

SNEERING

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'SNEERING, OR OTHER SOCIAL PELTING'¹

My aim in this piece is to understand what kinds of acts sneering acts are. I aim to look at what sneering acts do and what social function they perform. In particular, I want to mark them out as acts of 'making people feel'. I explore the grounds on which we might criticize sneering acts, and ask whether the thing that we do when we sneer is always vicious.

I

Introduction. My aim in this piece is to understand what kinds of acts sneering acts are. I aim to identify what sneering acts do and what social function they perform, but I will be concerned also to consider what I—perhaps contentiously—take to be the separate question of whether the thing that we do when we sneer is always vicious.

Sneering acts are marvels of human economy—with no more than the twitch of a lip, the lift of a brow, a slight sound, we can transform our social spaces, and effect change in those around us. Both the power and the problematic nature of a sneer are due in part to the fact that so little is required on the part of the sneerer to sneer successfully. They are so efficient.

I take sneering acts to be what Reid terms 'social acts of mind'—in contrast to 'solitary ones'. Sneering 'impl[ies] social intercourse with some other intelligent being', and as with all social acts of mind, 'expression is essential. They cannot exist without being expressed by words or signs, and known to the other party' (1788, Essay V, ch. 6).² Although to sneer is to act in a way that we can

¹ My title is a misquotation from George Eliot's *Romola*. She writes, 'to coerce people by shame, or other spiritual pelting, to the giving up of things it will probably vex them to part with, is a form of piety to which the boyish mind is most readily converted' (Eliot 1996, ch. 49, p. 420).

² Reid in fact calls for something stronger than I am going to claim here. He calls 'those operations social, which necessarily imply social intercourse with some other intelligent being who bears a part in them' (Reid 1788, Essay V, ch. 6). He assumes that the particular social action requires social intercourse, and the other as a part. I require only that social

make sense of only with reference to our interactions with other people, one might nevertheless sneer in solitude. Sneering in solitude will usually involve the thought of an absent target and audience, but could also be self-directed. However, what one is doing when sneering in solitude needs to be understood in terms of a type of act that plays a role in our relation to others. The role played by a sneer nearly always has a communicative aspect—the attitude of the sneerer is expressed, and so communicated to witnesses. However, a central aim of a sneer is, I will argue, not only to communicate our attitudes to others, but to feed into an economy of social value through the expression of one's attitude. A sneer is an act expressive of contempt or scorn aimed at the re-calibration or maintenance of the standing of another in a particular social setting. When directed at a person, a sneer is aimed at downgrading, or confirming and emphasizing the downgradedness of, that person's standing within that setting. This is not a newsworthy claim. I hope, however, that bringing an underexplored class of human acts more clearly into view will show that understanding what they are and how they work is of interest, and not philosophically straightforward.

The objects of an act of sneering can be very various—one can sneer at a remark, a hat, a piece of music, a house, a social movement, a practice, a nationality. However, to keep my discussion manageable, and because I take it to be the core case by means of which we make sense of the others, I will focus my discussion on acts of sneering that are aimed at individuals, and take that to include cases in which we sneer at an individual for a remark they make, a hat they wear, a piece of music they like, a house they live in, a social movement they are part of, a practice of theirs, their nationality. I take such sneerings to be distinct from general sneerings at a genre of music or a political party, for example.

The contents of a sneer can also be very various. Many sneering acts are themselves fully formed speech acts. I might be sneering if I were to say in a certain tone that someone liked Babycham, or wore white stilettos. I may in my sneering even add a claim that liking Babycham and wearing white stilettos are 'vulgar', or otherwise not 'the thing'. Such an act of sneering would include the attribution of attitudes or behaviours to a person, and a negative evaluation of

act types require social intercourse, and that what is done in particular, normal, cases involve others as a part.

them. If there is an explicit evaluation, it will usually have a content that is in some way relevant to social evaluations—even if only made socially relevant by the sneer itself. It would take a very particular social context successfully to sneer at someone for his ten fingers—it might be possible late in a ‘chicken’ contest involving very sharp knives, speed, and fingers. Many sneers, however, have little or no explicit content. The drawling tone of voice that presumably gives us the onomatopoeia ‘sneer’ can float free of any sentence—truth evaluable or not. A content might be implied by the circumstances in which the sneer arises. But a kind of bootstrapping super-sneer is the sneer that manages to leave the sneered-at—and the witnesses to the sneer—the task of doing the work in determining what it is that is contemptible or worthy of scorn about its object. One can fittingly sneer without providing anything in the way of its own justification as fitting.

A further limitation that I will work with is to focus on sneering acts that are intentional acts. By intentional sneering acts I do not mean sneering with a distinct intention—or as the result of deliberation—but voluntary, goal-oriented, non-accidental acts. In particular, I will suggest that sneers are acts that express the attitude of contempt or scorn, with the aim of socially downgrading, or confirming and emphasizing the downgradedness, of their object.

A complication of making this claim is that people will rarely take themselves to be, or describe themselves as, sneering. So, if a test of whether someone is intentionally ϕ -ing is whether they take themselves to be ϕ -ing under that description, then it might seem that we rarely sneer intentionally. The problem, of course, lies in the fact that in common usage to talk of an act as an act of sneering is to use a pejorative or moralized description. We do not tend to self-attribute sneering to ourselves: usually other people sneer; we uphold standards, or stand on our merits, give out what was deserved. The concept of ‘sneering’ is a candidate for being a ‘thick’ concept in Williams’s sense—with the factual and evaluative elements not independent (Williams 1985, Ch. 8; 1993, p. 206). The patterns of ascriptions of sneering in written works may function somewhat differently from those in speech, but of the 41,000-plus works in the Gutenberg online library, with 40,000-plus occurrences of the word ‘sneer’, only 189 involve first-person ascriptions. Some of those involve a confession of a past misdemeanour, or come with an excuse. It should, however, be noted that some appear to be straightforward

self-attributions with no obvious markers of a self-evaluation beyond the use of the word 'sneer'.³

If to say that someone is sneering is to ascribe a social goal to them, we would not expect to find sneerings that are done entirely unwittingly or accidentally. Indeed, the suggestion that the description of an act as an act of sneering is a moralized description gives credence to the suggestion that the act being described is generally an intentional one. Consider, as a comparison, acts of cruelty. Core cases of 'acts of cruelty' are those in which the agent acts for the pleasure, satisfaction, knowing disregard or indifference to the suffering of another. To act cruelly is intentionally to discount or gain satisfaction from—or, at least, be knowingly indifferent to—others' suffering. Acts which result in suffering entirely unknowingly or accidentally may be culpable, in a number of ways, but would not usually be considered cruel. Similarly, for an act to be accurately and literally described as a sneer, we would expect to be able to attribute to the sneerer a goal. If a would-be sneerer were sincerely, and with no bad faith, to respond to an accusation that they were sneering with something like 'I did not know I was doing anything', or 'I was just stretching my face', a retraction would be warranted. A curling of the lip, the expiration of air, or the arching of the brow of the kind that are often sneerings may occur unintentionally, and such occurrences may be taken to be sneerings when they are not. However, when the curling of the lip, the expiration of air, or the arching of the brow is the act of someone sneering, what she is doing is something she does as an agent with a goal, even if she does so with half attention, or not 'really meaning it', or through habit or carelessness, or as Eliot puts it in *Daniel Deronda*, 'without strict intention': Lush is reported making a contemptuous remark, not accidentally, unknowingly, unintentionally even though 'This sneer slipped off his tongue without strict intention' (*Eliot 2003*, ch. 25, p. 284).

So while we do not generally sneer under the description 'sneering'—as we do not often act cruelly under the description 'acting cruelly'—what we are doing when we sneer is not usually something we do accidentally, unknowingly, unintentionally. Sometimes we may accidentally sneer within someone's earshot, or eyeshot—when we meant others to see or hear the sneer, but not *him*. However, that is a case in which we intentionally sneer—but are accidentally seen

³ Huge thanks to Patrick Lavery for doing this data collection and analysis for me.

or heard. Or we may do something which, in the context, could reasonably be taken to be sneering when no sneer was intended. However, that is a case where there is no sneering—even if there is some accidental offence. I do not intend to get further into these weeds here. For almost any action verb, ϕ , offered as standardly characterizing a type of act that is usually done intentionally, if done at all, there will be borderline and special cases in which an agent could truly be said to be ϕ -ing un-intentionally. I mean to focus on a set of intentional acts, and to claim that such a focus will include central cases of the phenomenon.

A further simplification is that in this discussion I will focus on sneering acts, and not consider 'sneeriness' as a character trait. There are sneerers, or sneery people—those for whom sneering is a stable disposition and, perhaps, vice. There are also those who never, or rarely, sneer. Many of us sneer sometimes. However, I am primarily interested in acts of sneering, and do not yet see any prima facie reason to think that one cannot properly be said to have sneered except out of a sneery character. So I will focus on acts of sneering.

Finally, I want to make it explicit that the question being asked here is what we are doing when we sneer, and not what we are doing when we represent someone as sneering. Putting things in this way allows us to ask whether the thing that we are doing when we sneer could be such that it does not warrant the thing that we are doing when we represent it as a sneer. To represent someone as sneering is, or has evolved to be, to criticize them. Sneers are bad.⁴ My question is whether the grounds for criticism lie in the nature of the act type, or whether there could be acts of a kind with those that we call sneers, when we seek to criticize, which are neutral, benign or even virtuous.⁵ Is there an argument for exploring a neutral use of 'sneer'?

II

Acts of Making People Feel. Before thinking more about sneering acts in particular, I want to step back and situate my topic in relation to a much broader way that we might usefully categorize act types.

⁴ There are no obvious neutral alternatives. However, terms such as 'put down' or 'bring down' are helpful for capturing in a neutral way part of what one is doing in sneering. Thanks to Daniel Morgan for the observation.

⁵ Thanks to Julian Bacharach for suggesting this way of separating the questions.

Human animals are creatures capable of cognition, agency, and affection. However, we are not only individual creatures with such capacities that we exercise. We also operate in social relations, one to another, and can have the activation of those capacities *in others* as goals in our interactions. Recent philosophical theorizing has had a quite a lot to say about social acts that aim at *cognitive* change in, or exchange with, others. We tell, assure of, show, and teach each other matters of fact, thereby bringing about cognitive change in others. These concerns are at the centre of discussions of testimony, of promising, of understanding.

There are also a wide range of social acts that aim at *agential* change in others. We tell people that things are so, giving them reason to want or believe things that make them change what they do. More directly, we command, ask, convince, manipulate each other to do things, and to refrain from doing things: we silence and obstruct. Such concerns are, for example, at the centre of speech act theory, the ethics of manipulation, responsibility, and discussions of free speech.

Less often explicitly identified as such, in contemporary analytical philosophy of mind and moral psychology, are social acts that aim at *affective* change in others. We act in ways aimed at *making people feel*. We exploit our capacities to act in ways that are designed to bring about affective change in others: we intentionally make people feel.⁶

The kinds of ways in which people can feel are countless—and there are, correspondingly, countless acts aimed at making people feel in those ways. We can, however, at a very rough approximation, distinguish between three categories of feeling that might be aimed at: sensations, emotions, and self-conscious emotions. I do not intend to offer a theory of sensation and its relation to a theory of emotions here since nothing of weight turns on it. What is important, for my purposes, is to note that acts of making feel can range from those which require little more than the causal interaction between bodies of a certain kind to those that require knowledge, on the part of the subjects involved, of social codes and structures.

⁶ The power to make people feel has, however, been a cornerstone of discussions of rhetoric at least since Aristotle. Pathos is one of the three Aristotelian modes of persuasion, and identified as a way of securing both cognitive and agential change, through affective change. Thanks to Tom Stern for reminding me to register this. It was partly thinking about acts of persuasion as acts of making feel that led to me wanting to label the broader category.

These may be very simple, and perhaps even systemic, codes—or highly complex and socially developed.

The simplest acts of making people feel exploit little more than the basic physiology of the human bodies that causally interact. We feel bodily sensations: of pains, of pressure, of itches, of prickles. There are—correlatively—acts aimed at making someone feel one bodily sensation or another. These acts usually work by inducing the sensation in another. For example, if I want to make someone feel pain, I can pinch them. For such acts to be successful, little more is needed than the causal powers that one body has in relation to another. Pain resulting from recognition that one is being deliberately hurt by being pinched is very likely different from pain not so recognized, and deliberate pinchings often aim also at recognition. However, to the extent that the pain felt and aimed at is the result only of the physical interaction of the pincher's body—their finger strength, shape, and movement—and the pinchee's body—the sensitivity of the area pinched and the nociceptive structures operative—a pinching can be an act of making feel that relies on no contribution, other than their felt pain, from the target subject. Similarly, there are perceptual sensations associated with sight, smell, taste, and so on, and I can make someone have colour, smell, taste, sound sensations by acting in ways that stimulate the relevant receptors. And again, my capacity to do that requires little more than my exploiting the normal functionality of the body of the other.

Perhaps most of our acts of making people feel are aimed at more complex emotional states of a subject. We calm, we comfort, we irritate, we anger, we amuse, we frighten—we act in many ways aimed at inducing one or other emotional state in the person we are interacting with. Usually, the success of such acts requires that the target of the act has some recognition or understanding of the context they are in. I cannot frighten someone—say, by letting loose a snarling dog in their midst—unless the dog is taken by the target as harmful or dangerous. I cannot calm someone worried about money by a large deposit in their bank account unless they know that the money is in the account, and take it to solve their financial problem. However, such acts do not require, for their success, a recognition on the part of the target that there has been any such act carried out, never mind that there has been an act aimed at making feel. There are acts that aim at making someone feel one emotion or another

simply by making the subject's environment one that elicits that emotion.

A large number of acts of making feel, however, depend upon the target of the act recognizing it as an act of making them feel the thing that the act is aimed at making them feel. For example, some acts aimed at making people feel fear are threats that do not put the target in a situation with an immediate and present danger, but rely instead on the person who is threatened recognizing the act as an act aimed at making them feel fear. Consider, for example, the way in which threats can wear their purpose on their surface: 'You should be afraid, very afraid'. That is not to say that such verbal threats float free of the target's recognition of the potential for actual harm or danger. A verbal threat can fail in at least three ways, and be a 'mere threat' rather than a 'real threat'. It can fail if (a) the threatener is recognized by the target as not having the intent to 'carry through', or (b) the threatener is recognized by the target as not having the ability to 'carry through', or (c) if that which threatened is not taken by the target to be harmful or dangerous. Nevertheless, the aim of the act is to make the target feel fear partly in virtue of her recognition of the aim of the agent in so acting.

Acts of comforting can also depend on the recognition by the target that the comforter is aiming to comfort. Certain acts of provocation can give us very pure cases of recognition-dependent acts of making feel. One can act in a way that is aimed at angering, precisely on the basis that the target recognizes that the provocateur is aiming to make them angry. The offence that elicits, and makes fitting, the target's anger *is* the act aimed at making the target angry through their recognition of it as an act aimed at making them angry.

The above discussion brings out the fact that cutting across the distinctions of the different kinds of feelings—sensations, emotions, self-conscious emotions—aimed at by acts of making feel are distinctions between acts of making feel which require (i) no, or little, understanding on the part of the target who is to be made to feel, (ii) some understanding of the situation in which the act operates on the part of the target who is to be made to feel, and (iii) a specific understanding on the part of the target of the nature of the act of making feel that is being carried out.

Before turning to look more carefully at sneering acts in particular, I want to add two further complications. A single action can be used to do many things, to carry out distinct acts. For example, a

single directed action can be an act of making a given target feel, while also an act of making the witnesses, or indeed the agent, of the act feel. A social action can have a primary target—and the goal of making the target feel—but third party witnesses can be a secondary target, and the goal of making them feel one way or another can be a secondary goal. In fact, one can carry out an action that is of an act of a type usually aimed at making the primary target feel but, on this occasion, be quite uninterested in whether the primary target feels anything at all—one might even know that they are immune to such attempts—and be concerned only in the response of the witnesses.

Suppose I threaten someone in public. I may be seeking to make them feel fear; however, I may also be concerned to inculcate respect or admiration in my witnesses. In such cases we have an action with more than one 'making feel' goal. And of course we can iterate further—I may be aiming at making the witnesses of my threat feel and show respect, in order to make my partner feel admiration of me and my bravado. Perhaps I care most about inculcating admiration in him—and am in fact uninterested in the fear of my primary target or in the respect of the other witnesses.

The second, related, complication is that not only can an action be used to carry distinct acts of making feel, but it can also, at the same time, be used to carry out acts aimed at agential change: the action can have as its overall primary goal that the other act in some way as a result of being made to feel in some way. Such actions aim at agential change via aiming at affective change. Indeed, some act types are best understood as acts of making act by making feel. The example of provocations, mentioned above, is a case in point: we can aim making someone feel anger as the means to making them express their anger in action. Many provocations in sport, for example, aim at initiating fouling behaviour, perhaps with the further aim to it being seen by the referee to the benefit of the provocateur's team.

Consider Sampson's provocation in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Sampson is after a fight. He makes an offensive gesture to Abraham—declaring his intention as follows: 'I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it' (*Rom & Jul.*, I. i. 49–50). His aim is to provoke the target to act, and to act not only through anger at being disgraced, but also through fear of appearing to others to allow an act of dishonouring to be unmet. If the thumb-biting was not visible to others in the group—but only by Abraham

himself—then the provocation would likely fail. If the target—Abraham—did respond with a feeling of anger, but nevertheless let Sampson ‘get away with it’, the overall aim would not have been satisfied.

Single concrete actions are capable of realizing many acts, picked out by many descriptions, and the goals of the agent may vary with the very many things that she is doing in carrying out that action. Again, to simplify, I will take as my starter cases of acts of making feel those that involve a transaction between two individuals; that is, cases in which the agent of the act aims at as her primary goal an affective response on the part of the target.

III

Back to Sneering. Let me now go back and try to unpack a bit further what it is to sneer at someone.

Firstly, sneers have physical profiles. Darwin described a sneer as being ‘the upper lip being retracted in such a manner that the canine tooth on one side of the face alone is shown’ (1872, pp. 249–50). However, a sneer may involve more—and less—than such a recognizable facial movement or contortion. It often involves a distinctive lopsided smile or laugh, sometimes accompanied by particular sorts of sounds—snorts and pfffs. A sneer may also involve an utterance expressed in a drawling mode, maybe with vocal fry, with a certain kind of content aimed at putting someone down. However, unlike a snort, a sneeze or a frown, a sneer cannot be understood only as a bodily occurrence.⁷

The ragbag of physical characteristics that sneers have seem to have two related functions: to express an attitude of contempt, scorn or disdain, and to publicly socially diminish the sneered at. A bodily movement that has all the physical characteristics of a sneer but serves no further social function is not a sneer.

⁷ How universal is the physical profile of a sneer? It had been commonly held that expressions of contempt, for example, are universal (see Izard and Haynes 1988). However, more recent work warns us to be wary of assuming that facial movements reliably correlate to emotions (see Barrett et al. 2019). Independently of the question of how tight the correlation is between lip rises and contempt, say, everyday usage suggests that we describe acts as sneerings that are subject to individual shaping and have culture-dependent, conventional elements. I come back to this in §IV.

Michelle Mason makes the case in her essay on the attitude of contempt that the failings of a person that would make contempt apt are failings that prompt one to despise. In discussing her central case of Camille, whose lover Paul has offered Camille up as a potential sexual diversion to another man for Paul's own career advantage, she says:

Although we have lost a transitive verb form to function as contemn itself once did, it seems most apt to say that Paul's failing prompts Camille to despise him. If this is correct, then contempt inherits the connotation of looking down upon its object (despise deriving from the Latin *despicere*, to look down upon). (Mason 2003, p.240)

Whether or not Mason is right about the particular connection between contemning and despising, it is plausible to say that intentional public expressions of contempt are used for social 'downsizing' of another. Similarly, to express scorn is to aim at publicly 'taking down' another. The word 'scorn' is likely influenced by the Old French *escorne*, drawn from *escorner*, literally 'to break off (someone's) horns'. Whatever exactly the symbolism of 'de-horning' someone is, it is not going to be good for their social standing. Whether to scorn is to remove symbols of strength or glory, or of masculinity, sexual power and fecundity, the scorner aims to bring down the scorned person, to publicly diminish them. To disdain someone is to take them as unworthy of one, or one's attention (from Old French *desdeignier*, in turn from the Latin *dedignare*, from *de-* + *dignare*, 'consider worthy').

While sneering acts are usually expressive of a state of mind of an agent—of their contempt, scorn, disdain—they are, concomitant with the states of mind that they are expressive of, expressive acts which have the social function of diminishing, or keeping down, the standing of the target in the context. In their primary uses they are public acts that aim at social diminution, and they do so by being public displays of the attitude of the sneerer. We might reclaim the no longer used transitive verb and say that they are acts that 'contemn'.

There are many different ways of socially diminishing someone—we can make them poor, silence them, ignore them, make them immobile. However, one common and core way of socially diminishing another comes more easily—we can socially diminish another by making them (or others) feel that they are diminished, and one core

way of doing that is to publicly express a negative evaluation of them. Part of what makes this possible is that social standing has a fluid dimension, dependent on our expressed evaluations of each other in a given context and not only on our long-term position in a stable social structure, never mind moral worth. Acts of sneering belong in a class of diminishing acts—along with jeering, shaming, humiliating, mocking, putting down—that have as their function making their targets feel socially diminished. They can be contrasted with a class of raising acts—such as praising, *fêting*, lauding, flattering, honouring, bigging up—that have as part of their function making their targets feel socially raised.

The extent of the capacity to socially diminish or raise is often related to the social standing of the agent. One can socially diminish or raise a person when having little social standing, for example, by bringing to light an agreed failure or success. One's testimony would need to be believed, or one's evidence clear, but attention to the facts alone can work to raise or diminish a person. However, any act of evaluating that might accompany any such revelation will play a part in determining the extent to which a person is lowered or raised only if the agent of the act is able to secure a route for her evaluations to affect the social standing of the evaluated. However, if the agent has sufficient standing, there may be no more she needs to do to determine a feature as socially significant, or a target as socially diminished or raised, than declare it as such.

In sneering at an individual, the sneerer is, in the cases we are focusing on, making the sneered-at feel diminished. And the sneerer with sufficient social power will, thereby, have diminished them. There need be no actual failure that ought to be relevant to social standing, or grounds that warrant the sneering, beyond the sneering itself. Even so, the sneered-at will rationally—indeed rightly—feel diminished if she:

- (a) recognizes that the aim of the sneer is to diminish her;
- (b) recognizes that the sneerer has the social power to determine actual social relations in such a way;
- (c) has the affective capacity to be sensitive to such changes in social relations, and feels diminished as a result of such a capacity.

Sneerings, of the kind we are focusing on, are acts of making feel that fall into the third category identified in §II above: they require for their success a specific understanding on the part of the target of the nature of the act of making feel that is being carried out. Unlike a pinch or a punch, they need recognition of the aim of the act to be successful.

Suppose it is accepted that sneers, in their core instances, are social acts which effect a social change—in particular, an act of social diminution—by the public expression of a contemptuous attitude involving characteristic utterances, facial movements and sounds apt for making people feel diminished if they are the target.

A question that now arises is, if that is what we are doing when we sneer, why is 'sneer' a pejorative—why is it that to represent someone as sneering seems already to criticize them? After all, social acts which effect a social change—in particular, an act of social diminution—by the public expression of a contemptuous attitude could be highly beneficial. They could constitute reprimands, or warranted correctives, to the socially arrogant or inflated, they could be acts of political resistance at unjustified social power, they could be acts that enable the maintenance of proper standards.⁸ Is 'sneer' then simply a label correctly applied only to those *bad* instances of social acts which 'effect a social diminution by the public expression of a contemptuous attitude involving a certain kind of characteristic facial movements and sounds'? Well, perhaps. But, as we have remarked, there is not a natural alternative label for the good cases or neutral cases. Note also that almost always facial expressions characteristic of sneering will be identified as a sneer before further information about the badness or goodness of the act is in view.

There are a number of aspects of the acts identified even using the thinner description I have offered—an act of social diminution by a characteristic public expression of a contemptuous attitude—that we might think are already troubling.

Sneering acts might seem to be inegalitarian. Intentional expressions of contempt and scorn seem to be problematic in so far as they may seem to rely on an assumption of superior worth on the part of the agent. As Graham Greene puts in *The Heart of the Matter*,

⁸ Vanessa Carr suggested to me that we can think of them as kinds of reprimands—carried out by intentionally giving public shape to our contempt.

‘What are others worth that they have the nerve to sneer at any human being?’ (2004, p. 23). What is wrong with assumptions of superiority? Well, if human beings are of equal worth, and social acts of diminution involving treating them as inferior in worth and the agent superior, then there will always be a kind of moral mistake in holding oneself ‘higher’ than another and seeking to downgrade another’s social standing. However, I think equality of moral worth cannot be quite the right explanation of our problem with sneers. First, we do not tend to think of social acts of praising or celebrating as problematic in the same way, and they stand to be inegalitarian also. We also allow for virtuous negative evaluation and critique. The kind of social standing that is affected by the diminishing and raising acts that human lives are full of may interact with claims about our equal moral worth, but they seem also to allow for dimensions of difference. Second, a sneerer may seek to diminish without taking themselves to be superior—they may simply take the other to stand in need of diminution. If there is something right in this kind of explanation, it cannot simply be that it allows for difference in social standing. It is rather that there is something problematic in the *form* of diminution undertaken by the sneerer.

A notable feature of sneers is that they involve an evaluation with no invitation to the sneered-at to respond or engage. Sneers seek to secure an outcome without proffering any justification or reasons for it. A sneer insinuates a claim of failure—and in the right circumstances effects social change by such a claim. But you cannot, as William Paley puts it, ‘refute a sneer’, because it hides both its grounds and its status as a judgement that stands to be proved false. The sneerer often offers no statement of fact, and rarely give reasons in their dismissals. Sneers might seem to have a power unearned, and be disproportionate in their effect on the sneered-at in contrast to their cost to the sneerer. The sneerer might seem to give a reason—as in the cases mentioned above where the sneerer explicitly states that something is ‘vulgar’ or ‘not the thing’. However, these kinds of evaluative verbs are themselves evaluations with little content beyond that something is apt to be sneered at. For the most part, no justification is offered, and the act seems to allow no epistemic or rational defeat.

Related to lack of reason-giving inherent in sneering is the thought that they are *manipulative acts*, and manipulative acts might be

thought vicious acts.⁹ Sneering is manipulative in a number of ways, most obviously because it seeks to gain an end by means that bypass the deliberative and rational agency of others. It takes a back route to expressing a negative evaluation, and securing a social downgrading, in two ways. First, a sneer offers up an evaluation in a way that invites others to accede to it—as such, it testifies to the worth of its target—but it does so in a way that hides its status as an act of testimony. Rather than offering up a claim to be accepted or denied, disputed or challenged, it aims to exploit human affective dispositions in such a way that the other incorporates the contempt or scorn expressed into their own affective response to the target. They aim at *affection control*. Second, sneers come with no explicit acceptance of responsibility for the attitude expressed and the social changes brought about, and the sneerer operates in the comfort of reasonable deniability: ‘I did not say anything at all, and you must have mistaken my expression’ or ‘I only said she wore white stilettos, I did not say that there is anything wrong with that. It must be *you* who think white stilettos are not quite the thing’. In their lack of explicitness the sneerer is, as Pope puts it, ‘Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike; Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike’ (Pope 1735, ‘Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot’).¹⁰

These features of sneerings mean that they wield an unfair, unearned power and influence in our dealings with one another. They can stifle the new or unusual, they can punish difference, and they mark a kind of contagion that stands to corrupt the grounds on which judgements about social value and worth are made. Yet more troubling, they can seem to control and influence without robust critique or satire; they are at one with a system of timid social critique and behaviour, and economy of shallow dismissal, where the mere sneer eventually comes to be all that is needed—we first ‘Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer; And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer’ (Pope 1735).

A popular ground of an objection to sneering, despite the fact that they are most often the targets of sneering, is that it is form of attack chosen by the socially ‘weak’. In *Conversations on Some of the Old*

⁹ See Baron (2003). She concerns herself primarily with manipulateness as a disposition or character trait, but I owe much to her discussion.

¹⁰ Thanks to John Mullan for referring me to Pope.

Poets, James Russell Lowell describes a sneer as 'the weapon of the weak' and complains that:

Like other devil's weapons, it is always cunningly ready to our hand, and there is more poison in the handle than in the point. But how many noble hearts have writhed with its venomous stab, and festered with its subtle malignity. (Lowell 1901, p. 54)

Hazlitt (1837, p. 97) complains that 'insignificant people are the most apt to sneer at others. They are safe from reprisals. And have no hope of rising in their own self-esteem but by lowering their neighbours' (*Characteristics*, CCLXX).¹¹

This objection is a slightly strange one. It is distinct from the objection that sneering can be indirect and cowardly, be enacted by those 'afraid to strike'. The core objection is, I take it, that those without social capital use sneering as a way of lowering those with higher social capital—even those with 'noble hearts'. They are supposed to be 'level-downers'—reduced to bringing down, rather than gaining, in their own name and on merit, self-esteem or social capital.

Setting aside the delightful, somewhat self-undermining, fact that expressions of this sort of objection to sneering tend to carry a sneering tone, it is worth reminding ourselves that one of the things that makes sneering possible as a device of social change is that a social evaluation can—in itself, and independent of its content or warrant—feed into the extent of a target's social capital. Moreover, the greater the social power an individual has, the more effective in lowering others her sneerings are likely to be. The more 'insignificant' the individual, and the more obscure the grounds, the less effective the sneer. Lowell insists that the 'noble' can nevertheless be injured, and Hazlitt that the esteem of the less lowly neighbour can be lowered. I will come back to this.

There is a feature of many cases of sneering, only mentioned briefly so far, that might seem a better candidate for what makes sneering troublesome. We can take pleasure, and give pleasure to others, in our sneerings. It can be enjoyable, fun, funny to sneer, despite the risk of social injury to another—it may be a form of schadenfreude. Even if sneering can be socially beneficial and corrective,

¹¹ There are studies in social psychology that suggest that a kind of psychological fragility does co-exist with a disposition to sneering and otherwise expressing contempt; see Schriber et al.(2017).

it is rarely a sober act done out of painful duty for a consideration of the common good, or the rectification of injustice or disproportionate advantage. We and others often delight in our sneering, and given that sneering diminishes, to do so is to delight in the diminution of another. Kingsley (1881) enjoins us never to ‘indulg[e] in the devilish pleasure of a sneer’ (*Westminster Sermons*, VII, p. 83). Perhaps that is why sneering is bad—it is the nature of the pleasure we can take in it.¹² Should we not wish for all our fellow beings to be as splendid as they are able, and so never take delight in the social downfall or injury to any? Is the pleasure of a sneer always devilish, and the kind of act we carry out when we sneer, even if pleasure is taken, always vicious?

IV

Thick and Thin. Before I consider this question further, I want, more explicitly, to make a couple of methodological points about our ways of talking about our actions and what we do.

When we try ask a question of the form ‘What kinds of act are ϕ -ings?’ or ‘Are all ϕ -ings F ?’, we will need to conduct our enquiry bearing in mind two things. One is that in saying that someone is ϕ -ing I could be saying that they are doing any number of things—typically a claim that a particular someone is ϕ -ing will cover *multiple activities*. The action in which they perform the act of ϕ -ing will also instance various other acts, say, ψ -ing and χ -ing. Two, that many acts are polymorphous. Often when what a person is doing is constituted on this occasion by their ϕ -ing, what they are doing— ψ -ing, say—could have been constituted differently: they could have done what they are doing differently, without ϕ -ing. Where someone ψ s by ϕ -ing, they could have ψ -ed in a different way, by χ -ing, say (see Sibley 1970).

We employ thicker and thinner descriptions of a particular action corresponding to the act types satisfied by the action. Consider Ryle’s remarks on Rodin’s *Le Penseur*:

If *le Penseur* is trying to solve a chess-problem . . . he may experimentally move and re-move pieces on the chessboard in front of him,

¹² Thanks to Kate Summerscale for reminding me to worry about pleasure that can be taken in sneering. I should say that I do not think all sneering comes with pleasure. It often comes with discomfort, fear and anxiety.

unpressed by an opponent or a clock. Or he may, like me, only much more efficiently, be considering alternative moves of visualised chessmen on a visualised chessboard; or he may in imagination, in some other manner, be experimentally making alternative moves. But whichever he is at this moment 'thinly' doing, 'thickly' he is trying to check and mate in four moves. (Ryle 1966–7, p. 492)

One could be doing any number of things in moving pieces around the board—teaching someone chess, going over someone else's game for the pleasure of it, or trying to check in four moves. And if one moves pieces around the board in trying to check in four moves, one might have tried to check in four moves by doing something else—by visualizing chessmen on a visualized board, say. As Ryle puts it, 'The concept of thinking is polymorphous' (1951, p. 272).

Similarly with sneering—there are lots of ways to do it, and many different thinner descriptions can be used to describe those ways. We have seen a number of such thinner descriptions—from Darwin's description of the upper lip being retracted on one side to more varied descriptions of the way a sneerer may move their face, emit certain sounds, utter certain forms of sentence. However, sneerings are social acts of mind which admit of huge variation in their presentation. Even if they are rooted in our more basic expressive dispositions, as sneerers we have developed significant degrees of individual, cultural and contextual variation in the nature of the presentation of our sneers. Indeed, given the right context, shared understanding, and scaffolding, it is arguable that one can sneer without satisfying *any* of the standard thinner physical descriptions I have offered. Consider the following description by Proust, in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, of an interaction between the characters Mme de Guermantes and Colonel de Froberville, witnessed by a M. de Bréauté:

I need not ask whether you are going to Mme de Saint-Euverte's tomorrow,' Colonel de Froberville said to Mme de Guermantes . . . 'The whole of Paris will be there.' . . . 'Well, the fact is I shan't be in Paris,' the Duchess answered Colonel de Froberville. 'I must tell you (though I ought to be ashamed to confess such a thing) that I have lived all these years without seeing the stained-glass windows at Montfort-l'Amaury. It's shocking, but there it is. And so, to make amends for my shameful ignorance, I decided that I would go and see them tomorrow'. M. de Bréauté smiled a subtle smile. For he was well aware that, if the Duchess had been able to live all these years without seeing the

windows at Montfort-l'Amaury, this artistic excursion had not all of a sudden taken on the urgent character of an 'emergency' operation and might without danger, after having been put off for more than twenty-five years, be retarded for twenty-four hours. The plan that the Duchess had formed was simply the Guermantes way of decreeing that the Saint-Euverte establishment was definitely not a socially respectable house, but a house to which you were invited so that your name might afterwards be flaunted in the account in the *Gaulois*, a house that would award the seal of supreme elegance to those, or at any rate to her (should there be but one), who would not be seen there. (Proust 2000, pp. 96–7)¹³

If this is a candidate case for the subtlest of sneers, then perhaps no curl of the lip is required, no raised eyebrow, no brute emission of suppressed laughter, no pffs or snorts. All that may be needed is the common knowledge that 'the Duchess had been able to live all these years without seeing the windows at Montfort-l'Amaury' and that she carries a social position that allows her to deflate others, and to elevate herself and secure the 'supreme elegance' of not being seen at Mme de Saint-Euverte's. M. de Bréauté witnesses the act with 'delicate amusement . . . coupled with the poetical pleasure which society people felt when they saw Mme de Guermantes do things which their own inferior position did not allow them to imitate but the mere sight of which brought to their lips the smile of the peasant tied to his glebe when he sees freer and more fortunate men pass by above his head' (Proust 2000, p. 97).

'Sneering' is a relatively thick description—it is more like 'trying to mate in four moves' than moving the pieces on a board. Indeed, given the evaluative colouring, it is more like trying to mate elegantly in four moves. Even so, an action that is an act of 'sneering' admits of many thicker descriptions. As I have been concerned to show, in its paradigm cases it is act of making someone feel diminished, with the aim of thereby diminishing them, by intentionally expressing certain evaluative emotions. However, very often—as it is in Mme de Guermantes's way of sneering—the sneer can also be an act of self-aggrandizement and public advertising, or some other kind of move in a social competition somewhat removed from the feelings of the sneered-at. More widely, a sneer can be a provocation, an act of rebellion, of social bonding, or trying to amuse.

¹³ Thanks to Tom Stern for leading me to this reference. I obviously never made it to Volume 4 myself.

V

Benign Cases? Let me finish with a closer look at what we are doing when we are sneering, with the aim of suggesting a more nuanced answer to the question of whether what we do when we sneer is always vicious, and whether there is room to represent someone as doing what we do when sneering without thereby criticizing them. In particular, using a thinner description, is an act of socially diminishing via the public expression of a disdainful attitude involving characteristic utterances and facial movements always a vicious act, and would any pleasure we take in it be devilish?

Let us go back to the somewhat sneering objection that sneering is a device of the socially 'weak'. We remarked on the slight oddness of this charge: successful sneering seems to be more available to the socially elevated in a context: Mme de Guermantes, in her milieu, can do things inimitable by those without her standing. However, this is compatible with the thought that sneering can offer an opportunity for critique for those without such standing. Moreover, it can offer an opportunity that may not be afforded by other forms of critical communication.

The first kind of cases that might come to mind are certain acts of ridicule or derision that seem comfortably to meet the non-evaluative conditions of a sneer. We will tolerate, even praise, some such acts of ridicule. A target of ridicule can merit it—and the ridicule can earn its place by being contentful, truthful and funny.¹⁴

More generally, the option of doing what we do when we sneer can, on occasion, function as a particularly well-adapted arrow in the quiver of those who are operating in circumstances in which ordinary complaints, objections and reasoned critiques fail to puncture—perhaps because they are not fully admitted to an economy of reciprocal reason-giving, or because the context is not apt for such activity for some other reason.

Imagine being subjected to workplace harassment. Suppose you have limited opportunity or desire to communicate your objections about your treatment—to either your employers, your colleagues, or your harasser. Perhaps such complaints would come with sanctions, or with costly social and other consequences. Suppose that you have

¹⁴ See [Anderson \(2020\)](#) for a discussion that offers an account of successful 'roasts', and identifies, unpicks, and explains different kinds of acceptable acts of ridicule.

some reason to think that your harasser may be sensitive, in certain ways, to being the target of your expressed disdain, that you may have the opportunity to make them feel socially diminished by a humorous, or truthful, or simply well-timed and confident sneer. Moreover, precisely in being a device that seeks to secure an outcome without providing any justification or reasons for it, in being a device that is suitable to manipulation and reasonable deniability, the well-constructed sneer can bypass mechanisms of social muffling that may be operative—the costly consequences and sanctions of overt complaint, for example. In so bypassing them, the sneer offers the possibility for warranted recalibrations, and because it operates through the manipulation of the affective states of the target and audience, it can slip through armour that might otherwise protect the target from warranted critique and diminution.

This is, of course, not to say that acts of this type will not often be ineffective. They can fail to bring down: the target may be thick-skinned, or their social standing so stable and resilient that they do not take even a temporary hit in the situation. But they may not fail: many of us are socially self-conscious beings sensitive to expressions of disdain or contempt by those before us—and are liable to be diminished by feeling diminished.¹⁵ Further, even if such an act does succeed in bringing down the target within the context at the time, it may fail to secure any longer-term correction; it may even rebound on the sneerer and make things worse. The point is only that an action that is aimed at diminishing, in the way characteristic of a sneering act, might be an action that does not warrant our criticism.

It is also worth saying that the point here is not supposed to be that sometimes the ends justify the (*prima facie* bad) means, or that a bad act can sometimes be excused. If you had punched your harasser, we might want to say those things. The point is, rather, that the type of thing that we do that we describe as sneering is an act type with a particular and distinctive critical and social goal, and that we have found no settled reasons to think that an action of that type cannot sometimes be apt.

Nor is there any claim to the effect that the viciousness of a sneer is in ratio to power in a social situation—that 'sneering up' is okay, and that 'sneering down' is not. The claim, again, is only that the

¹⁵ See O'Brien (2011) for a discussion of potentially uncomfortable forms of self-consciousness brought about by the evaluative attention of others. Thanks to Léa Salje reminding me to emphasize how local, situational and fleeting social standing can also be.

thing we do when we sneer is an act that offers a distinctive of form of critique and social correction, and we do not yet have a reason to think that it is always viciously deployed. Of course, acts of that type often—no doubt usually—warrant criticism, with 'noble hearts' unjustly brought to 'writhe' as a result of them. But equally, they occasionally effectively target those with malign, or merely careless, hearts liable to warranted diminution.

But, it may be said, what of the pleasure that can be taken by the sneerer, and their audiences? Suppose you grin with pleasure as you express your disdain of your harasser—although you are just as likely to grin with fear. Isn't pleasure taken in diminution of another always bad? Well, first, the social diminution inflicted on the target, in such a case, is not an injury of the kind we usually seek to proscribe—it is more akin to the injury of disappointment caused to the vendor asking for too much for their product by our refusing to buy. Second, the pleasure in such a case will often lie, not in the social diminution of the target per se, but rather in the truthfulness, ingenuity, timing or wit of the sneerer, and the satisfaction at the world being put aright—why might we not justifiably enjoy that? Recourse to an act of diminution through the deliberate expression of disdain or contempt, with the aim of making the target feel diminished, when it is one of the few ways of rectification available to someone in a context, does not always mark a vicious agent.

Indeed, once we consider such cases, broader questions come in to view of why we, especially we philosophers, tend to be so suspicious of social acts of making feel that are not grounded in the giving of arguments or reasons, and whether we are right to be. Considering those questions further is, obviously, a job for another occasion.¹⁶

However, if I am right the about the range of valences that properly attach to what we are doing when we sneer, we have an argument in favour of doing something other than criticizing when we represent someone carrying out acts of that kind. We certainly make a mistake in not identifying and understanding the power of the sneer—and other such acts of social pelting—to unjustly belittle, to promote prejudice, and to police unfairly. In identifying acts of sneering as social acts aimed at social change in a context via making people feel—via affection control—we have, I hope, brought into

¹⁶ Daniel Rothschild and Kirstine LaCour have, separately, made me think about the broader questions.

view a domain of human life that operates often in the dark with malign effects. However, we may equally underestimate our opportunities for benign social agency if we entirely abjure from doing what we do when we sneer. We will likely not—given the currently moralized character of the term—describe ourselves as doing quite that. It may be worth making room for a more neutral usage.¹⁷

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