

Contempt, Community, and the Interruption of Sense

Abstract

In the early modern period, contempt emerged as a persistent theme in moral philosophy. Most of the moral philosophers of the period shared two basic commitments in their thinking about contempt. First, they argued that we understand the value of others in the morally appropriate way when we understand them from the perspective of the morally relevant community. And second, they argued that we are naturally inclined to judge others as contemptible, and that we must therefore interrupt that natural movement of sense-bestowal in order to value others in the morally appropriate way. In this paper I examine in detail the arguments of Nicolas Malebranche and Immanuel Kant concerning the wrongness of contempt, emphasizing the ways in which they depend on conceptions of community and of the interruption of moral sense-bestowal. After showing how each of these arguments fails to comprehend the nature and the wrongness of contempt, I argue that we can find the resources for a more adequate account in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, and specifically in his reflections on ontology and on the meaning of community.

Keywords: contempt, community, Nicolas Malebranche, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Luc Nancy

In the early modern period, contempt emerged as a persistent theme in moral philosophy. Although none of the most important philosophers of the period examined the question of contempt at great length, and although none made it a central concern, almost all of them devoted at least a few pages to the issue, typically in the sections of their ethical treatises focusing on our duties toward others. And almost all agreed that treating others with contempt constituted a very serious moral wrong. Hobbes, for example, believed that “no one should show hatred or contempt of another by deeds, words, facial expressions, or laughter.”¹ To do so, he argued, was to violate the natural law. In a similar vein, Christian Wolff argued that “since man ought not to make an enemy of anyone, he ought not to hold anyone in contempt.”² Nicolas Malebranche characterized contempt as “the greatest of

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49. Italics omitted.

² Christian Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedanken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit in Gesammelte Werke, Band 4* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlage, 1976), 562. Translation mine. Hereafter VG.

injuries.”³ And Immanuel Kant insisted that expressing contempt is “in every case contrary to duty.”⁴

Although early modern moral philosophers agreed that holding others in contempt was morally impermissible, they arrived at this conclusion on the basis of very different kinds of reasons. For Hobbes, as well as for Samuel Pufendorf and Pierre Nicole, contempt was understood primarily as a prudential wrong: contemning others causes interpersonal conflict and thus threatens the social order.⁵ For Malebranche, contempt was primarily an epistemic error: to condemn someone is to misjudge her true value. For Wolff, the duty we have not to condemn others derives from our duty to love others as we love ourselves, and thus to contribute to their perfection insofar as we are able.⁶ And for Kant, the wrongness of contempt derives from our duty to treat others with respect. Despite all these fundamental differences in argumentative strategy, though, moral philosophers of the early modern period did share two very basic commitments. First, they argued that we understand the value of others in the morally appropriate way when we understand them from the perspective of the morally relevant community. And second, they argued that we are naturally inclined to judge others as contemptible, and that we must therefore interrupt that natural movement of sense-bestowal in order to value others in the morally appropriate way. What I want to argue in this paper is that the early modern moral philosophers were correct to emphasize these two points, but that they tended to conceive each of them

³ Nicolas Malebranche, *Traité de Morale*, Tome 11 of *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche*, ed. Michel Adam (Paris: J. Vrin, 1966), 201. All translations from this work are my own. Hereafter TM.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed., Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 579 [6:463]. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition. Hereafter MM.

⁵ Pierre Nicole, *Essais de Morale, Contenus en Divers Traités sur Plusieurs Devoirs Importans, Tome Premier* (Paris: Gillaume Desprez, 1755), 272-275; Samuel Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae et Gentium Libri Octo*, trans. C.H. Oldfather and W.A. Oldfather (London: Wiley & Sons, 1964), 340. Cf. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, ed. Knud Haakonssen and James A. Harris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 100.

⁶ Wolff, VG, 539-562.

inadequately, leading them both to mischaracterize what contempt is and to misidentify the wrong that it does to the person who is contemned. In what follows, then, I will examine in detail both Malebranche's and Kant's arguments concerning the wrongness of contempt, emphasizing the ways in which they depend on conceptions of community and of the interruption of moral sense-bestowal. After showing how each of these arguments fails to comprehend the nature and the wrongness of contempt, I will argue that we can find the resources for a more adequate account in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, and specifically in his reflections on ontology and on the meaning of community.

I. Seeing a Part of What God Thinks: Malebranche

The commitment that grounds Nicolas Malebranche's account of the phenomenon of contempt, and indeed the whole of his moral philosophy, is stated in the very first sentence of his *Traité de Morale*: "The reason that enlightens man is the word or the wisdom of God himself; for every creature is a particular being, but the reason that enlightens the mind of man is universal."⁷ Insofar as we are rational beings, then, we form a kind of community with God: we participate in his reason, and so are able to "see a part of what God thinks."⁸ Qua particular being, I understand that my representations do not have the value of universal validity; if I burn my tongue drinking coffee that is too hot, the pain that results is mine and mine alone. If another person also drinks coffee that is too hot, her pain will be her own; we do not share the same pain. But if, on the other hand, I bring before my mind the concept of a triangle, I do understand my representation to have universal validity. When any other rational being at all, including the angels and God himself, conceives of a triangle, that being has exactly the same representation that I have.

⁷ Malebranche, TM, 17.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

In conceiving of a triangle, or indeed in thinking of anything that is objectively true, I see a part of what God thinks. To know, then, is to know what God knows.

The implication of our community with God that is most important from the moral point of view is that it enables us to will as God wills and to love as God loves. As a rational being, God wills only in accordance with a rational order. More specifically, God loves things in exact proportion to their objective worthiness to be loved. Now the worthiness of things to be loved is proportional to their degrees of perfection, which are known clearly and distinctly by God and somewhat less clearly and distinctly by us. What morality requires of us, then, is that we raise ourselves to God's point of view, willing and loving as he does, in accordance with rational order. There ought to be a proportion in our degrees of love that corresponds exactly to the proportion in the degrees of perfection of the objects loved.⁹ We ought, for example to treat animals with greater esteem than inanimate things, for "an animal stands in a greater relation of perfection to a stone than a stone does to an animal."¹⁰ We ought to treat human beings with greater esteem than animals, as human beings have an objectively greater degree of perfection, and of course we ought to esteem and love God the most.

This injunction to will as God wills and to love as God loves, in accordance with his objective knowledge of the degrees of perfection of things, entails that we must never treat other human beings with contempt. According to Malebranche, "man is the noblest of creatures, and so it is a false judgment and an unregulated movement to condemn him, whatever he may be."¹¹ Importantly, from God's point of view, all human beings without exception merit esteem. We must not suppose that the poorest or lowest born are any less valuable than the wealthiest and highest born. Indeed, we must not even refuse our esteem

⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹¹ Ibid., 201.

to the worst criminals and sinners; although their conduct should certainly be scorned, their persons are always worthy of respect. With the help of God, the worst of the worst can become “pure and holy like the angels” and can “precede us into the kingdom of God.”¹² Moreover, only God knows what is in people’s hearts. Perhaps a sinner has sinned by mistake, or perhaps he sinned freely but has since repented. None of us can know these things, and so none of us has a right to deny to anyone the esteem that is due to all human beings.

Of course it is very difficult for us to determine the moral sense of the situations we face from the point of view of our community with God. This is primarily because we orient ourselves toward the world not only rationally, but also sensibly. Insofar as we encounter the world by means of the senses, our experience tends to be particular and thus distorted by self-love. Interpreting events against the backdrop of our own desires, aversions, and prejudices, we overestimate the value of persons or things that make us happy and we exaggerate the severity of the wrongs done to us by our supposed enemies. The greatest sinner, who in the eyes of God is a potential saint, is for us a source of danger. The least of us, who in the eyes of God are potentially first, appear to us rather as victims of their own laziness or stupidity and as making unjust appeals for our sympathy and support. Judging in a way that is systematically distorted by our passions, we all have a tendency to underestimate the value of others, even to the point of contempt. In order to avoid inflicting this “greatest of injuries” on others, it is essential that we develop what Malebranche calls freedom of the mind, or the capacity to suspend our consent to the evaluations we are naturally inclined to make concerning others’ value: “When we judge because we want to do so, and before we are obliged by the evidence to do so, we are subject to error; this is

¹² Ibid., 202.

because the judgment comes from a basis in us and not from the action of God in us.”¹³ The suspension of our natural, self-regarding moral sense-bestowal helps to raise us to the level of community with God, where the objective values of things and of other persons become evident.

On Malebranche’s account, then, to judge someone as contemptible is to make an epistemic error; the wrongness of contempt consists in the falseness of the judgment. The contemned person has an objective value that is grounded in the objective degree of perfection in human beings generally. Because we tend to evaluate persons from our own particular points of view, though, we fail to recognize that value. And in failing to recognize others’ objectively true values, we wrong them.

I want to argue that this account of contempt is mistaken, that we cannot understand the wrongness of contempt in terms of the falseness of a judgment of value. To show why this is the case, I will examine one of Malebranche’s own examples. In support of his claim that we ought not to condemn the poor and the low born, Malebranche notes that “the least of men can be elevated to sovereign power, and the first kings that God gave to the Israelites were drawn, so to speak, from the dregs of the people. Saul, from the lowliest family within the smallest of the twelve tribes, found royalty when he was searching for his father’s donkeys.”¹⁴ Now suppose someone had told Saul, prior to his being chosen as king, that he was a worthless nobody who represented the dregs of his people. Clearly the person would have treated Saul with contempt in speaking to him in this way. But in what precisely would the contempt have consisted? Would the speaker have contemned Saul, as Malebranche’s account would suggest, simply by judging his value incorrectly, on the basis of his own particular, self-serving point of view? To discover the answer to this last

¹³ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁴ Ibid., 201.

question, we need only imagine the conversation that might follow the speaker's expression of contempt. Saul might very well say to his contemnor, "Even though nothing in my life has suggested it so far, I may one day, by the grace of God, rise to a position of great authority. And so you did me a great wrong in speaking to me with contempt." In one sense, of course, Saul's response would be correct: he did in fact possess a value that the contemnor failed to recognize. But in another, more important sense, Saul's response would have missed the mark. The wrong done to Saul surely does not consist in the mere lack of correspondence between his objective value and the contemnor's judgment about that value. Let us suppose that God had not in fact granted to Saul the potential to rise above his circumstances, or to do anything at all that would make him worthy of admiration or respect. Even in that case, surely the contemnor ought not to have told Saul that he was a worthless nobody. The contemnor, in our example, would have wronged Saul whether or not his judgment of Saul's value had turned out to be true. The wrongness of contempt, then, cannot consist simply in the falseness of the judgment in which it is expressed.

Malebranche, I believe, was certainly correct to argue that we can wrong others by making and by acting upon mistaken judgments of their value. But he was incorrect in treating such mistaken judgments as instances of contempt. For example, if I assigned too low a final grade to a student simply because I had forgotten to record one of her homework grades in my grade book, then it would certainly be appropriate to say that I wronged the student. But it would be odd to suggest that I contemned her. And this is just because contempt is not primarily a matter of true or false judgments *about* persons and their value. Instead, as I will attempt to demonstrate in what follows, it is better understood as a particular manner of comporting oneself *to* the person. It is, in Stephen Darwall's terms, an irreducibly second-personal phenomenon.

II. The Right as Prior to the Good: Kant

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant gives an account of contempt that highlights its independence from questions of truth and falsity and that intimates its second-personal character. In Section 39 of the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant asserts that “to be *contemptuous* of others (*contemnere*), that is, to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general, is in every case contrary to duty.”¹⁵ In this he agrees with Malebranche. But unlike Malebranche, Kant does not ground the duty not to condemn on any knowledge of persons’ true value. His argument does not rely on the possibility that people have good qualities that, because of the finitude of our intellects, we have failed to recognize. Even if we could somehow judge with certainty that a person completely lacked moral worth, Kant believes we would be obligated not to treat the person with contempt: we owe the person respect “even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it.”¹⁶

In passages scattered throughout his various ethical works, Kant states that certain persons are objectively contemptible.¹⁷ In the *Lectures on Ethics*, for example, Kant argues that we dispose of our humanity, and thus render ourselves contemptible, when we sell parts of our own bodies or allow ourselves to be used for the sexual pleasure of others. In performing such acts, we renounce our own subjectivity, reducing ourselves to the level of mere things.¹⁸ In practicing other vices, such as drunkenness and gluttony, we render ourselves contemptible by reducing ourselves to the level of the non-rational animals.¹⁹ And in the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant argues that the vices of lying, avarice, and servility are

¹⁵ Kant, MM, 579 [6:463].

¹⁶ Ibid., 580 [6:463]. Cf. Oliver Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 201. Hereafter KHD; Lara Denis, “Humanity, Obligation, and the Good Will: An Argument Against Dean’s Interpretation of Humanity,” *Kantian Review* 15, no. 1 (2010): 125-127.

¹⁷ Krista K. Thomason emphasizes this point in Krista K. Thomason, “Shame and Contempt in Kant’s Moral Theory,” *Kantian Review* 18 (2013): 224.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 157 [27:386]. Hereafter LE. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

¹⁹ Ibid., 420 [27:692-693].

contrary to inner freedom and human dignity; to adopt them is to “throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt.”²⁰ Now as rational beings, we all belong to a common moral community. Our practical reason has the principle of morality “always before its eyes and uses [it] as the norm for its appraisals.” As a result, we all know “very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty....”²¹ No member of the rational moral community can fail to recognize the drunkard or the glutton as contemptible, just as no rational person can fail to think of an observed event as having a cause. This common recognition of certain persons as worthy of contempt is not, for Kant, a merely contingent feature of our psychological makeup; the reason that presents the drunkard and the glutton as contemptible is legislative in the practical domain. Those who dispose of their humanity, reducing themselves to the level of non-human animals or even of mere things, are objectively worthy of contempt.

To comply with the duty not to condemn, then, we must interrupt the moral sense that we bestow simply in virtue of our being rational, self-legislating members of the moral community: “At times one cannot, it is true, help inwardly *looking down* on some in comparison with others (*despicatui habere*); but the outward manifestation of this is, nevertheless, an offense.”²² The difference between Kant’s and Malebranche’s positions on this point is remarkable. According to Malebranche, we must interrupt our sensibly based, self-regarding moral sense-bestowal in order to raise ourselves to the level of the true moral community, where the objective value of human beings as the noblest of all God’s creatures becomes plainly visible. For Kant, on the other hand, it is the sense-bestowal of the moral

²⁰ Kant, MM, 545 [6:420].

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed., Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 58 [4:403-404]. Hereafter GMM. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

²² Kant, MM, 579-580 [6:463].

community itself that we must interrupt: even though the liar or the drunkard truly is contemptible from the perspective of legislative pure practical reason, we must nonetheless refrain from treating him contemptuously. This Kantian way of presenting the relation between contempt, community, and the interruption of moral sense-bestowal avoids the problems that arise from treating contempt as an epistemic error. But it also raises a new and difficult question: if another person truly is contemptible, then what can ground our duty to treat him as if he were not? How can it be the case that reason prohibits us from acting on the basis of moral determinations that have their source in that very same reason?

One promising way of understanding Kant's prohibition on contempt is to see it as grounded not in facts about a person's properties, but rather in facts about the relations that obtain between persons. More specifically, we might understand the wrongness of contempt as following from the presuppositions of what Stephen Darwall has called the second-person standpoint. To stand in a second-personal relation with another is to acknowledge that person as having the authority to address agent-relative demands. If I accidentally step on another person's foot, for example, that person has a right to demand that I pick up my foot and that I put it down elsewhere. Because I stand in a second-personal relation with him, his very act of making the demand counts for me as a morally relevant consideration; I am accountable specifically to him. He does not need to convince me to move my foot by making reference to reasons that I might have completely independent of my second-personal relation with him, such as my general utilitarian commitment to maximizing the total amount of happiness in the world.²³ Contempt, on this kind of account, would consist in the refusal of second-personal relation, that is, in the refusal to treat the other person as having the authority to address demands to which one would be answerable.

²³ Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5-8. Hereafter SPS.

The two examples of contempt that Kant gives in Section 39 of the Doctrine of Virtue seem to support the second-personal interpretation. First, we treat people with contempt when we subject them to “disgraceful punishments that dishonor humanity itself (such as quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, cutting off his nose and ears).”²⁴ In her paper, “Contempt as a Moral Attitude,” Michelle Mason suggests that for Kant, the wrongness of contempt consists in the fact that it can motivate people to perform such gruesome acts.²⁵ But the text does not seem to support that reading. To subject persons to degrading punishments *is* to condemn them; it is not merely a consequence of having condemned them. To torture a person is to treat him third-personally, as nothing more than a case falling under the law. The torturer does not recognize claims addressed to him by the victim as providing him with any morally relevant reasons to limit the extent of his cruelty. The victim is treated as a moral nobody. It is that refusal of the second-personal relation that constitutes the wrongness of the act of contempt. This is illustrated perhaps more clearly in the second of Kant’s examples: we treat a person with contempt when we censure his errors too severely, “calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth.”²⁶ In using such disrespectful language, the contemnor indicates that he regards the condemned as so lacking in reason as to be unable even to present an argument for his views. He cuts off the possibility of entering into any kind of genuine dialogue that could result in his being won over to the other’s point of view. Once again, he treats the condemned person third-personally, merely as the object of his judgment. Whether or not the person’s error was truly an absurdity, or even an error at all, is beside the point; even if the person reasoned extraordinarily badly in committing the error, we would do him a serious moral wrong by refusing to engage with him second personally.

²⁴ Kant, MM, 580 [6:463].

²⁵ Michelle Mason, “Contempt as a Moral Attitude,” *Ethics* 113, no. 2 (2003): 261.

²⁶ Kant, MM. 580 [6:463].

But this second-personal account of the wrongness of contempt seems merely to push back a step the question that Malebranche's account had failed adequately to answer: why, precisely, is it wrong to treat others with contempt? Why are we obligated to maintain second-personal relations with others? Kant provides a possible answer in Section 11 of the Doctrine of Virtue when he writes that each person "possesses a dignity (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts respect for himself from all other rational beings in the world."²⁷ It is the word "exacts" (*abnötigen*) that I want to emphasize here. Kant seems to be arguing that we encounter the other person as wresting respect from us, whether we like it or not. This wresting of respect from us does not depend on our having first recognized the other as having certain properties that entitle him to the respect; it is wrested from us simply in virtue of our standing in relation to him. In the exacting of respect, then, the constraint of the obligation not to contemn happens *to* the moral subject.²⁸

Although this account would certainly contribute to our understanding of the grounds of the prohibition on treating others with contempt, it is ultimately untenable as an interpretation of Kant's own position. One of the most basic and distinctive commitments of Kantian ethics is the idea that the right is prior to the good. Kant expresses this point most straightforwardly in the *Critique of Practical Reason* when he writes that it is "the moral law that first determines and makes possible the concept of the good, insofar as it deserves this name absolutely."²⁹ Kant's concern in establishing the priority of the right over the good is to account for the possibility of goods that are specifically moral, and not merely prudential. But the priority of the right also rules out the possibility that the moral law could be grounded in any kind of good at all, including what Kant calls the

²⁷ Ibid., 557 [6:435]. Italics omitted.

²⁸ Cf. Darwall, SPS, 263.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed., Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 191 [5:64]. Hereafter CPR. Page numbers in brackets refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

incomparable worth of dignity: “For, nothing can have a worth other than that which the law determines for it.”³⁰ As Oliver Sensen has convincingly argued, worth is not a distinct metaphysical property for Kant, and so it cannot exact respect from anyone.³¹ Thus it is not the case, as suggested above, that the constraint of the obligation not to condemn is something that happens *to* the moral subject. As Kant argues explicitly in the *Groundwork*, such a conception is incompatible with autonomy, i.e., with the supreme principle of morality: “If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law—consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects—*heteronomy* always results.”³² In refraining from holding others in contempt, then, we obey only a law that we give to ourselves.

But this account of the wrongness of contempt gives rise to problems very similar to the ones we noted in Malebranche’s account. Contempt, as I argued above, seems to be most fundamentally a second-personal phenomenon; the wrong that we do in holding others in contempt is a wrong we do *to* the contemned. For Kant, though, the wrong consists ultimately in our failure to act autonomously; the contemned is merely the occasion of the wrong. And what is more, the object of the respect that the moral law commands is the other qua rational nature. It is this, Kant thinks, that elevates human beings above the rest of nature and thus functions as the source of their dignity.³³ But this too seems to miss something essential in the phenomenology of contempt, something that is especially visible from the point of the view of the one who is contemned. When I am treated with contempt, I do not feel as if it is I qua possessor of any particular property, or even I qua possessor of

³⁰ Kant, GMM, 85 [4:436].

³¹ Sensen, KHD, 188-189.

³² Kant, GMM, 89 [4:441].

³³ Kant, MM, 579 [6:462].

the totality of my properties, who has been mistreated. It is not I qua human being for example, or qua scholarly authority, or qua benefactor, but rather I as this absolutely singular being. This is not to deny, of course, that general properties can function as the occasions for contempt. But the target of the contempt, the one who bears the weight of it and who is wronged by it, is the person as singular. An adequate account of contempt should be able to make sense of this, along with its irreducibly relational character as a mode of address to another.

III. Sense and Singularity: Nancy

In this final section, I want to argue that the work of Jean-Luc Nancy provides us with the resources for a more adequate account of contempt. Relying primarily on the ontology that Nancy develops in a number of different texts, but most explicitly in *Being Singular Plural* and *The Sense of the World*, I will argue first that community happens precisely as the interruption of sense, and second that this interruption presents others to us as singular and as sources of a legitimate demand not to treat them with contempt. This Nancian account of contempt will provide support for Kant's claim, expressed in the Doctrine of Virtue, that the other possesses a kind of value by which he "exacts respect for himself." While this claim turned out to be incompatible with some of the most fundamental commitments of Kantian ethics, it can be shown to follow straightforwardly from Nancy's ontology of being-with.³⁴

³⁴ I would like briefly to address the apparent incongruity involved in bringing the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to bear on Malebranche's and Kant's accounts of the relations between contempt and community. To the best of my knowledge, Nancy has never situated his own work within the body of early modern literature on contempt. And when he writes about community, he is not primarily concerned with the kind of rational community that both Malebranche and Kant had in mind. Nancy's reflection is historically situated, responding to the challenges to our sense of community that were effected by the perceived failures of an increasingly totalitarian communism and a highly individualistic, liberal capitalism. What I would like to suggest is that the felt loss of given, practically orienting sense, which was associated with the perceived failures of these two models of being-together, brings into sharper relief the experience of singularity that is such an important part of our intuitions about contempt and that both Malebranche and Kant—especially the latter—seemed to have an intimation of.

In outlining the ontology that will ground a Nancian understanding of contempt, I would like to begin with Nancy's conception of aseity. The primary sense of aseity comes from Scholastic philosophy, where it refers to God's property of having his existence from himself, or independently of all other beings. (The term is derived from the Latin *a se*, from itself.) But Nancy takes advantage of the meaning of the French *à*—to or toward—to give the term a completely different sense. To be, on Nancy's account, is necessarily to be *à soi*, or toward oneself. The *à* signifies a distancing or a spacing from oneself that is the condition of possibility for one's being present as oneself. In *Corpus*, Nancy writes that "aseity—the *a se(lf)*, the to-itself, the by-itself of the Subject—*exists* only as the swerve and departure of this *a*—(of this *a-part-self*), which is the place, the moment proper of its presence, its authenticity, its sense."³⁵ It is not the case, on Nancy's view, that first there are beings, and then in addition the *to* or the spacing that allows them to appear as the beings they are. The aseity or being-to of beings is ontologically basic.

To unpack what this means, I will begin with a claim that Nancy advances in his *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*: "the given always gives itself as something other than simply given."³⁶ That is to say, it never happens in our experience that we are confronted with brute, unqualified being; whatever becomes manifest to us becomes manifest to us *as* something. The machine that I am using to type these words, for example, is present to me *as* a computer. As I type, I am present to myself *as* a professional philosopher. And at a higher level of abstraction, whenever I think about questions in ontology I find that being is manifest to me *as* being. The "as" in these constructions signifies the presence of sense: the machine I am using to type these words has the meaning

³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 33.

³⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52. Hereafter H. Italics omitted.

of “computer” and I have the meaning of “professional philosopher.” Thus, we can gloss Nancy’s claim as follows: the given always gives itself as meaningful. But we must not understand this to mean that there are two things—the given being and meaning—that are merely juxtaposed. It is not the case, for example, that I have two discrete objects of consciousness as I type: the given, sensuously present thing and the meaning “computer.” As Nancy puts it in *The Sense of the World*, “sense does not add itself to being...[or] supervene upon being.”³⁷ Rather, the being is manifest as meaningful, and the meaning is manifest as the meaning of the being.³⁸ This happens as one phenomenon, and not as two. Thus “being is the sense of the being, or rather—and because there is not the being on one side and its sense on the other—being is the structure, property, and sense-event of the being in general.”³⁹

The happening of being as the sense-event of the being in general presupposes a *to* that is irreducible. Sense, Nancy argues, begins with a presence that is necessarily a divided presence, a presence *of* something *to* something.⁴⁰ A being, in other words, is never immediately one with its sense. It has its sense, rather, only as exposed, as present to other beings. Hegel’s treatment of sense certainty in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides a good example of Nancy’s point. Thisness is not immanent or immediately present to the given being whose sense is “this;” thisness only appears in the presence of the *this to* a consciousness. In being-this, then, the being is necessarily exposed to an outside. The *to* here names the spacing that first gives the being to be given as meaningful, as *this*. It is not the case, in other words, that there would first be a being which is in itself a *this*, and

³⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 28. Hereafter SW.

³⁸ Nancy, H, 49.

³⁹ Nancy, SW, 13. Translation modified.

⁴⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

secondly another being who would come upon the scene and recognize it as such. The sense-event of the being happens only at the limit where it is exposed to its outside. If we try to imagine the sense of the being without its aseity, as a “pure unshared presence—presence to nothing, of nothing, for nothing,” then what we are left with is neither a presence nor an absence, but rather the “simple implosion of a being that could never have *been*—an implosion without any trace.”⁴¹ We would be left, in other words, with a kind of black hole of meaning. The *to* is necessary as the place, the moment proper of the being’s presence and of its sense.

The name that Nancy gives to this spacing, to the exposition by which we become present most originarily to each other in our sense, is community.⁴² The conception of community that Nancy articulates is importantly different from the conceptions we find in Malebranche and Kant. For both of the latter, the commonness that grounds community is an established common sense that unites all of the members. In Malebranche, the moral community has its basis in our rational nature, in our ability to think what God thinks and to value things as God values them. In Kant, the moral community is constituted by legislative pure practical reason, which is common to all rational beings. Nancy, on the other hand, insists that community “is nothing common.”⁴³ Instead, community names the space that is opened by the *to* of our presence to each other, a space not of shared sense but rather of the sense-event of the beings who make it up. In this sense-event, meaning happens as ceaselessly interrupted.⁴⁴ As beings who are constitutively exposed to each other, the members’ identities are improper and inappropriable; the sense that comes into being in the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 19; 26. Hereafter IC.

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common” in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5. Hereafter OBC. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes and Others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 155. Hereafter BP.

⁴⁴ Nancy, OBC, 6.

to of their presence to each other is excessive to any significations that they can think of as their own. Precisely what is shared in community is the non-identity of each member to herself and to the others.⁴⁵ Indeed, community, for Nancy, just is being's never being immediately one with its sense.⁴⁶

In the interruption of sense that happens in our exposition to each other in community, we become present to each other as singularities. A singular, in Nancy's sense of the term, is importantly different from a particular, which is an instance of a kind. Qua particular, a being is identified with its sense, and is thus differentiated from other particulars merely numerically.⁴⁷ Qua particular, for example, a person instantiates a whole set of significations concerning race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, profession, etc. But the sense-event of that person's being exceeds each of these significations and it exceeds all of them together. The person is not only the instantiation of a set of significations, but also the very site of the happening of sense. This site is "incomparable and inassimilable, not because it is simply 'other' but because it is an origin and touch of meaning."⁴⁸ As such sites of origin, where established, proper significations are ceaselessly interrupted, each of us is absolutely singular and unexchangeable.

The singular that is given in the spacing of being-to is given *as* exacting respect. Respect, as Nancy understands it, "is the very alteration of the position and structure of the subject."⁴⁹ At the level of being-to, the structure of subjectivity—of the relation to an object that is intended as a unity of sense correlative to a subjective act of sense-bestowal—is interrupted. In community, the subject is positioned outside itself, exposed at its limit to an upsurge of a sense that is not its own and that it cannot appropriate. The singular,

⁴⁵ Nancy, IC, 66.

⁴⁶ Nancy, OBC, 8.

⁴⁷ Nancy, BSP, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 147.

incommensurable sense that arises in the subject's exposure to the other does not have its origin, then, in the autonomous Kantian subject who would intend the other, in accordance with its own measure, as having a value that merits respect. Understood in terms of Nancy's ontology of aseity, respect is not a mode of intentionality, of looking at an object, but rather a kind of looking back (*re-spicere*) toward the sense-event that first gives the subject and the meaningful world in which it has its being.⁵⁰ In respect, therefore, the subject is presented to itself as the addressee, and not as the addressor, of the sense of the other. Because being-to is ontologically irreducible, the subject can never convert itself without remainder to the position of autonomous addressor of moral sense; the subject is always most fundamentally the recipient of its meaningful being. The sense that is in play in the encounter with the other, then, is a sense that befalls the subject always already, weighing on it and making a claim on it. And so there is no need to present an argument showing that other persons deserve our respect, and thus deserve not to be contemned; to encounter the singular as singular just is to have respect exacted from us.

I want to conclude by showing how Nancy's ontology helps us better to understand both what it is to condemn another person and what the wrongness of doing so consists in. First, Nancy's ontology helps to make sense of our intuition that contempt is second personal through and through. We miss something essential about contempt when we understand it as a false belief *about* another or as a failure to act autonomously *with regard to* another. Contempt, rather, is a mode of relating immediately *to* another. It is not a subjective position, but an intersubjective one. Contempt, on the Nancian account I am suggesting, consists more specifically in the refusal of being-to, a refusal of openness to others as singularities and thus as incommensurable and unexchangeable origins of the world. Stated otherwise, it is a refusal of the addressee position that is ineluctably ours and

⁵⁰ Nancy, BP, 44-45.

that is made manifest to us in the experience of respect. This account, I want to suggest, makes better sense of the examples of contempt from Section 39 of the Doctrine of Virtue than Kant's own account does. I will focus here specifically on Kant's second example. When we criticize another's errors too severely, "calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth," we attempt to engage with that person wholly from the addressor position, determining the sense of his point of view unilaterally and without appeal. We relate to the other in such a way as to foreclose the possibility that any new and unforeseen sense will originate from the encounter; whatever valuable sense comes from the encounter will come from the side of the contemnor. The contempt here consists neither in the judgment, presumably false but perhaps even true, of the other's intellectual capacities, nor in the failure to act with regard to the contemned as our own legislative practical reason commands. The contempt consists rather in a mode of being-to that attempts to neutralize the sense-event of the other's being. As the attempt to render the being of the other immediately identical with his sense, contempt consists precisely in the refusal of community.

And finally, the Nancian account that I am suggesting provides a more adequate account of the specific wrongness of contempt. Malebranche, as we saw, thought of contempt as "the greatest of injuries." The other moral philosophers of the early modern period did not express themselves quite so strongly, but they all believed that contemning others constituted a serious wrong. However none of these theories succeeded in explaining precisely why contempt is so bad. This is especially clear in the accounts of Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Nicole, which treat the wrongness of contempt as prudential. But it is also a problem for Malebranche's account: it is not obvious at all how a person is grievously wronged merely by others' holding false beliefs about her value. Kant's account also falls

short of explaining the wrong: if a person possesses an incomparable worth, set above all price, merely in virtue of her rational nature, then how precisely is she wronged by others who do not treat her accordingly? Her value as a human being, it seems, is a secure possession that no one else could ever deprive her of. I want to argue that the Nancian account succeeds where the Kantian account fails because it is able to explain how the contemned is vulnerable to the wrong. The incommensurable value that a being has as a singular origin of the world is not in fact a secure possession. As we have seen, that value is unavoidably exposed, arising only between beings who are oriented to each other in community. The person's status as somebody who matters, as what John Rawls called a self-originating source of valid claims, is at stake in her second-personal relations with others, vulnerable to those who would engage with her as someone who does not matter.⁵¹ To refuse to relate to someone as "an origin and touch of meaning," then, is to wrong the person profoundly and concretely, denying the person's very being as singular.

⁵¹ John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 543.

References

- Darwall, S. 2006. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Denis, L. 2010. "Humanity, Obligation, and the Good Will: An Argument Against Dean's Interpretation of Humanity". *Kantian Review* 15(1): 118-141.
- Hobbes, T. 1998. *On the Citizen*. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 1996. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Mary J. Gregor (ed. and trans.), 37-108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 1996. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Mary J. Gregor (ed. and trans.), 353-603. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 1997. *Lectures on Ethics*. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind (ed.), Peter Heath (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malebranche, N. 1966. *Traité de Morale*. Michael Adam (ed.). Paris: J. Vrin.
- Mason, M. 2003. "Contempt as a Moral Attitude". *Ethics* 113(2): 234-272.
- Nancy, J-L. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Peter Connor (ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, J-L. 1991. "Of Being-in-Common". In *Community at Loose Ends*. Miami Theory Collective (eds.), 1-12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, J-L. 1993. *The Birth to Presence*. Brian Holmes and Others (trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Nancy, J-L. 1997. *The Sense of the World*. Jeffrey Librett (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, J-L. 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, J-L. 2002. *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nancy, J-L. 2003. *A Finite Thinking*. Simon Sparks (ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, J-L. 2008. *Corpus*. Richard A. Rand (trans.). New York: Fordham University Press.

Nicole, Pierre. 1755. *Essais de Morale, Contenus en Divers Traités sur Plusieurs Devoirs Importans, Tome Premier*. Paris: Gillaume Desprez.

Pufendorf, S. 1964. *De Jure Naturae et Gentium Libri Octo*. C.H. Oldfather and W.A. Oldfather (trans.). London: Wiley & Sons.

Rawls, J. "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory". *Journal of Philosophy* 77(9): 515-582.

Reid, T. 2006. *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*. Knud Haakonssen and James A. Harris (eds.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Sensen, O. 2011. *Kant on Human Dignity*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Thomason, K. 2013. "Shame and Contempt in Kant's Moral Theory". *Kantian Review* 18(2): 221-240.

Wolff, C. 1976. *Vernünfftige Gedanken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseeligkeit*. In *Gesammelte Werke, Band 4*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.