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10-21-2020

Contempt in the Public Sphere

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<https://www.jacksonsgalaxy.com/blog/aggression-in-cats/>

Contempt ...

Illustrator: John Tennell (1865) *Alice Meet the Caterpillar*
(<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/tennell/alice/5.1.html>)



From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll

'I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,' Alice replied very politely, 'for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.'

'It isn't,' said the Caterpillar.

'Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,' said Alice; 'but when you have to turn into a chrysalis — you will some day, you know — and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?'

'Not a bit,' said the Caterpillar.

'Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,' said Alice; 'all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.'

'You!' said the Caterpillar **contemptuously**. 'Who are you?'

... In the Public Sphere

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



The main question:

- Is contempt of moral value?
- Is the experience of contempt compatible with a healthy society?

Opinion

THE STONE

Our New Age of Contempt

By Karen Stohr

Jan. 23, 2017



Anyone who hoped that 2017 might bring a change in the tone of our political discourse has by now been thoroughly disappointed. The remarkable degree of contempt that characterized the 2016 election has shown no sign of abating in President Donald J. Trump's first days in office.

Contemptuous political discourse is not new, of course. What *is* new is the extent to which contempt has managed to slither into our daily experience of political conversation. Gone are the days when contempt for political rivals and their supporters was mostly

DEFINITION: CONTEMPT

- An attitude towards someone
- A negative evaluation of that person
- The desire for distance from them
 - Apt or inapt
 - Impossible to imagine same of self

Daffy Duck © Warner Brothers



CONTEMPT: MORALLY APPROPRIATE?

- “Upward contempt”
- Epistemological import
 - Leads to knowledge about self
 - Leads to knowledge about circumstance/systemic injustice
- Witness-bearing value
- Motivational value



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<https://mg.co.za/article/2017-11-03-00-she-was-right-to-regard-me-with-contempt/>

CONTEMPT: MORALLY APPROPRIATE?

Non-instrumental value

- A way for persons to maintain their integrity
 - In the face of threats of “vices of superiority”

CONTEMPT: MORALLY PROBLEMATIC?

What the empirical literature shows:

- Criticism generally not well received
 - Contempt is particularly intense criticism
 - Met with anger, defensive, counter-contempt
- Contempt is addictive & infectious
 - Repeated often enough becomes part of one's character

CONTEMPT: IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

(1858-1964)

Leads to more and more
divisiveness

Anna Julia Cooper (1896): “Our great
‘problem’ [the problem of race] after
all is to be solved not by brooding over
it, and orating about it, but by *living*
into it.”

Living into means embodying what I
want the world to be



LIVING INTO: IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

- Making human connection
- Making mistakes
- Working towards solutions
- Caring about the result
- Doing whatever we can to allow ALL to retain their dignity



LIVING INTO: IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A healthy, just society requires:

- Solidarity
- A sense of mutual responsibility
- Strong sense of community
- The cultivation of civic virtue

(according to Michel J. Sandel, 2009)



LIVING INTO: CIVIC EDUCATION

A healthy, just society requires:

- Diverse individuals
 - Coming together in common institutions

(according to Michel J. Sandel, 2009)

- How about *mandatory* national service?
 - First two years after high school
 - With allowable exemptions
 - Something like Americorps
 - “. . . address[ing] compelling community issues in education, public safety, health and human needs, the environment, and more.

LIVING INTO: NATIONAL SERVICE

- Instills a duty to serve
- It's a form of civic education
- Creates connection between diverse people
- Deepens one's understanding of citizenship
- Creates solidarity



LIVING INTO: NATIONAL SERVICE

What do you think?