/26/cohen-trump-racist-conman-cheat-1189951. Accessed April 4, 2019.

Goldberg, Michelle. "Maybe They're Just Bad People." *New York Times*. November 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/opinion/trump-supporters-bill-white-bryan-eure.html>. Accessed April 7, 2019.

Higgins, Tucker. "Trump's approval ratings are low but steady — possibly a good sign for his re-election chances." *CNBC*. January 2, 2019. www.cnn.com/2019/01/02/trump-approval-low-but-steady-possible-good-sign-for-2020-re-election.html. Accessed January 2, 2019.

Holmes, Jack. "Trump's Disgusting Retweets Suggest a Larger Problem is Brewing." *Esquire*. November 19, 2017. www.esquire.com/news-politics/a13974149/trump-retweet-britain-first/. Accessed April 7, 2019.

King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." 26 UC Davis L. Rev. 791, 1992, 835.

Lima, Christiano. "Hillary Clinton walks back 'basket of deplorables' remark." *Politico*. September 9, 2016. www.politico.com/story/2016/09/hillary-clinton-basket-deplorables-227988. Accessed January 9, 2019.

Peters, Jeremy W. "As Critics Assail Trump, His Supporters Dig in Deeper." *The New York Times*. June 23, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/us/politics/republican-voters-trump.html. Accessed January 8, 2018.

Romero, Anthony D. "ACLU on border wall 'emergency': We'll see you in court, President Donald Trump." *USA Today*. February 20, 2019. www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/02/20/aclu-lawsuit-trump-emergency-declaration-illegal-unprecedented-column/2920655002/. Accessed April 7, 2019.

Sparks, Grace. "How many Americans actually support Trump?." *CNN*. September 27, 2018. www.cnn.com/2018/09/26/politics/actual-trump-support/index.html. Accessed January 1, 2019.

Trump, Donald J. (@realDonaldTrump). "I play golf to relax. My company is in great shape. @BarackObama plays golf to escape work while America goes down the drain." Twitter. December 30, 2011, 10:12 a.m. twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/152814332915363840?lang=en.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Lou Chen for reading over the draft of this paper. And thank you to Professor Krista Thomason for being an invaluable interlocutor. Our discussion about Macalester Bell's *Hard Feelings* motivated much of my thinking on contempt in public discourse.

