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## Beneath contempt

### Dignity, contempt, and expulsion

topics:

- *human dignity and contempt*
- *self-hatred and self-denigration*
- *the task of integrating the abjected/contempted within oneself*
- *Reflections on Genesis 3 and 4*

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#### Introduction: What has dignity to do with contempt?

It might seem strange to present a paper exploring the nature of contempt at a conference on dignity. What, you might ask, does dignity have to do with contempt?

A working definition of dignity might run like this: Human dignity is the inherent worth or value of a human person from which no one or nothing may detract.<sup>1</sup>

As such, dignity lies at the bottom of any appeal to human rights, and ultimately in any issue of justice. It provides a crucial bedrock to any system of value, and you will find appeals to dignity in any institution concerned with pastoral care – or, more broadly – with people in all shapes and conditions: prisons, schools, hospitals, you name it.

I found myself, in preparation for this paper, trying to discover what might be the opposite of “dignity”. Indignity doesn’t work; indignant has altogether a different meaning with its sense of righteous offence. You have to have a sense of dignity to be indignant. But there’s nothing as undignified as contempt, to my mind. There is an English expression where you might say of someone or something that “they are beneath contempt”. By which you would mean that they are the lowest of the low. Beneath consideration. Beneath even the extremes of hatred and scorn you could pour upon them. It’s an expression that has challenged me for quite a while.

I think Tolstoy comes close to a description of contempt when he wrote of his relationship with his tutor. Alongside the feelings of revulsion, he notes how compelled by his feelings he was: “Yes, it was real hatred... the hatred that fills you with overpowering aversion for a person who, however, deserves your respect, yet

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<sup>1</sup> Falconer, A. D. "Human Dignity", in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. Macquarrie, J. and Childress, J. (London: SCM 1986), p. 278.

whose hair, his neck, the way he walks, the sound of his voice, his whole person, his every gestures are repulsive to you, and at the same time some unaccountable force draws you to him and compels you to follow his slightest acts with uneasy attention. Such was the feeling I experienced for St-Jerome.”<sup>2</sup>

And what might be “beneath contempt”? When you bottom contempt out, the revulsion and compulsion, what is there? Further contempt? Contempt piled upon contempt? Or when the contempt works itself through, do we return, somehow, to a dignity of sorts?

So today I want to explore with you the nature of contempt. I want us to hold in our minds that question: What is beneath contempt? I want us also to experience something of the ugliness and contemptible nature of contempt by reading an excerpt from a play. I want us to think together about some biblical material as well. At the end I don't promise any answers, but I hope you will have had cause to think a little more deeply about dignity by focusing on a profound and stirring emotion that can render us, or someone else we are involved with, “beneath contempt”.

### **Familiarity breeds contempt**

There's another English expression that you'll hear: “Familiarity breeds contempt”. Sometimes used of a couple who have grown too used to each other, or of a situation that has become habitual, this expression hints at the *tiredness* of contempt, its boredom, its dismissive nature. But if we stop and consider the notion of “familiarity”, I think we come to something quite important about contempt. For it belongs, I'd suggest, in relationships that are familiar, even familial. Contempt emerges, in my experience, where people are bonded together. Where there is little or no means of escape. So perhaps in the work place. Perhaps in the family. Perhaps in a couple. Perhaps, even, between God and humanity.

### **Contempt and abjection**

I should note, I think, at this stage, some convergence between the way I am understanding contempt, and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. In *Powers of Horror*, she argues that what is *abject* is “the jettisoned object, [it] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting upon the power of the Symbolic to shape culture, the *Abject* is that which is rejected, expelled in order that culture can be sustained. Elizabeth Grosz has explained Kristeva's idea of the *abject* thus: “Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The *abject* is what beckons the subject every closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeal-

<sup>2</sup> Kerr P (ed): *The Penguin Book of Fights, Feuds and Heartfelt Hatreds: An Anthology of Antipathy* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, J.: *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press: 1982), p. 4.

ity, animality, materiality - those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps we could argue, following this line of thought, that what we find contemptuous is the object of dignity. Our contempt is what our dignity rejects, covers over or contains. But only just.

### A play of contempt

I want to turn now to a powerful play, written back in the early 1960s in the United States, where a couple play out, again and again, their contempt for each other, circling around the loss of a son, many years before. You're never clear, as audience, if this son ever existed – what is clear is that he fulfils a crucial role in the drama between the couple.<sup>5</sup> In “*Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” all semblance of dignity has long since gone. We have now only the contempt between George and Martha that fuels their ongoing marriage. Early one Sunday morning, at the end of a faculty party, Martha and George, draw another couple, Nick and Honey, into their relationship. They are locked together in contempt for each other and they need an audience for their habitual struggle.

The foursome become caught in a vicious circle, but there are two other significant persons in this drama who do not appear. With one of them, Martha's father, the contempt begins. George marries Martha on the understanding that he is to be the father's successor as chair of the faculty, but he is a disappointment. Father rejects George, Martha idealises her father, and grows in contempt for George. Unable to contain the father's contempt, the couple create the other absent character, a son. This son is precious to both of them: perhaps he bears all the good things that they cannot experience in each other. This night is the denouement. There is a killing, the killing of the son. By that forbidden killing, George breaks the established rules of their marital contempt, and leaves Martha pliable and submissive, finally afraid of Virginia Woolf.

How many times, I wonder, have you observed relationships that seem to exhibit only bonds of contempt, a negative dynamic from which there is no escape?

### Contempt and expulsion

Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, is an astute exploration of contempt, a powerful but relatively ignored emotion. In my remaining time, I want to argue that beneath any experience of contempt, there is a psychological drama at work which finds resolution either in the banishment of the contemptible one, or in sacrificial action. Because it is an emotion of such power, and discomfort, the most obvious action is avoidance. When this is impossible, for example in a family, complex patterns of behaviour come into play. With George and Mar-

<sup>4</sup> Grosz, E: *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 73. See also Condren, M.: "Women, Shame and abjection: reflections in the light of Julia Kristeva" (in *Contact: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Pastoral Studies* 130, 1999) for further exploration of the notion of abjection.

<sup>5</sup> Albee E: *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (first published USA 1962 Penguin reprint 1989).

tha, locked together in mutual war, the sacrifice of their son becomes the only way they can live to see another day.

Perhaps something similar was going on in this story as well: Donald Capps offers us a full account of an incident in his own childhood when he experienced the contempt of his parents:

“I was nine years old. My younger brother, then four, had been unusually difficult that day. When my father came home from work, my mother told him about my little brother, how he was becoming more than she could handle. At dinner that evening we – my brothers and I – could feel the tension. No one was speaking. A sense of doom was in the air. After dinner ... my father pulled the car out of the garage and my mother came out of the house. They directed us to get into the car, my younger brother between my parents in the front seat and my two older brothers and I in the back... ‘Where are we going?’ one of us had the courage to ask. No answer. My father drove on. Dusk was approaching. Then, on our right, we recognised the building and began to realise what was going on. We felt dread in the pits of our stomachs. It was the orphanage, and our parents were about to send my little brother away. My father stopped the car and turned to my brother and said, ‘This is the end of the line.’ My mother opened the door and began to get out so that my brother could follow. The three of us in the back seat were stunned. I somehow found my voice and, amid sobs, pleaded: ‘Don’t send him away. He’ll be good. Just give him a second chance.’

What I did not know, of course, is that they had no intention of leaving him at the orphanage that night... I took them at their word, first believing that they were going to abandon him; next assuming that my pleading in his behalf had made them change their minds. For a very long time – months, maybe even years – I assumed that my parents were capable of abandoning a child of theirs, and I did all in my power to make certain that it would never be me. But something surely died in me – in all of us – that night. Life before that night had not been perfect. There had been the usual conflicts between parents and children, the usual fightings and reconciliations. But this was different. This was the threat of abandonment. The sense of dread that this threat produced in me was nearly overwhelming.”<sup>6</sup>

Alice Miller takes the analysis further. The final chapter of *The Drama of Being a Child* is a full consideration of the vicious circle of contempt, and there she writes:

“The contempt shown by narcissistically disturbed patients... may have various forerunners in their life history. These may have been, for instance, ‘the stupid little brothers and sisters’, or the uneducated parents who don’t understand anything – but the function all these expressions of contempt have in common is the defence against unwanted feelings. Contempt for younger siblings often hides envy of them, just as contempt for the parents often helps to ward off the pain of being unable to idealise them. Contempt also may serve as a defence against other feelings, and it will lose its point when it fails as a shield – for instance, against shame over one’s unsuccessful courting of the parent of the opposite sex; or against the feeling of inadequacy in rivalry with the samesex parent; and above all against the narcissistic rage that the object is not completely available. So long as one despises the other person and overvalues one’s own achievements (‘he can’t do what I can do’), one does not have to mourn the fact that love is not forthcom-

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<sup>6</sup> Capps D: *The Child's Song. The Religious Abuse of Children* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 170.

ing without achievement. Nevertheless, avoiding this mourning means that one remains at bottom the one who is despised. For I have to despise everything in myself that is not wonderful, good, and clever. Thus I perpetuate intrapsychically the loneliness of childhood: I despise weakness, impotence, uncertainty – in short, the child in myself and in others.”<sup>7</sup>

Contempt enables the avoidance of despising the “weakness, impotence, uncertainty of the child in myself and in others.” Miller believes that the parent’s contempt is perpetrated onto the child in order to defend the parent against their own self-hatred. The child absorbs the negativity, and because s/he is powerless, turns the emotion into self-denigration, and in turn projects that onto future victims. Thus the “narcissistic rage” takes out on the other what is unacceptable in self. Miller’s perception that contempt is a narcissistic emotion can be observed by any who have experienced the emotion for themselves. The contemptible person is repulsive. To look them in the face is impossible. You want to banish them from sight, but cannot: they are too important to you. You also experience compulsion in their company. Who knows why some people offer us reflected images – of beauty or contempt – which catch us unawares?

The myth of Narcissus is a story that revolves around countenance and reflected image. Narcissus falls in love with the only image he can have power over – all other real lovers are invisible to him. But he is mistaken: for this image is one which has power over him: “the very abundance of my riches beggars me”. From this relationship with self, this interlocking, there can be only one escape: death. But if, instead of beauty, the image in the mirror holds the ugliness of self, what then? We have the same narcissistic process, the same compulsion and repulsion, the same rejection and death – worked out with fear and loathing. The image is caught on the face of the other – and if this contemptible image can be killed, then negativity can be murdered within self, leaving behind all that lightens the countenance.

### God's contempt: expulsion

If we follow this train of thought and turn to the first chapters of Genesis, some interesting insights come to light. I have always felt that Cain, and Adam and Eve before him, had a rough deal from the God of the writers of Genesis. Some, like Rene Girard, have examined this material, focusing upon the fraternal - and fratricidal relationship between Cain and Abel. He recognises the pairing that is essential to this cultic drama of sacrifice, this projected violence. For Girard the drama is between the brothers:

One of the brothers kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal.<sup>8</sup>

My reading draws God into the story, giving God a more central role. As the stories have it, God creates the world and everything in it, including humanity, in God’s own image, and it is deemed very good. Very soon after, however, an account needs to be given for the presence of evil in creation. Of course God cannot be held responsible for evil, so it must initiate in the created order. But perhaps the writers and redactors have been too protective of God (and too revealing of

<sup>7</sup> Miller A.: *The Drama of Being a Child* (London: Virago Press Ltd reprint, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Girard, R.: *Violence and the Sacred* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press [1977] 1993), p. 4.

their own contempt). Perhaps the first chapters of Genesis can be told another way, as a story of God's growing knowledge of the evil within his<sup>9</sup> own creating nature and God's projection of that evil onto his children in order to preserve his identity as good.

I find that final verse of chapter four enigmatic: "At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord." This is usually interpreted<sup>10</sup> that at this time people began to worship the Lord as a name of sufficient power and identity to receive such worship. But a great deal happens before this point to establish that God is good enough to be worshipped.

We can read the story differently: In the beginning, God knows both good and evil (Gen. 3:22), and creates "in his own image". God is surprised, and horrified, when creation mirrors not solely his goodness, as expected, but both good and evil. A narcissistic God finds in the reflection more than he bargained for: he finds evil and imperfection. Now reflected in the mirror of creation, God can no longer dismiss as irrelevant the presence of evil in Godself. So God has to set about re-creating himself as good. These early chapters of Genesis are the story of the formation of the good identity of God, an identity above reproach.

For God to be above reproach requires a vicious contempt. God behaves towards Adam and Eve, and then towards Cain, just like Miller's parent. They are sent away from the presence of the Lord, bearing with them into the land East of Eden all that God rejects in Godself – the knowledge of evil. Only after such banishments is the Lord's identity sufficiently secure that his name could be invoked, and the blessing of a good God received by the people.

God here affects, in psychological terms, a split between good and evil by contemptuously scapegoating the proto-humans. Contempt is the right word. Adam is humiliated: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return"<sup>11</sup> –, and Cain fares no better. The story in Genesis 4 is a story of contempt that ends in murder and banishment but begins with God. Cain and Abel bring offerings to the Lord: Cain "an offering of the fruit of the ground" and Abel "for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions." It does not say that Cain's offering was of lesser quality than Abel's. As the story stands, the Lord receives Cain's gift with contempt – "with no regard". If both gifts are equal, and who is to say that they are not, Cain's anger is predictable. He takes his brother out into the field and murders him. His punishment follows, a punishment that Cain feels is too great to bear: "Today you have driven me away from the soil ...". Powerful indeed, this divine contempt projected out from the Godhead onto the bitter shoulders of Cain: "...and I shall be hidden from your face" he moans.

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<sup>9</sup> For God to be male entails, if Julia Kristeva's thinking is correct, the murder of the archaic mother, a proto-sacrifice so that God (and language) can be established as one and male. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, (op. cit.), and *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). My thesis that God splits off what is unacceptable in his nature can equally well be applied to gender. The establishment of patriarchy requires the same process as the establishment of goodness.

<sup>10</sup> I owe a debt to Walter Houston for exegetical help with this verse.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Capps pursues this theme in *The Child's Song* where he believes God is "punitive" in his treatment of Adam and Eve. See page 164.

## God: the Good-enough parent?

The first children are banished east of Eden, away from the face of God. God drives out from himself the evil he knows in his own heart. He splits the image to preserve his goodness. But is it good enough? By the time of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has found another way. A way which gives humanity a pattern of reconciling the primal split between good and evil. But it is a costly reconciliation. It demands the sacrifice of the child of God.

The story of Cain and Abel can be paralleled by Jesus and Judas. Judas, who stands as an archetypal scapegoat through the centuries, bears all the marks, like Cain, of the contemptible reject. (A reject who, incidentally, has proved too necessary to be allowed to rest in peace throughout centuries of Christian anti-Semitism.) He is as necessary to the story of the passion as Jesus himself, for he bears all that the innocent Jesus is not. It is significant to our narcissistic theme that the traditional portrayal of Judas at the last supper has him with his face turned away.

But more significant is the kiss, a kiss of identification. The moment of handing over is sealed with a kiss - the physical expression of an intimacy for ever denied to Narcissus. That kiss draws together what is split between Judas and Jesus. That Jesus receives it means he carries with him to the cross all of Judas' self-hatred, fear and pride. Jesus goes to the cross a contemptible figure. Judas hands Jesus over to be exposed to mockery and derision and contempt. "And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe, They kept coming up to him, saying 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face". (John 19:2- 3)

There is a different God beneath this drama of contempt. Unlike the God who splits and banishes from sight, God in Christ owns the contempt, and receives the narcissistic rage of creation on the face. God knows the evil at the heart of creation, and Jesus dies, mocked and reviled, a sacrifice to that evil.

We are given here a way to manage and resolve our own experience of contempt. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ..." It is only by so loving what is contemptible that it can be changed. The child within God - all that is weak, insufficient, pathetic had to be so loved to be redeemed.

What an effort there is in that "so". Alice Miller writes that "freedom from the contemptuous introjects only comes when the patient has truly emotionally worked through the history of his childhood and thus regained his sense of being alive..." and "... a person who has consciously worked through the whole tragedy of his own fate will recognise another's sufferings more clearly and quickly, though the other may still have to try to hide it. He will not be scornful of others' feelings, whatever their nature, because he can take his own feelings seriously. He surely will not help to keep the vicious circle of contempt turning."<sup>12</sup> Between the old and new Adam, God "worked through the whole tragedy of his own fate". With Cain, God scorned the child; with Jesus, God so loved the child.

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<sup>12</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 140-141.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I've tried to explore with you a powerful, even violent, emotion that we would all, I suspect, acknowledge as part of our own experience. I'd argue that it's difficult to treat others with dignity if we ourselves have not faced our own contemptuous feelings. What is beneath contempt? Perhaps our own harboured selfhatred, the abject. And if that's the case, facing contempt – in order to be dignified, and to treat others with dignity – will always be a difficult, costly process.