

HOW CONTEMPT BECAME A PASSION

Abstract:

Philosophers and psychologists have come to recognize contempt as a crucial concept for understanding moral and social life. Yet its conceptual history remains understudied. This essay argues that contempt underwent an important conceptual shift at the end of the 1640's with the publication of René Descartes' *Passions de l'âme*. Prior to the appearance of Descartes's treatise early modern philosophers generally excluded contempt from their taxonomies of the passions, treating it instead as a form of indifference. To have contempt of something (death, illness, wealth) was to be free of passion in the face of it. Following Descartes's intervention, however, philosophers came increasingly to include contempt among the passions, those unruly perturbations of the mind that could have benign or dangerous effects depending on how well they were moderated. This was a change that harbored practical as well as philosophical implications. For what had once been an emblem of one's self-mastery was now itself a passion in need of careful regulation. More specifically, much aristocratic contempt now signified a lack of self-control that threatened civil peace rather than a cool display of superiority. The article concludes by drawing out the affinities (and dis-affinities) between this mid-seventeenth-century reconceptualization of contempt as a passion and the current attempt by philosophers to redeem contempt as a morally justifiable attitude.

Keywords: contempt, passions, conceptual change, Descartes, Hobbes, Malebranche, Hume

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1. Introduction¹

Contempt is both a powerful moral concept and one especially difficult to analyse. This difficulty is due in no small part to lack of agreement over what exactly it is. At times contempt can resemble an emotion like revulsion or shame, a visceral response to something that strikes us as vile. In other respects it more closely resembles an entirely *dispassionate* form of regard or even numbness. The Stoic who has contempt for pain or death claims to feel no emotion in the face of these two conventional evils, precisely because he has trained himself not to think of them as evils at all. Philosophers who have recently taken an interest in contempt have preferred to categorize it as ‘moral attitude’ rather than an emotion *per se*.² Some psychologists, taking the opposite tack, have concluded that contempt belongs on the list of the so-called ‘basic emotions.’ To support their case they have even tried to identify a facial expression for contempt that cuts across cultural differences (the most popular candidate so far has been the narrowing of the eyes and an upturned lip on one side of the face).³ For others contempt is best understood as a compound of other more primary emotions such as anger and disgust.⁴

Lack of agreement over what contempt is has not precluded debate over its value to moral and political life. A recent article in the *New York Times* warned that the increasing presence of contempt in politics was a cause for worry because contempt is more toxic than other negative emotions such as hatred or anger.⁵ The latter, it was implied, at least have the virtue of encouraging people to engage with whoever or whatever has provoked them. The hate-filled and angry, after all, are rarely shy about communicating the reasons for why they feel the way they do and can therefore be relied upon to sustain a verbal exchange with those they detest. Contempt, by contrast, seems to prompt withdrawal rather than engagement.⁶ To regard someone with contempt is not to consider them the holder of mistaken views that we might venture to correct, but rather to see them as fundamentally worthless and so undeserving of even negative attention. For some, this tendency to ‘signal that the

¹ The author would like to thank Celeste McNamara, Edward Skidelsky, Rebekah Sterling, and audiences at Oxford and Westminster for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

² Michele Mason refers to contempt as ‘an attitude’ but concedes that one ‘might just as easily refer to it as an emotion or feeling.’ Michele Mason, ‘Contempt as a Moral Attitude,’ *Ethics* 113, no. 2 (2003), 239. Macalester Bell notes that ‘[u]nlike some emotions (e.g. anger and disgust), contempt seems to lack a characteristic feeling.’ Bell continues to refer to contempt as an emotion but one that closely resembles a form of regard. Macalester Bell, *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27.

³ Paul Ekman excluded contempt from his initial catalogue of six basic emotions but later added it. See Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, ‘A New Pan-Cultural Facial Expression of Emotion’ *Motivation and Emotion* 10, no. 2 (1986), 160.

⁴ Jesse Pinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67.

⁵ Karen Stohr, ‘Our New Age of Contempt’ *New York Times*, January 23 2017.

⁶ For an excellent account of this aspect of contempt see Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 38-40.

conversation is over' makes contempt fundamentally incompatible with the basic respect owed to all persons.⁷ Contempt can seem particularly out of place in democratic cultures supposedly committed to the equal worth of all. As one commentator has put it, contempt in democracies is always likely to be 'accompanied by a sense of its own doubtful legitimacy' precisely because the members of such societies balk at the very notion of a hierarchy of worth.⁸ Even so, contempt has had its recent defenders too, particularly among ethicists keen to rehabilitate it as the appropriate moral response to those who have severely compromised themselves by their misconduct.⁹

Debate over the nature and legitimacy of contempt is hardly unique to our own time, however. In what follows I aim to recover a comparable early modern controversy over how contempt should be categorized, what its dangerous effects might be, and whether it has any legitimate function. Focusing on English and French philosophers of the passions, I will argue that contempt underwent an important conceptual shift towards the end of the 1640's. Prior to that moment early modern philosophers generally excluded contempt from their taxonomies of the passions, treating it instead as a form of indifference. To have contempt for something (death, illness, sorrow, wealth) was to be free of passion in the face of it. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, however, philosophers came increasingly to include contempt *among* the passions, those unruly perturbations of the mind that could have both benign and calamitous effects depending on how well they were moderated. This was a change with practical as well as philosophical implications. For what had once been a sign of one's self-mastery was now itself a passion in need of moderation. More specifically, once contempt was re-imagined as passionate, aristocratic displays of contempt could be readily characterised as exhibiting a lack of self-control rather than a cool demonstration of superiority. This was critically important at a moment when the ethos of an independent aristocracy was widely seen as an encouraging feuding and other forms of violence, a problem to which political absolutism was increasingly offered as a solution.

The pivotal turning point in this reconceptualization of contempt as a passion, I maintain, was the publication of René Descartes' *Passions de l'âme* in 1649. Original to Descartes' analysis was his presentation of contempt as species of wonder (or *admiration*), a passion that occupied a central place in his schema. To experience contempt towards an object, for Descartes, was to experience wonder at its smallness, just as to esteem something was to marvel at its *grandeur*. The significance of Descartes' move was twofold. By

⁷ Thomas Hill, *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice: Kantian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60.

⁸ William I. Miller, 'Upward Contempt' *Political Theory* 23, no. 3 (1995), 479.

⁹ For qualified defenses of contempt see Mason, 'Contempt as a Moral Attitude' and Bell, *Hard Feelings*. Even Kant has emerged recently as a defender of contempt. See Krista Thomason, 'Shame and Contempt in Kant's Moral Theory' *Kantian Review* 18, no. 2 (2013), 221-240.

classifying contempt as a passion, Descartes was able to specify its potential utility as a discouragement to vice, while at the same time presenting it as just as unruly, capable of abuse, and in need of regulation as any other passion.

Descartes' preferred means of regulating contempt was through the cultivation of a legitimate form of self-esteem he termed *générosité*, borrowing the term (though not the sense) from the aristocratic honour codes of his day. The viability of this remedy, I next argue, became a principal fault-line dividing philosophers of the passions who came after Descartes, many of whom were similarly dismayed at the unsociable effects of contempt in the aristocratic societies of their day. Thomas Hobbes, for one, adopted elements of Descartes' analysis of contempt in the taxonomy of the passions he presented in *Leviathan* and even allowed for the possibility of legitimate self-esteem. But he ultimately rejected Descartes' Stoic-inspired account of what such self-esteem might look like. It was among Descartes' French Augustinian disciples such as Nicolas Malebranche, however, that the implications of his novel conceptualization of contempt were most fully explored but also where his ethic of *générosité* encountered the greatest skepticism. I conclude by drawing out the affinities (and dis-affinities) between this mid-seventeenth century reconceptualization of contempt as a passion and the current attempt by philosophers to redeem contempt as a morally justifiable attitude.

2. Before Descartes: Contempt as Indifference

Contempt rarely featured in taxonomies of the passions prior to the early modern period. It featured nowhere, for example, in the list of eleven passions found in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* or in the comparable list contained in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Instead the Latin terms *contemno*, *contemnere*, and *contemptus* generally denoted an attitude of calm indifference rather than emotional disturbance. The first Latin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* used the word *contemptivus* to describe not a passion but rather the indifferent attitude of the 'great souled man' towards illusory goods.¹⁰ Similarly, for the Stoics, contempt implied that one was in command of one's passions rather than being subjected to them, as when the sage shows contempt for things considered to be good or bad (and hence passion-inducing) by non-sages. According to Thomas Elyot's 1542 Latin to English Dictionary the definition of *contemptor, aris* was to 'sette lyttell by.'¹¹ Thomas Cooper's 'enriched' 1552 edition of the text made the element of indifference more emphatic

¹⁰ Grosseteste, cited in Tobias Hoffmann, 'Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas on Magnanimity' in Istvan P. Bejczy, *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 105. My thanks to Edward Skidelsky for alerting me to this reference.

¹¹ Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae* (London: Thomae Bertheleti, 1542).

still. In Cooper's version, the *contemptor* was now someone who 'setteth nothyng by a thyng' or ignores it entirely.¹²

The philosophical literature on the passions that blossomed in seventeenth-century Europe (much of it taking its starting point from Aristotle and the Stoics) was similarly disinclined to treat contempt as a passion. The reasons for this were at least threefold. In the first place, beginning in England with Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1601) and in France with Jean Pierre Camus' *Traité des Passions* (1614), most seventeenth-century philosophers considered passions to be motions or disturbances of the mind that move us towards or away from some perceived good or bad. Jean-François Senault's *De l'usage des passions* of 1641 was typical in defining a passion as 'nothing else, but a motion of the sensitive appetite, caused by the imagination of an appearing or veritable good, or evil.'¹³ By contrast, to experience contempt towards something was generally to be *unmoved* by it. As Thomas Hobbes would later define it in *Leviathan* (more on which below), contempt was a kind of 'immobility of the heart' rather than an impulse towards or away from an object.¹⁴

Secondly, seventeenth-century philosophers also generally agreed that passions had a corporeal dimension, which again was difficult to spot in the case of contempt. The passions, Thomas Wright declared, invariably caused some 'alteration in the body' and could be readily identified by some outward physical symptom.¹⁵ A man's passions, Senault similarly affirmed, were evident in the 'colour of his face, by the flame which sparkles in his eyes' and 'by the shaking of his joynts' among other 'signes.'¹⁶ But it was far from clear how (or even whether) contempt manifested itself physically in this way. The signs of contempt in a person's bearing or countenance (a haughty laugh, a curled lip, a sneering squint) were not nearly as consistent or agreed upon as blushing was for shame or bulging veins for anger. Marin Cureau de La Chambre, in the first volume of his *Les caractères des passions* (1640), associated contempt (*mépris*) with a raised nose as if the contemnor wished to sniff out and 'hunt whatever they scorned [comme si elle vouloit chasser ce qu'elle dégaigne]' but this was by no means universally agreed upon.¹⁷

¹² Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae: Eliote's dictionarie the second tyme enriched, and more perfectly corrected, by Thomas Cooper, schole maister of Maudlens in Oxforde* (London: Thomae Bertheleti, 1552).

¹³ Jean François Senault, *The Use of Passions*, trans. Henry Carey, Earl of Monmouth (London: J. L. & Humphrey Moseley, 1649), 17. Thomas Wright also argued that 'all of our passions either tend to some good, or flie from some evil.' Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (London: printed by V.S, 1601), 45.

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

¹⁵ Senault, *The Use of Passions*, 14.

¹⁶ Senault, *The Use of Passions*, 9.

¹⁷ Marin Cureau de la Chambre, *Les caractères des passions* (Paris: Jacques D'Allin, 1662): 17. *Les caractères des passions* was produced in four volumes between 1640 and 1662. Citations are to the 1662 edition of the first (1640) volume.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, contempt had no discernible *purpose* in the way that most passions were held to. Most seventeenth-century philosophers rejected the Stoic view that the passions were inherently pathological and instead affirmed that each had a specific function (in the paradigmatic examples fear prompts us to flee danger and anger encourages us to avenge injustices).¹⁸ These functions, moreover, bore the stamp of a divine plan, the idea being that because passions were an elementary part of human mental life then God must have put them there deliberately for our benefit. God endowed us with passions, Edward Reynolds wrote in his *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man* (1640), to encourage us to pursue things that ‘beareth a natural conveniencie’ and avoid things that are ‘noxious and destructive.’¹⁹ Although the passions, Thomas Wright proclaimed, have the capacity to ‘blind reason’ and ‘seduce the will’ they are nevertheless ‘meanes to help us’ provided by God.²⁰ But whereas passions such as hatred or fear could quite easily be imagined to be useful for virtue or self-preservation, this was far from the case with contempt.

To the extent that contempt featured at all in this literature, it was usually not as a passion in its own right but rather as a derivative of hatred. This relation of dependence was given particularly dramatic expression in the anonymously written *Pathomachia, or the Battle of the Affections* (1630) a text that was more allegorical play than philosophical treatise. The *Pathomachia* depicts a kind of civil war of the soul in which the minor passions stage a revolt against the dual monarchy of Love and Hatred. Consistent with the taxonomical conventions of the time contempt features nowhere in the roster of fifteen ‘affections’ that (along with eleven virtues and twenty-five vices) make up the play’s cast of characters. Nevertheless its sole appearance in the play is telling. In the opening act Love convokes a Parliament of the Passions to hear their grievances. Hatred cannot bring herself to attend and so sends ‘contempt’ and ‘dislike’ (her ‘minions’) to act as her representatives.²¹ In the rebellion of the passions that forms the basis of the play’s plot contempt plays no role whatsoever, having presumably remained a loyal subordinate of Hatred. Even ‘disdaine’ (the closest equivalent to contempt among the play’s main protagonists) struggles to emerge from under Hatred’s shadow. For although disdain ‘seemeth to contemn’ in reality it ‘hateth,’ suggesting that even

¹⁸ As Amy Schmitter puts it, very few seventeenth-century philosophers ‘issued blanket condemnations of the passions, even when seeking remedies for them.’ Amy Schmitter, ‘Passions and Affections’ in ed. Peter R. Anstey, *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 447.

¹⁹ Edward Reynolds, *A treatise of the passions and faculties of the soul of man* (London: Robert Bostock, 1640): 32. See also Senault’s ‘apologies for passions against the Stoicks.’ Senault, *The Use of the Passions*, 1.

²⁰ Wright, *The Passions of the Minde*, 3.

²¹ Anon., *Pathomachia or, the Battle of the Affections, Shadowed by a Faigned Siege of the Citie Pathopolis* (London: Thomas and Richard Coats, 1630), 6.

disregard usually conceals an underlying aversion.²² Disdain, in other words, is only ever a *feigned* indifference, incapable of becoming a true form of unconcern.

In highlighting disdain's dependence upon hatred, the anonymous author of *Pathomachia* hit upon a paradox of contempt that would recur in philosophical treatments of the subject: namely that those who take the trouble to *display* contempt for another (rather than simply ignoring them) have already failed to treat them with indifference. Thomas Hobbes was unequivocal that those who go out of their way to condemn others might be trying to convey indifference but more often than not reveal vainglory and cowardice instead.²³ After all, to make known one's contempt for another person through a laugh, a word, or a gesture was not to disregard them but to select them for special (albeit unwanted) attention. This argument would later reach its fullest expression in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer according to whom 'whoever shows contempt thereby gives a sign of some regard in so far as he wants to let the other man know how little he esteems him.'²⁴ In this way, Schopenhauer concluded, he 'betrays hatred which excludes and only feigns contempt.'²⁵ A more 'genuine' contempt, by contrast, is a 'firm conviction of the other man's worthlessness' and so is 'incompatible with consideration.'²⁶

If contempt did not make the standard taxonomies of the passions it was nevertheless essential to understanding a key passion on every philosopher's list: anger. The reasoning here was that anyone who *discovered* that they were being regarded with indifference would quickly fly into a rage. Indeed, whatever else they might have disagreed upon nearly all theorists of the passions concurred with Aristotle's argument in the *Rhetoric* that the suspicion that one is the object of contempt was the chief (or possibly only) cause of anger. In the *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man*, Reynolds insisted that 'the fundamental and essential cause of anger' was 'contempt from others meeting with the love of ourselves' in that anyone who feels slighted will quickly 'desire to make knowne unto the persons who thus contemne him [...] that there is in him more courage, power, and worth, than deserves to be neglected.'²⁷ Not everyone was prepared to accept that contempt was the

²² Anon., *Pathomachia*, 40.

²³ In *Elements of Law* (the manuscript of which he composed in 1640) Hobbes singled out those 'greedy of applause from everything they do well' as being particularly disposed to laugh contemptuously at others. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, in *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, J.C.A Gaskin ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 54. For Quentin Skinner notes that for Hobbes those who laugh at others are trying to express 'high confidence' but in fact reveal 'cowardice' and pusillanimity. Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes and the Social Control of Unsociability' in Al P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 447.

²⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, Psychological remark #324, *Parerga and Paralipoema* volume 2, E.F.J. Payne trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 591.

²⁵ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipoema*, 591.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipoema*, 591.

²⁷ Reynolds, *A Treatise of the Passions*, 317.

sole cause of anger, however. In the *Traité des passions* of 1614, Jean-Pierre Camus placed contempt among the causes of anger, arguing that witnessing offences to God could also provoke one to rage.²⁸ Nicholas Coëffeteau, in his *Tableau des passions humaines* (1620), stuck more closely to the Aristotelian line, stating that all men will be moved to ‘choler’ if they consider themselves ‘contemned’ by others.²⁹ Writing in the same year as Reynolds, Hobbes half-heartedly challenged the view that anger was a kind of ‘grief proceeding from an opinion of contempt,’ retorting that such a definition failed to account for the anger we feel at inanimate objects that are ‘incapable of contemning us.’³⁰ However, Hobbes later dropped this dissent and returned to something like the consensus view in his *De Homine*, confirming there that anger ‘ariseth most often from the belief that one is contemned’ [*passio quae appellatur ira... oritur quidem saepissime ab opinionione contemptus*].³¹

Because contempt was such a potent prompt to anger it was imperative for early modern philosophers to understand how it might be communicated, particularly in an aristocratic culture plagued by fractious arguments, duels, and honour feuds. Here too Aristotle served as the crucial source of insight. Aristotle’s suggestion in the *Rhetoric* was that contempt could be expressed in three different forms, each more provocative than the last.³² The first, disdain (καταφρόνησις), is mainly passive and manifests itself through neglect or withdrawal of attention from its object rather than through any active attempt to provoke. Aristotle’s remaining forms of contempt, by contrast, are both more active and more acrimonious. In the case of the second form, there is a deliberate attempt to make its object aware of just how indifferently they are regarded through acts of gratuitous harm inflicted solely out of spite (ἐπιπρεασμός). Worst of all, however, was to use insults (ὕβρις) to communicate contempt, an offense that in the Athens of Aristotle’s day was a greater criminal offense than physical assault.

Several early modern authors seized on this typology when seeking to understand the various ways contempt could cause anger and, by extension, interpersonal violence. Writing before the first English translation of the *Rhetoric*, John Marbeke included an analysis of contempt in his *Booke of Notes and Commonplaces* (1581) that hewed closely to Aristotle’s. Contempt, Marbeke wrote, ‘constiteth chieflie in three things.’ The first was a mere opinion that something was lowly and so remained ‘onlie in the minde.’ Marbeke did not associate any actions with this form of contempt, suggesting that it may even be concealed from its

²⁸ Pierre Camus, *Traité des passions de l’âme* (Paris, Garnier, 2014/1614), 443; Nicholas Coëffeteau *A table of humane passions. With their causes and effects*, trans. E. Grimeston (London: Nicholas Okes, 1621), 443.

²⁹ Coëffeteau, *A table of humane passions*, 571.

³⁰ Hobbes, *Elements*, 52.

³¹ Hobbes, *De Homine*, in *Man and Citizen*, Bernard Gert ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 56.

³² Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J.H. Freese (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1926), 175.

object entirely. As with Aristotle, however, Marbeke's other forms of contempt were more overt. The second comprised those actions committed to frustrate another for no other purpose than to 'rejoice' at their 'discommoditie.' In Marbeke's last category the contemnor 'adde[s] words,' especially those 'which have ignomie or contumlie joined with them,' aggravating the offense and increasing the likelihood of a feud.³³ Reynolds too identified three forms of contempt that mapped directly onto Aristotle's, labeling them 'contempt,' 'spitefulness,' and 'calumny' (the last of these was most damaging because the effects of insults could ripple outwards, ruining our reputation 'in the Eyes and Ears of the World').³⁴ Finally, Pierre Charron in his *De la Sagesse*, similarly concluded that the 'opinion of contempt' that served as 'the Principal ... Cause of anger' (and thus of conflict) could be communicated either 'by word, deed or countenance,' this time reversing the order of Aristotle's list.³⁵

If one powerful effect of contempt was to inflame anger in its object and so ignite conflict, another was to diminish a very different passion in its subject: fear. Several students of the passions agreed that to have contempt for something was to be utterly unafraid of it. Indeed, it was the *confidence* associated with contempt that made people so recklessly willing to provoke those they despise through spiteful actions or insults. In the battle between passions portrayed in *Pathomachia* 'Disdaine' fights alongside 'Hope' on account of his bond to 'Lieutenant Bouldness, or Confidence.'³⁶ The implication was that those experiencing contempt for another would be so confident of victory in any quarrel that they would see little reason to exercise restraint. Hobbes in particular recognized that the confidence of the contemnor, when combined with the fact that those who feel contemned will react with violent fury, could have dire consequences for social peace. It was for this reason that he saw fit to include expressions of contempt among the behaviours prohibited by the laws of nature.³⁷

The fearlessness associated with contempt had implications not only for social relations but also for political authority, a potent concern at a moment when monarchs were eager to consolidate their rule at the expense of an independent aristocracy. In France several theorists of the passions worried that subjects or vassals who grew contemptuous of their rulers would quickly shed the salutary fear necessary for obedience. Rulers, they thus

³³ John Marbeke, *A Booke of Notes and Commonplaces* (London: Thomas East, 1581), 249.

³⁴ Reynolds, *A Treatise of the Passions*, 322.

³⁵ Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdome: Three Bookes*, trans. Samson Lennard (London: Edward Blount & Witt Aspey, 1608), 88.

³⁶ Anon., *Pathomachia*, 2.

³⁷ For Hobbes' apprehensions regarding the threat that signs of contempt could pose to civil peace see Skinner, 'Hobbes and the Social Control of Unsociability'; Theresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2017), ch. 3; and Kinch Hoekstra, 'Hobbesian Equality,' *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, ed. S. A. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

concluded, needed to avoid contempt even more assiduously than hatred (in this line of argument the distinction between contempt and hatred was firmer). Pierre Charron in his *De la Sagesse* of 1601 went to great lengths to show that of hatred and contempt (the two ‘murderers of a prince and state’) the latter posed by far the greater threat.³⁸ Defining contempt as a ‘sinister, base, and abject opinion’ of a ruler, he insisted that it was ‘more contrarie and dangerous [to a government] than hatred.’³⁹ Hatred, Charron explained, was ‘modest and timorous’ because ‘helde back by fear.’⁴⁰ Contempt, by contrast, had an enabling effect, releasing subjects from fear, arming their hatred, and giving them ‘courage to execute’ whatever seditious notions they might be entertaining.⁴¹

The argument that contempt could slacken fear received a more equivocal endorsement in Senault’s *De l’usage des passions*. Wading into the controversy over whether it is better for rulers to be feared or loved, Senault considered the claim that contempt (the ‘capital enemy to monarchy’) was so dangerous precisely because it was incompatible with fear. By contrast, contempt was perfectly compatible with love, in that we might look down upon weak things we adore.⁴² In response Senault considered the opposing view that because love ‘arises from valuation’ it must always be ‘accompanied by respect.’⁴³ Senault refused to approve either argument unambiguously, maintaining instead that rulers must generally win the affection of their subjects while making exceptional uses of severity when necessary, lest contempt creep up on them.

Unsurprisingly, the provenance of the argument that contempt was a solvent of fear (and hence of authority) lay with early modern writers on statecraft. Machiavelli in *The Prince* cautioned rulers to avoid both contempt (*contemptus*) and hatred (*odium*) if they wished their rule to last.⁴⁴ Justus Lipsius devoted a whole chapter of his *Politica* (1589) to advancing a similar argument. Lipsius defined contempt as the ‘vile and abject opinion of the king and his estate’ that subjects and foreigners alike will develop towards weak rulers. This opinion, he stated bluntly, is the ‘death and destruction of kingdoms: yea in some respects more than hate.’⁴⁵ A few lines down he made the contrast with hatred clearer still: ‘The first cause and motion of the destruction of kingdoms most commonly hath proceedeth from

³⁸ Charron, *Of Wisdome*, 383.

³⁹ Charron, *Of Wisdome*, 385.

⁴⁰ Charron, *Of Wisdome*, 385.

⁴¹ Charron, *Of Wisdome*, 385.

⁴² Senault, *The Use of Passions*, 178.

⁴³ Senault, *The Use of Passions*, 180.

⁴⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, eds. Quentin Skinner and Richard Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63.

⁴⁵ Justus Lipsius, *Six Bookes of Politics or Civil Doctrine*, trans. William Jones (London: Richard Field, 1594), 109. Lipsius concedes, however, that contempt on its own is an insufficient impulse to revolt and that some admixture of hatred is usually necessary to stir rebels to action.

hatred; but the last, and that which hath most force, is contempt.⁴⁶ Once again the power of contempt was not that it drove the subject to conspire against their ruler but that it dampened fear, the passion most likely to inhibit those considering such a course of action. Whereas a subject filled with hatred but also afraid was unlikely to trouble a ruler, contempt, for Lipsius, ‘doth let loose the bridle of fear,’ encouraging the discontented to hazard a revolt they would otherwise be wary of undertaking.⁴⁷

The image of contempt that emerges from this literature is of an attitude that was calm and destructive all at once. As a form of indifference, contempt was suggestive of inner calm or at the very least a lack of real disturbance. On the other hand, it could inflame angry conflict if communicated to others and also diminish the fearful respect required for political order. Yet because these thinkers refrained from including contempt in their taxonomies of the passions, they rarely offered the kind of detailed instructions of how it could be directed, regulated, or controlled that they provided for similarly disruptive affects such as hatred, despair, or desire. This would all change with the publication, in 1649, of René Descartes’ *Passions de l’âme*, a treatise that revealed its author to be a ‘taxonomical rebel’ prepared to analyse contempt as a passion in its own right and specify both its potential uses and the means by which it might be brought to heel.⁴⁸

3. Contempt Becomes a Passion: Descartes’ *Passions de l’Âme*

From Montaigne onwards, French writing on the passions was, as Stuart Carroll notes, a ‘response to the violence of elite society’ and in particular to the ‘preponderant role played by violence in the aristocratic honour code.’⁴⁹ It was a response that called not so much for an end to honour culture as a shift in emphasis from external manners to inner control. Descartes’s *Passions de l’âme* was part of this tradition, anatomising the human mind

⁴⁶ Lipsius, *Six Bookes of Politics or Civil Doctrine*, 109.

⁴⁷ Lipsius, *Six Bookes of Politics or Civil Doctrine*, 109. As with the analysis of the relationship between contempt and anger, the argument that contempt smothers fear can ultimately be traced to Aristotle, although on this occasion it was his *Politics* that supplied the crucial analysis. Monarchs, Aristotle suggested in Book V of that text, needed to guard both against hatred (μῖσος) and contempt (καταφρόνησις) as these were the two principal motives impelling subjects to attack them. Of these two motives, however, contempt was by far the bigger problem because the contemptuous are also fearless. Kings who are spared hatred will fall if they incur contempt, Aristotle held, while even a tyrant could be hated and survive nonetheless, provided his subjects did not regard him with contempt. Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 144. 1312b and 145. 1313a

⁴⁸ A.M. Schmitter, “‘I’ve Got a Little List’: Classification, Explanation, and Forms of Explanation in 17th Century Philosophy” in A. Coen and R. Stern eds. *Thinking about the Emotions: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 111.

⁴⁹ Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 312.

while at the same time trying to convince his readers that the surer path to honour laid in containing their passions rather than indulging them.

Quite what these passions were was still a matter of some dispute, however, and it was here that Descartes offered himself as an innovator. One indication of his willingness to depart from his predecessors lay in his inclusion of contempt (along with esteem) among the passions operative in the mind. Contempt (*mépris*) makes an early appearance in Descartes' taxonomy as a derivative of *admiration*, the feeling of wonder we experience when confronted with something new or extraordinary. Wonder is the first of Descartes' six fundamental passions (the others being love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness) but stands more or less alone in this series in that it barely registers any physical effect on us at all. It prompts no change in the flow of our blood or animal spirits and so leaves us, physiologically speaking, much as we were before.⁵⁰ The objects that excite our wonder neither threaten us with harm, nor advertise their usefulness to us, but only surprise us with their strangeness. Wonder, for Descartes, is thus first among the passions, not because it enjoys primacy, but because we experience it *prior* to evaluating the thing or person that astonishes us. We wonder, as Descartes puts it, 'before we have any knowledge of whether the thing is beneficial to us or not.'⁵¹ If we examine the object of wonder, it is not because we hope to gain something from it, but simply because we wish to know more. The focus of wonder is never 'on good or bad but only on the knowledge of the thing that has given rise to it.'⁵²

How might wonder morph into contempt? Descartes' initial explanation for this is rather terse. Because we are comparative creatures sensitive to differences of scale we are predisposed, Descartes assumes, to wonder at objects that either loom large before us or strike us as miniscule. Wonder, he thus suggests, will take the form of either esteem or contempt 'depending on whether it is the greatness or the littleness of the object that we marvel at.'⁵³ Descartes acknowledges that this definition still left open to doubt whether contempt and esteem truly qualified as passions. It is possible, he concedes, to experience an entirely dispassionate opinion of esteem or contempt towards an object whose worth we have accurately assessed with our reason.⁵⁴ Here we see traces of the Stoic claim that if the mind can correctly identify the nature and worth of objects that pass before it then it will never

⁵⁰ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul and other Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 224 (art. 71). According to Thomas Carr, Descartes' contempt is a 'chiefly intellectual' passion as the spread of the animal spirits remains 'localized in the brain.' Thomas Carr, *Descartes and the Resilience of Rhetoric* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 53.

⁵¹ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 220 (art. 53).

⁵² Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 224 (art. 71).

⁵³ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 220 (art. 54). As Susan James has argued, Descartes' argument here carries the curious connotation that we could esteem something we do not yet evaluate as good or condemn something we do not yet view as bad. Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 170.

⁵⁴ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 257 (art. 149).

lapse into passion. But such instances, Descartes notes, are rare. Esteem and contempt might begin as mere opinions but they were usually followed up by a passion that reinforces that initial opinion. His more comprehensive definition, then, is as follows: ‘the passion of contempt is an inclination on the part of the soul to consider the baseness of what it despises, caused by the movement of the spirits that reinforces the idea of this littleness.’⁵⁵

Descartes is clear in *Passions de l’âme* that contempt rarely acts on us alone but rather combines with other passions. Much of the time, he insists, our esteem or contempt arrive tinged with passions of a more appetitive or aversive sort, particularly love and hatred, creating new alloy passions. Hence, if we come to judge that a person whose *grandeur* we wonder at (a rich person or a ruler perhaps) may advance our interest then our esteem will slide easily into veneration and we will anxiously seek out his or her favor. Conversely, if we ascertain that the object of our wonder is theoretically capable of affecting our interest but is too weak to do so then our contempt will shift into what Descartes calls disdain (*dédain*).⁵⁶

On the face of it, Descartes’ inclusion of contempt among the passions may appear more like a minor classificatory deviation than the beginning of an important conceptual shift. By classifying contempt as a passion, however, Descartes raised for the first time the possibility that contempt might have a distinct purpose all of its own. Descartes, in explicit rejection of the Stoic thesis that the passions are pathological, consistently emphasizes their usefulness, and contempt is no exception. Just as veneration can incline us to submit to God and humble ourselves before temporal authority, contempt, in the form of disdain, is useful for spurring us to look down upon certain vices or dishonourable habits.⁵⁷ Miserliness, for instance, is despicable because it reveals an excessive attachment to money. The man who is jealous of his wife is to be disdained because if he truly loved her he would also trust her.⁵⁸ Thus although how we direct our disdain will in practice vary from person to person (such that what is an object of disdain to one may be an object of veneration to another), Descartes is clear that there are some *intrinsically* despicable behaviours and that our disdain needs to be trained towards those.

The problem for Descartes is that contempt is unruly, and frequently directed at the wrong targets. In a rank obsessed aristocratic society such as seventeenth-century France, people often venerated the unworthy and disdained those who should be respected. Such distortions began, Descartes argues, when we experience wonder at something grand or despicable in *ourselves*. Those who ‘know themselves least well,’ he affirms,

⁵⁵ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 257 (art. 149).

⁵⁶ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 220 and 257 (art. 55 and 149).

⁵⁷ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 263 (art. 164).

⁵⁸ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 265 (art. 169).

are those most prone to exalt and to abase themselves more than they should, because any unfamiliar occurrence takes them by surprise; assimilating it to themselves, they become to themselves a source of wonderment, and feel self-esteem or self-contempt according as they judge that what is happening to them is to their advantage or not.⁵⁹

Because ‘what is happening to them’ changes constantly, the self-ignorant will vacillate between pride and dejection. A stroke of good fortune will prompt them to mistakenly marvel at *themselves* and degrade those around them, while an unexpected calamity will cause them (again mistakenly) to look with wonder at their own wretchedness and then grovel before those they believe to be their superiors.

If self-wonder is the cause of these abuses then the path to mastery over them must be some sort of self-knowledge. Put otherwise, to avoid becoming a ‘source of wonderment’ to ourselves we must learn to weigh our own self-worth steadily and accurately. But on what basis is such an exercise in self-estimation to be conducted? In addressing this problem Descartes, having earlier rejected the Stoic argument that the passions must be purged from the soul, borrows heavily from the Roman Stoic Epictetus.⁶⁰ According to Epictetus the wise are immune from sudden gusts of pride or dejection because they know that the only ground of legitimate self-esteem is the use we make of our free choice. It is senseless, Epictetus argued, for us to rate ourselves according to externals such as wealth, reputation, or anything else that lies outside of our sphere of control. Descartes, assimilating Epictetus’ concept of choice to his own understanding of free will, concurs entirely. The sole basis for self-esteem, he confirms, lies in knowing that only freely willed acts are praise or blame worthy, and resolving to exercise good judgment.

Departing from his scholastic predecessors, Descartes described this feeling of legitimate self-esteem as *générosité* rather than magnanimity, its closest equivalent.⁶¹ Unlike the Stoic sage, those with *générosité* will experience passions much like anyone else, including humility and the self-satisfaction that comes from knowing that one has behaved virtuously. What is distinctive about their passions, however, is that ‘surprise is not a major

⁵⁹ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 265 (art. 169).

⁶⁰ Victoria Kahn notes that Descartes’ ‘ideal of self-government has much in common with the Stoic philosopher Epictetus.’ Victoria Kahn, ‘Happy Tears: Baroque Politics in Descartes’ *Passions de l’âme*’ in *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, eds. Daniel Coli, Victoria Kahn, and Neil Saccamano (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), n. 11.

⁶¹ According to Sarah Marquardt, Descartes, scarred by what he witnessed of the Thirty Years War, deliberately took the concept of generosity – long associated with a hierarchical and martial aristocratic culture – and refashioned it into the form of humility necessary for a ‘culture of peace.’ Sarah Marquardt, ‘The Long Road to Peace: Descartes’ Modernization of Generosity in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649)’ *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 1 (2015), 56.

factor in producing them.’⁶² Because the generous are ‘sufficiently aware of the causes of their own self-esteem’ they will never lapse into the exaggerated self-wonder that lies at the root of both pride and abjectness.⁶³ Descartes noted (in an argument similar to one later made famous by Immanuel Kant) that if the generous did not escape self-wonder entirely, it was only because the rational use of free will was *itself* so fascinating that it too could give rise to wonder.

Descartes’ generous individual not only feels deserved self-satisfaction, however, he or she will also be more tolerant of the failings or vices that she or he perceives in others. This is what makes *générosité* so crucial to Cartesian ethics. Because the generous appreciate that the vices of those around them are the product of ignorance, they will not ‘think themselves much superior to those they themselves surpass’ and so will refrain from disdainning them.⁶⁴ Although they may use raillery to gently correct faults, they will never indulge in abusive ridicule or scornful speech. Not only that, but they will be immune to such provocations from others. Having obtained ‘absolute self-mastery’ the generous will disregard the kind of ‘insults at which other people would normally take offense.’⁶⁵ They will rebuff the spiteful actions of others but keep their own contempt (along with the rest of their passions) firmly under control.

Descartes’ *générosité* has sometimes been translated, with heavy aristocratic overtones, as ‘nobility of soul’ and the term featured prominently in seventeenth century moral codes of the nobility.⁶⁶ And while Descartes acknowledged that some might consider *générosité* an accident of noble birth, he assured his readers that *all* who can learn to wonder at their own rational agency could nurture it in themselves.⁶⁷ The egalitarian implications of this move should not be lost sight of. Descartes’ experience as a volunteer soldier in the early stages of the Thirty Years War left him with a distaste for the martial values that drove the nobility to lord it over their supposed inferiors and commit acts of violence in pursuit of glory.⁶⁸ By holding out legitimate self-esteem as a reasonable goal attainable by all, Descartes severed any connection between nobility of soul and family name or social rank. At the same time, he invited the attentive among his readers to view with suspicion any path to esteem that required investing in hierarchies premised on anything other than virtue and self-command.

⁶² Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 262 (art. 160)

⁶³ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 261 (art. 160).

⁶⁴ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 259 (art. 154).

⁶⁵ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 277 (art. 203).

⁶⁶ Carr, *Descartes and the Resilience of Rhetoric*, 56. See also Marquardt, ‘The Long Road to Peace,’ 62.

⁶⁷ Charles Taylor argues that Descartes’ sense of generosity does in fact retain ‘some link with good birth.’ The well born, he writes, ‘have a head start but not a monopoly.’ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 541-542 (n. 32).

⁶⁸ Marquardt, ‘The Long Road to Peace,’ 55.

4. After Descartes: Contempt, Wonder, and the Limits of *Générosité*

Descartes' analysis of contempt and his rehabilitation of *générosité* both met with wide approval (and some criticism) among his early readers, particularly in England. Having endured nearly a decade of civil war, several English thinkers welcomed an analysis of contempt that seemed to delegitimize an aristocratic ethos that fanned interpersonal violence and stood in the way of the creation of a centralized state capable of guaranteeing civil peace. What follows in this section is only a sampling of that reception. It should, nevertheless, be enough to establish that after Descartes philosophers who took an interest in the passions were more confident in declaring contempt among them and were open to considering Descartes's recommendations for how that passion might be controlled.

To begin with an English philosopher writing in France, there is considerable evidence that Hobbes, when composing *Leviathan*, revised his understanding of contempt upon encountering Descartes' *Passions de l'âme*. In *Elements of Law* Hobbes had included no separate discussion of contempt and seemed to concur with the pre-Cartesian view that it was no passion at all. When he revised and expanded his taxonomy in *Leviathan*, however, Hobbes included contempt among the thirty or so passions that merited separate definitions. That he did so owed something, I suspect, to Descartes' influence. Hobbes composed *Leviathan* while moving in Cartesian circles in Paris and by the late 1640's he was on better personal terms with Descartes himself, having finally met him in 1648.⁶⁹ And while the two had major differences on matters of epistemology, physics, and optics, they found some agreement on the nature and function of the passions.⁷⁰ Both held, for instance, that the passions were perturbations of the soul that usually gave rise to some alteration of the blood or vital spirits. Both, moreover, argued that the passions, when functioning as they ought, were basically benign in that they prompted actions beneficial to our self-preservation. Moreover, whereas in *Elements* Hobbes presented all passions as more or less on the same footing, in *Leviathan* he identified seven 'simple' passions that aligned closely (though not exactly) with the six basic passions of Descartes' *Passions de l'âme*.⁷¹

When it came to defining contempt, moreover, Hobbes repeated several of Descartes' moves. Most significantly, he distinguished contempt from more appetitive or aversive passions such as hatred or anger and concurred with Descartes that its physical effects were

⁶⁹ Richard Tuck, *Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.

⁷⁰ There are important differences as well. The passions are largely passive for Descartes whereas for Hobbes they are 'acts' of the mind. Hobbes, *Elements*, 43. According to Arrigo Pacchi, the 'model' for Hobbes' discussion of the passion in *Leviathan* was 'Cartesian.' This is in contrast to both *Elements of Law* and *De Homine*, both of which look to Aristotle. Arrigo Pacchi, 'Hobbes and the Passions' *Topoi* 6 (1987), 114.

⁷¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 41.

minimal. We experience contempt, Hobbes contended, towards ‘things we neither Desire, nor Hate’ – a conception closer to the pre-Cartesian understanding of contempt as indifference rather than a movement or disturbance.⁷² While ‘potent objects’ that promise reward or pose a threat will move us to love or fear them, objects that arouse our contempt, on Hobbes’ definition, will leave us still.⁷³ This definition fit well with Descartes’ claim that contempt and esteem are detached from the heart, blood, or other organs concerned with conveying information essential to our self-preservation. Indeed, it is harder to reconcile with Hobbes’ own framing of the passions as desires and aversions that spur movement.⁷⁴

Hobbes’ definition of contempt differed from Descartes’ in two important respects, however. First, whereas Descartes was comfortable listing behaviours that should be universally considered contemptible (even if they were not always so considered in fact), Hobbes saw contempt as thoroughly relative and called into doubt whether the term ‘contemptible’ could have any stable referent at all. In his list of moral terms that lack a constant signification Hobbes included contempt alongside good and evil, suggesting that just as nothing was absolutely good or evil, nothing was absolutely contemptible either. Secondly, far from reducing contempt to a species of wonder, Hobbes separated the two passions. In *Elements* he had already defined wonder (or admiration) as a kind of spur to the acquisition of knowledge we feel when confronted with something ‘new and strange,’ and he retained the substance, if not the precise wording, of this definition in *Leviathan*.⁷⁵ But admiration, in *Leviathan*, forms no part of contempt. For while it is true that, for Hobbes, things we find contemptible may be new to our experience, they are also things that we have little curiosity about. Because such objects are ‘vile and inconsiderable’ the mind passes over them rather than hunting for more information about them.⁷⁶ Hobbes thus rejected Descartes’ claim that whatever we find contemptible will have some hold on our attention.

⁷² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 39.

⁷³ Gary Herbert calls Hobbesian contempt a ‘quasi passion.’ Herbert, *Thomas Hobbes: The Unity of Scientific and Moral Wisdom* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1989), 99.

⁷⁴ In Don Herzog’s words, it may be ‘tricky for Hobbes to distinguish between contempt and death.’ Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 237. As Rebekah Sterling has pointed out to me in personal correspondence, however, this analogy to death is difficult to sustain, as contempt describes our relation to a particular object rather than the complete absence of passion *per se*.

⁷⁵ Hobbes, *Elements*, 57. Hobbes frequently exploited the passion of admiration in his own writing. As Jon Parkin has recently shown, Hobbes was fond of using paradoxes because they could provoke wonder in his readership and stoke their curiosity. See Jon Parkin, ‘Hobbes and Paradox’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, eds. Al P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 39. This is further confirmed by Hobbes’ uses of the term in describing other passions. Cruelty, for example, is not a positive enjoyment of inflicting pain, but rather a ‘contempt, or little sense, of the calamity of others.’ The cruel, in other words, are numb to the suffering of others; but they do not go out of their way to make them suffer unnecessarily in the first place. Impudence, in a similar vein, was a ‘contempt of good Reputation’; that is, a disregard for one’s own standing among others rather than a deliberate effort to offend. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 43.

On the question of whether contempt could be regulated through the cultivation of legitimate self-esteem, thereby curbing the destructive behaviors associated with it, Hobbes was ambivalent. On the one hand he seemed to acknowledge that arriving (at least provisionally) at a more accurate reckoning of one's own self-worth was a viable goal. In each of the taxonomies of the passions Hobbes published after Descartes' *Passions de l'âme* he not only criticized excessive self-esteem (vainglory) but also offered a vision of legitimate self-esteem. In *Leviathan* the vainglorious man who mocks others is set against the 'great minds' (a phrase that recalls contemporary translations of Descartes' *générosité* as 'greatness of soul') who prove themselves by freeing others from contempt and by only judging themselves against the most able.⁷⁷ Similarly, in *De Homine*, Hobbes followed up a very Cartesian diagnosis of pride and abjectness with an encomium to legitimate self-esteem. Such self-esteem is not, he insists, a 'perturbation' at all but rather 'a state of mind that ought to be.'⁷⁸

Hobbes' legitimate self-esteem, however, was very far from being an exact counterpart to Cartesian *générosité*. For although Hobbes and Descartes agreed that legitimate self-esteem was both possible and desirable they differed fundamentally on its underlying basis. Hobbes was too much of a materialist, and too doubtful that what Descartes called free will could be anything other than appetite, to grant that wonder at the use of our free agency could constitute grounds for self-esteem. Instead, he selected a far more mundane basis for self-assessment. Those who estimate their worth accurately, he makes clear in *De Homine*, 'do so on the basis of their own past deeds.'⁷⁹ Legitimate self-esteem, in Hobbes' view, is closer to accurate self-estimation. It is not wonder at our rational agency so much as a solid reckoning of what we are and are not capable of based on experience gained from previous successes and failures.

Descartes' analysis of contempt proved especially popular among moralists in Restoration England, many of whom were keen for alternatives to Hobbes' psychology. The theologian and philosopher Henry More, an avid reader of Descartes at least since the 1640s, agreed both on the centrality of wonder to contempt and on the role contempt might serve as a corrective to vice. 'This passion' he wrote, 'is not altogether unprofitable' as 'it suffers not Virtue or Truth to be abandoned, either on the threats or on the temptations of impotent men.' 'Such,' More continued, 'was the contempt of Socrates for Anytus and Melitus, when he let them know, that *although they had power to kill, they had not power to hurt him.*'⁸⁰ In addition, More had little hesitation in endorsing generosity as key to both inner tranquility

⁷⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 43.

⁷⁸ Hobbes, *De Homine*, 61.

⁷⁹ Hobbes, *De Homine*, 61.

⁸⁰ Henry More, *An Account of Virtue: Or Henry More's Abridgement of Morals Put into English* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1690), 58.

and good social behaviour. The ‘valuing a Man’s self which Descartes calls generosity,’ More confirmed, can be a ‘spur to the procurement of the highest felicity’⁸¹

William Ramesey in his *Gentleman’s Companion or, A Character of True Nobility, and Gentility* (1672) was still more ardent. As his titled suggested, Ramesey was determined to differentiate authentic nobility from the empty courtesies and formalities of aristocratic life. Again Descartes’ *Passions de l’âme* proved of considerable use. Ramesey reproduced Descartes’ list of the six primary passions exactly, beginning, as Descartes did, with admiration, this ‘sudden surprise’ of a soul that encounters something ‘rare or different.’⁸² Having categorized contempt and esteem as varieties of this passion, Ramesey moved swiftly to endorse Descartes’ remedy for keeping them under control. It is ‘no absurdity,’ he argued, for a man to ‘esteem himself’ provided that such esteem derives from the knowledge that he has an ‘absolute command over his will.’⁸³ This ‘truly generous person,’ Ramesey declared, will have sufficient knowledge of his or her own worth that he or she will ‘never contemn, nor blame another’ and so prove a model of sociability.⁸⁴

The physician and scientist Walter Charleton was also forthcoming about his debt to *Passions de l’âme* even as he gave Descartes’ Stoic argument a distinctly Epicurean twist.⁸⁵ Charleton had been an early critic of Descartes’ epistemology, but in his 1674 *Natural History of the Passions* he agreed substantively with Descartes that esteem and contempt were ‘consequences’ of admiration, the ‘first of all passions.’⁸⁶ True to his ‘oracle’ Epicurus, however, Charleton immediately qualified the Cartesian position by stressing that admiration was only the first passion *after* ‘pleasure and pain.’⁸⁷ That these twin drives remained primary in Charleton’s account reflects the fact that he drew as much from Hobbes as from Descartes.⁸⁸ Charleton’s proposal for how the vices associated with contempt may be tackled, however, was unequivocally Cartesian.⁸⁹ When listing the principal remedies to the disturbances caused by the passions, he first mentions ‘generosity,’ which he had earlier defined, translating Descartes’ words directly, as a man’s ‘knowing he has nothing of his own except his free will.’⁹⁰

⁸¹ More, *An Account of Virtue*, 58.

⁸² William Ramesey, *The Gentleman’s Companion* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1672), 142.

⁸³ Ramesey, *The Gentleman’s Companion*, 143.

⁸⁴ William Ramesey, *The Gentleman’s Companion*, 144.

⁸⁵ For a thorough analysis of Ramesey and Charleton’s debt to Descartes’ ethics, and to the concept of *générosité* in particular, see Christopher Tilmouth, ‘Generosity and the Utility of the Passions: Cartesian Ethics in Restoration England’ *The Seventeenth Century* 22, no. 1 (2007), 144-167.

⁸⁶ Walter Charleton, *Natural History of the Passions* (London: James Magnes, 1674), 88.

⁸⁷ Charleton, *Natural History of the Passions*, 88.

⁸⁸ In his discussion of admiration, Charleton refers to Hobbes’ *Elements of Law* to illustrate that admiration is always accompanied by curiosity, which nearly always has an appetitive dimension. Charleton, *Natural History of the Passions*, 89.

⁸⁹ Charleton, *Natural History of the Passions*, 93.

⁹⁰ Charleton, *Natural History of the Passions*, 93.

Descartes' analysis found its greatest champion, however, in Antoine Le Grand whose *Entire Body of Philosophy* (1694) offered a comprehensive defence of the entire Cartesian system. Le Grand followed Descartes' reasoning more or less to the letter, insisting that esteem and contempt must 'not be taken for simple opinions' but should be treated as species of admiration instead.⁹¹ As Christopher Brooke has noted, Le Grand was an early advocate of Stoicism who made a conversion to Cartesianism late in life.⁹² But the eagerness with which he seizes on Descartes' Epictetean argument (the 'right use of our free will is the only ground for self-esteem') would suggest that his renouncement of Stoicism was never total.⁹³

It was among his compatriots, however, that Descartes' analysis of contempt was most keenly studied, taken up, and criticized. The zealous Cartesian and mathematician Bernard Lamy found room for an analysis of contempt in his 1675 *La Rhétorique ou l'Art de Parler*, one of the first French rhetorical treatises written in the vernacular. Lamy followed the by now familiar Cartesian understanding of contempt as a form of wonder but sought to break new ground by drawing out the implications of his thesis for rhetoric. In doing so, however, he subtly revised Descartes' argument. Whereas Descartes had treated contempt and esteem as simple opposites, Lamy pointed to the peculiar attraction that contempt had for the mind. 'To this passion,' he wrote, 'we willingly incline.' For

it is pleasing, and flatters the ambition that men have naturally for superiority and grandeur. We do not properly condemn any but those we look upon as inferiors. We look down upon them with divertissement, whereas it is troublesome to lift our eyes in contemplation of what is above us.⁹⁴

More violent passions, Lamy continued, 'spend and disturb us.' Contempt, by contrast, is so easy and satisfying to the mind that it is positively refreshing. It is not a 'commotion' of the soul as other passions are but rather a welcome 'repose.'⁹⁵ Indeed, so enjoyable is contempt that if orators can render an argument contemptible then they soon convince their audience to disregard it as false.

Other French disciples of Descartes preserved some details of his argument while questioning the viability of *générosité* as an ethical goal. In his *Recherche sur la vérité* of 1675, Nicolas Malebranche followed Descartes in presenting esteem and contempt as species

⁹¹ Antoine Le Grand, *An Entire Body of Philosophy According to the Principles of the Famous Renate Descartes, in Three Books* (London: Samuel Roycroft, 1694), 336.

⁹² Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought From Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton, N.J., 2012), 96.

⁹³ Le Grand, *An Entire Body of Philosophy*, 336.

⁹⁴ Bernard Lamy, *The Art of Speaking* trans. Anon. (London: W. Godbid, 1676), 139.

⁹⁵ Lamy, *The Art of Speaking* trans, 139.

of *admiration*, that ‘imperfect passion’ that scarcely affects us physically.⁹⁶ But if Malebranche shared Descartes’ basic psychological categories, he was too much of an Augustinian believer in human pride and sinfulness to share Descartes’ confidence that we can ever correct the misuse of these passions through justified self-esteem.⁹⁷ Malebranche even launched a direct attack on the Epictetean distinction between what is and is not ‘up to us’ that had been so foundational to Descartes’ *générosité*. This ‘magnificent division’ he wryly conceded, ‘seems consistent with reason’ but was also ‘inconsistent with the disordered state to which sin has reduced us.’⁹⁸

Nor, for Malebranche, was it necessarily desirable to quell the drive for superiority over others that Descartes had found such an objectionable trait among social elites. Malebranche reckoned that what he called our ‘secret desire for greatness’ could be a useful spur to courage provided it remained carefully hidden from public view.⁹⁹ A strenuous effort must be made to conceal one’s contempt for others to avoid offending other aspirants to superiority. ‘For in the end,’ he continued

contempt is the ultimate insult; it is the one most capable of rupturing society; and naturally we should not hope that a man whom we have made aware that we consider him beneath us can ever be joined to us, because men can never stand being the meanest part of the body they compose.¹⁰⁰

Note that Malebranche seems to have accepted that contempt itself is ineradicable. His concern, rather, was with the disastrous effects that would follow if that contempt were made known to its object. Gone was the Stoic-inflected emphasis on inner command; the onus instead was now firmly back on avoiding needless provocation through insult.

Malebranche offered a more developed series of recommendations on this topic in his 1684 *Traité de morale*. In Part II of that work, he repeated his earlier claim that expressed contempt is ‘the greatest of injuries,’ describing it now as a cruel denial of the basic dignity due to all humans as members of the highest species in creation.¹⁰¹ Even sinners, Malebranche declared, never forfeit this basic entitlement to dignity. For while sin itself might be contemptible, the sinners are not and must be afforded basic respect. If readers were not yet

⁹⁶ Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 375.

⁹⁷ As Michael Moriarty has noted, Malebranche was among those philosophers who were ‘profoundly influenced’ by Descartes’ philosophy but who declined to ‘use it to develop an ethics.’ Michael Moriarty, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 392.

⁹⁸ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 183. See also Brooke, *Philosophic Pride*, 91.

⁹⁹ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 333.

¹⁰⁰ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 334.

¹⁰¹ Nicolas Malebranche, *A Treatise of Morality*, trans. James Shipton (London: James Knapton, 1699), 42.

convinced, Malebranche presented them with more prudential grounds for biting their tongues when the occasion to demean others presented itself. Essential to this argument was Malebranche's commitment to viewing social life as an artificial (and fragile) construction. Because humans do not naturally seek society, and only enter into it with an eye to personal advantage, they need to foster the conditions under which mutually advantageous relationships can thrive. Expressing contempt for others is a sure way of undermining those conditions, making us appear obnoxious and our friendship unprofitable. For no one can ever 'expect any good' from 'those who are so unjust as to despise them.'¹⁰² Even our enemies, whom we may hate, must be spared our scorn, Malebranche argued, for when 'contempt is open and visible' the chance of achieving reconciliation between foes becomes remote.¹⁰³

Malebranche's skepticism towards Descartes' remedies for contempt was eventually followed by a challenge to his definition of contempt as derivative of wonder. Isaac Watts, in his 1729 *Plain and Particular Account of the Natural Passions*, adopted Descartes' general schema but signalled disagreement with the Frenchman (without naming him) on how to categorise contempt. Watts conceded that admiration was a 'primitive' passion but categorically denied that esteem and contempt had anything to do with it.¹⁰⁴ While 'some writers,' Watts noted, had claimed these to be 'species of admiration,' it would be more appropriate to describe them as species of love and hatred respectively.¹⁰⁵ His argument here rested on the idea that esteem and contempt were actually more turbulent than Descartes had made out. While 'neglect' (the ignoring of common things not worthy of hatred or love) was 'no passion,' esteem and contempt did qualify as such because they were accompanied by at least some 'ferment of the blood' or movement of the animal spirits.¹⁰⁶ Having made of contempt a bodily passion, Watts could discuss its physical traits and external characteristics in a way that Descartes had not. This passion 'discovers itself by turning the Back, shrinking up the Nose, thrusting out the lip, by derision and laughter, and terms of ridicule and jeering.'¹⁰⁷

By the 1730s even philosophers appreciative of Descartes were beginning to part ways with his analysis of the passions in general, and of contempt in particular. In volume II of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740) David Hume was content to follow Descartes in characterizing contempt as a passion. However, unlike Descartes, he refrained from connecting it to wonder or surprise. Instead, in a section entitled 'Of respect and contempt,'

¹⁰² Malebranche, *A Treatise of Morality*, 44.

¹⁰³ Malebranche, *A Treatise of Morality*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Isaac Watts, *Discourses of the Love of God and the Use and Abuse of the Passions in Religion, with a Devout Meditation suited to each Discourse to Which is Prefix'd, a Plain and Particular Account of the Natural Passions, with Rules for the Government of Them* (London: J. Clark and R. Hett, 1729), 11.

¹⁰⁵ Watts, *Discourses of the Love of God*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Watts, *Discourses of the Love of God*, 12 and 15.

¹⁰⁷ Watts, *Discourses of the Love of God*, 17.

Hume chose as his starting point our more habitual inclination to make comparisons between others and ourselves. He notes that people evaluate each other by one of three methods: by assessing the intrinsic worth of the other's qualities, by comparing those qualities with their own, or by a combination of the two. It is this third mode of evaluation, Hume argues, that gives rise to both respect (in the case of good qualities) and contempt (in respect of bad ones). To regard the negative traits of another as simply odious will result, Hume maintains, in our feeling hatred for that person. With the addition of a reflexive element, however, what would be simple hatred starts to mingle with pride, forming the compound passion of contempt. Notably, this mixture of pride and hatred that constitutes contempt is far from evenly balanced in Hume's account. For contempt has 'so strong a tincture of pride,' he insists, that there is 'scarce any other passion discernible' in it.¹⁰⁸

Hume's emphasis on the centrality of pride to contempt was reminiscent of French Augustinians like Malebranche. It also led him to rule out any resemblance between contempt and indifference. Because 'pride and hatred' tend to 'invigorate the soul,' the contemptuous will be moved to dramatically alter their behavior in the face of whatever they scorn, usually by placing physical distance between it and themselves.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Hume took it for granted that social elites would be incapable of behaving indifferently in the presence of the poor and would instead strive to keep them at bay. Far from exhorting them to restrain themselves in this regard, Hume merely considered such behaviour to be a standard example of how 'we commonly keep at a distance such as we contemn, and allow not our inferiors to approach too near.'¹¹⁰ There is little indication that he saw this as a perversion of contempt in need of correction, as Descartes might have. Hume's primary task, as he saw it, was to illustrate the role the passions actually play in everyday life rather than indicate how they might be tempered through self-mastery. There is, in other words, no equivalent of the Cartesian *généreux* to be found in Hume's analysis, or in many accounts of the passions that came after him.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that around the middle of the seventeenth century contempt ceased to be mainly a form of indifference and became instead a passion, at least for the purposes of philosophical analysis. It is important in acknowledging this shift to avoid overstating its significance or confusing a change in philosophical classification with a more profound

¹⁰⁸ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1739]), 251.

¹⁰⁹ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 252.

¹¹⁰ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 252.

cultural or social-psychological transformation. There were contemptuous people before 1649, and there were certainly contemptuous people after that date, irrespective of how their passions were classified and described by philosophers. Nevertheless, shifts in conceptualization do matter for the simple reason that moral emotions like contempt are not entirely independent of ‘what we take them to be.’¹¹¹ As Amy Schmitter has recently written, ‘the concepts we apply to the passions and emotions are not neutral or inert to what they describe’ in that ‘how we understand the passions affects what they *are*.’¹¹² When Descartes made contempt a passion, he *made* it an object of moral concern as much as an item of philosophical analysis, and gestured towards the ways abuses of it might be tempered. If before Descartes contempt was emblematic of self-control, after him it increasingly joined the other passions as the potential *object* of that control.

Moreover, even if conceptual shifts are not themselves causes of social or cultural change, they can nevertheless serve as indexes of larger transitions in the societies in which they are embedded. It was no accident that Descartes’ analysis of contempt and refashioning of *générosité* presented the honour ethos of the aristocracy in a negative light. This ethos had not only fuelled warfare in Europe among glory-thirsty aristocrats, it was also an obstacle to experiments in political absolutism then gathering steam, experiments legitimated in part by the perceived need to curtail violence among those willing to vindicate their honor by any means. By limiting the range of the contemptible to freely willed actions rather than morally arbitrary factors such as poverty or low social status, Descartes delegitimated most aristocratic contempt. In this way he gave conceptual fodder to those seeking to substitute virtue for rank or wealth as the basic criterion for distributing esteem in European societies.

Telling the story of how contempt became a passion can also illuminate what is at stake in how contemporary moral philosophers have chosen to classify it. The philosophers who have defended contempt of late have been consistent in referring to it as an ‘attitude’ or form of ‘intentional appraisal’ rather than an emotion.¹¹³ This choice makes sense to the extent that these philosophers wish to present contempt as very much within our control; an attitude we intentionally direct towards those we deem deserving. By contrast, when seventeenth-century philosophers deemed contempt a passion they were acknowledging that there was something alarmingly unruly about it. For the likes of Descartes, contempt was not a judgment that we choose to bestow upon those we think deserving of it, but rather a passion that threatens to engulf us independently of our deliberate pursuits or conscious judgments. By subtly deemphasizing the affective dimension of contempt today, philosophers show

¹¹¹ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 91.

¹¹² Schmitter, ‘I’ve Got a Little List’, 110.

¹¹³ Michelle Mason, for example, calls ‘properly focused’ contempt a ‘morally justified attitude to take towards another.’ Mason, ‘Contempt as a Moral Attitude,’ 235. For a defence of contempt as a form of ‘intentional appraisal’ see Bell, *Hard Feelings*, chapter 1.

themselves to be more optimistic about regulating its destructive effects than Descartes (and certainly his critics) ever were.