Condescension, Insolence, Impudence, Contempt: The Moral Psychology of Status

It's worth recalling how profoundly relations between ladies and gentlemen, on the one hand, and the "lower orders," on the other, were structured by the honor codes that were being challenged in the early nineteenth century. The practice of honor among gentlemen in the eighteenth century might seem, at first, to have had most to do with their respect for one other. William Paley, the latitudinarian Archdeacon of Carlisle, (who was to become famous for analogizing God to a cosmic clockmaker), asserted that "the Law of Honor" is "a system of rules constructed by people of fashion, and calculated to facilitate their intercourse with one another; and for no other purpose." "Consequently," he went on, "nothing is adverted to by the Law of Honor, but what tends to incommode this intercourse. Hence this law only prescribes and regulates the duties *betwixt equals*; omitting such as relate to the Supreme Being, as well as those which we owe to our inferiors."[i]

But each of these claims is at best hyperbolic. The gentlemen and ladies who took honor seriously had not invented its codes; nor did honor always facilitate their social relations; nor, indeed, did it permit them to ignore either God or their social inferiors, let alone that other earthly Supreme Being, the King. In fact, "Christian gentleman" was widely thought to be a pleonasm, not because a Christian had to be a gentleman—there was a place for the Christianity of the lower orders—but because, in a Christian nation, a gentleman had to be a Christian. The largest error in Paley's picture, however, was his failure to recognize how richly ladies and gentlemen were enmeshed in networks of reciprocal attitudes not just to each other but also to their "inferiors."

Consider, for example, the performance that the eighteenth century called "condescension." It occurred when a person of higher status generously treated a person of lower status in a way that presupposed that they were equals. It was a kindness and, when it worked, it pleased the beneficiary as much is it gratified the *amour propre* of the benefactor. Winchilsea was condescending when he signed himself the "humble and devoted servant" of the rabble who were to read his broadsheet. Don Herzog, the historian of conservatism, describes an encounter between the Duke of Devonshire and John Payne Collier, his librarian, a few months before the passage of the Great Reform Bill. His Grace brought the librarian lunch in the library at Chatsworth. In his diary, Mr. Collier wrote:

> He always does his utmost to lessen the distance between us, and to put me at my ease, on a level with himself … I do not call it condescension (he will not permit the word), but kindness, and I should be most ungrateful not to make all the return in my power.[ii]

In denying that he was condescending to Collier, His Grace was treating him in a way that presupposed they were equals. Granted that they were not—which is clearly Collier's view—the denial was itself a form of higher-level condescension.

In our more democratic age we cannot admit to condescending; nor can we confess the delight we indubitably feel in the condescension of our betters. We cannot own up to these sentiments because we do not publicly acknowledge either that we *are* or that we *have* betters. But that is surely only a polite fiction. True, only the snobbish condescend merely on the basis of social class. Still, there are many standards we care about against which people can be appraised as more or less successful; we believe that success and failure in meeting these standards are things we *should* care about; and esteem for those who do best is an inevitable and proper response to that achievement.

The old practices of condescension were challenged as British society became more democratic. In the erosion of the assumption of the Duke of Devonshire's massive social superiority to his librarian—an assumption that entailed condescension whenever His Grace treated Collier as an equal—the possibility of social condescension as a gift to another adult dissolved. Nowadays we use "condescension" only as the term for a superior's treating someone as an inferior in ways that are inappropriate: which is why you can condescend to a teenager (or at least so teenagers think) but it is hard to condescend to an infant, whose inferiority is undeniable. In the democratization of manners, we are left with no place for the idea of a superior's pretending equality with an inferior; we are left only with the possibility of people's presuming, wrongly, their own superiority.

That the background assumption of hierarchy is still available today, however, shows up in the fact that people will sometimes admit to resenting insolence, which is a sort of mirror image of condescension: treating a superior as an equal, or even as an inferior. It tells us something about how the world has changed that well into the nineteenth century, talk of "insolence" usually had to do with a person's presuming too much upon an *elevated* status rather than upon a debased one: a lady could treat her own servants insolently; a gentleman could be insolent to a waiter. In 1851, David Hume, in the *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* glossed insolence as "haughtiness," though one seems more like an act and the other a sentiment.[iii] "Impudence" or "presumption" would have been Hume's term for our "insolence"; for what we might today call "being uppity."

The hierarchy, as I said, need not be social. Impudence is claiming equality with your betters *in some respect or other*. When Dan Quayle, campaigning for the Vice Presidency of the United States in 1988, compared himself to President Kennedy, Senator Lloyd Benson of Texas clearly thought that impudent; and responded with what we would now call condescension: "I knew John Kennedy," he said, thundering over the lectern, "John Kennedy was a friend of mine. And you, Senator, are no John Kennedy." Whatever the basis of this judgment, it was not about social class.

Both insolence—as they understood it in the eighteenth century—and impudence as we still think of it, are offences of the same fundamental sort: they involve failing to tailor your behavior properly to your station, presuming to act in ways that would require a higher standing than you actually have. And both make sense only if we have a notion of standing to back them up.

Now these are not emotions, they are forms of behavior. But their meaning depends on the emotions that sustain them. Collier's humble pleasure, the Duke's gratified self-regard; the resentment and indignation of those who are treated, insolently, impudently, impertinently; the pride and *amour propre* of the insolent.

In fact, eighteenth-century condescension—though clearly no longer based on eighteenth-century social hierarchies—is a common enough practice still; we have just lost the name for it. When the Distinguished Visiting Professor stops to talk respectfully to a student after a lecture, he or she is talking down a hierarchy and that is one source of the student's gratification. And in reporting this event, it would be natural, even for the beneficiary, to describe it as thoughtful or, as Collier did, as kind; or, at any rate, to suggest that it was not to be expected … which is, no doubt, why students don't approach Distinguished Visiting Professors more often.

When they do, though, this condescension is precisely what they hope for. What they fear is its Janus face, contempt. Contempt can be hate-filled or dismissive, intense or mild, amused or angry, but, like condescension, it requires the background system of a hierarchy of standing. Contempt's natural expression—it is important that it has a natural expression—tends towards the sneer.

Fanny Burney's Cecilia (in the novel that bears her name) reminds us of a crucial point about this family of practices and sentiments associated with hierarchy, through a remark about contempt. Delvile, her lover, has told her that they must elope if they are to marry, because "my family … will never consent to our union!"

> "Neither, then, Sir," cried Cecilia, with great spirit, "will I! … I will enter into no family in opposition to its wishes, I will consent to no alliance that may expose me to indignity. *Nothing is so contagious as contempt!* The example of your friends might work powerfully upon yourself, and who shall dare assure me you would not catch the infection?"[iv]

The possibility that one person's contempt will spread to his neighbours reflects the social nature of these emotions and attitudes. That is how they work: through our concern for our standing among our fellows, which is reflected in the patterns of their respect and their contempt. And these contagious evaluations are central forces in the social shaping of human behaviour.

Cecilia is worried, as she says, about being "exposed to indignity." She is concerned, that is, not just about being mistreated but about being, so to say, mis-regarded. So her anxiety is not simply that she will be disliked, it is that she will be judged against a standard and found wanting. To honour someone—or to treat them as dishonourable—is to make a judgement founded in a claim, implicit or explicit, that they have met (or failed to meet) criteria; and that claim is, therefore, itself subject to challenge as incorrect. You can challenge the standard, too; reject the criteria. But whether or not you accept them, you can dispute

whether they are met. This is one of the reasons why the evaluations of honour are contagious. If I draw attention to your failure to live up to a standard, others who accept the standard are bound either to share my evaluation or to deny the factual basis of my judgement; so too if I draw attention to your success.[v]

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[i] William Paley *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* 5th ed. (Dublin: Printed by Brett Smith for Messrs. P. Byrne, W. McKenzie, and W Jones, 1793.): 2.

[ii] Cited in Don Herzog *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 206.

[iii] David Hume *The Philosophical Works of David Hume. Including all the Essays, and exhibiting the more important Alterations and Corrections in the successive Editions by the Author.* In Four Volumes. (Edinburgh: Adam Black and William Tait, 1826). Vol. 4: 344.

[iv] Fanny Burney *Cecelia* Volume 2 Chapter 4, para. 28. (Italics mine) http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/8cecl10.txt Accessed on January 3 2007. I was led to this passage by a mention of it in Herzog *op. cit.*

[v] See Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit *The Economy of Esteem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 16.