

Manners and the Moral Life

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Abstract: I explore the place of manners in the moral life, particularly with regard to their role in virtue education and in expressing virtue. The approach developed here is Aristotelian and Confucian in character. I discuss three crucial functions of good manners: (1) they help social life to go well; (2) they often involve ways of showing respect or reverence for that which is respect-worthy or reverence-worthy; and (3) they ennoble our animal nature via an acquired second nature. In light of this account I also discuss how concerns about arbitrariness, oppressiveness, and dishonesty with respect to manners can be overcome.

*It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin' Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight.*¹

These are the words of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, and they are offered as an explanation for the rise of an extreme and violent form of moral anarchy that the reader witnesses in the novel. To many, this may seem like a surprising explanation. But the thought is nothing new. A very similar idea is expressed, e.g., in Confucius's *Analects* (2003 [c. 450 BC]), though the focus is on the effects of good manners: "The gentleman applies himself to the roots. 'Once the roots are firmly established, the Way [Dao] will grow.' Might we not say that filial piety [*xiao*] and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness [*Ren*]?" (1.2). At the heart of the Confucian "way" of life is the concept of *li*, which is often translated as "ritual" but where this can be understood to include traditional norms of propriety, or what we might simply call "good manners."

In this essay I will explore the place of manners in the moral life, particularly with regard to their role in virtue education and in expressing virtue and thus living well. The topic of

¹ McCarthy (2005), p. 304.

manners is largely neglected among moral philosophers and when manners are discussed they are often seen as a separate domain from morality, as arbitrary and potentially oppressive social conventions, and as involving a significant degree of dishonesty or inauthenticity.² I will seek to show how manners in fact have an integral role to play in the moral life (i.e., the life of virtue) and how the concerns about arbitrariness, oppressiveness, and dishonesty can be overcome.

Philosophical discussions about manners typically focus on their role in the social life of *adults*. However, to properly appreciate the integral role of manners in the moral life we need to first focus on how teaching good manners to *children* is a key way that we initiate them into the life of virtue. As this suggests, the approach developed here is strongly Aristotelian as well as Confucian in character, whereas recent philosophical defenses of manners (the few that there are) typically adopt a Kantian approach.³ According to my Aristotelian-*cum*-Confucian approach, teaching good manners (or *li*) is a form of *habituation* into virtue as manners are *patterns of behavior*, often informed by culture and tradition. Before teaching young people about moral principles and theories, we teach them – if we are to teach them well – to say “please,” “thank you,” “you’re welcome,” “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you,” and to act in ways that are kind, generous, fair, respectful, polite, and considerate. In short, we teach them patterns of behavior that will help lead to a life of virtue and thus a well-lived (i.e., fulfilled) life.

I want to discuss here three crucial functions of good manners for the moral life.

I. Helping Social Life to Go Well

² See Foot (2002), pp. 160–6 (*sans* the concern about oppression).

³ See Buss (1999); Calhoun (2000); Sherman (2005); and Stohr (2011). Stohr does appeal to an Aristotelian view of practical wisdom. See also Kristjánsson (2006), which is Aristotelian.

First, good manners *help social life to go well*, which, as a corollary, also means that good manners help social life not to go badly. This is clearly part of what we want for our children when we teach them to say “please,” “thank you,” “you’re welcome,” “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you,” and to act kindly, generously, fairly, respectfully, politely, and considerately.

Helping social life to go well is crucial for enabling one’s life as a whole to go well, since human beings are, as Aristotle says, by nature “political animals.”⁴ One thing this means is that we lack self-sufficiency for achieving our full potential. In *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), Alasdair MacIntyre expands on this point by showing how becoming “independent practical reasoners” capable of achieving the good life requires participating in a “network of relationships of giving and receiving” and cultivating and exercising the “virtues of acknowledged dependence,” which, as the name suggests, demand that we acknowledge and appropriately respond to the manifold ways that we depend upon others over the course of our lives to live and live well. These virtues enable and sustain the flourishing of networks of relationships of giving and receiving. Examples include: gratitude, generosity, hospitality, compassion/kindness, and forgiveness. In light of this account, it seems clear that teaching children manners such as saying “please,” “thank you,” “you’re welcome,” “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you,” and acting kindly, generously, fairly, respectfully, politely, and considerately helps to cultivate the virtues of acknowledged dependence and thereby enable and sustain the flourishing of networks of relationships of giving and receiving. Moreover, having acquired such virtues, exercising them will also often involve such manners.

Consider also a second sense of being a political (i.e., social) animal: viz., that relationships with others are a constitutive part of human fulfillment. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*

⁴ See Aristotle (1998 [c. 325 BC]), I.2, 1253a1–4.

(IX.4, 9), Aristotle says that the virtuous or “decent” person’s friend is regarded as “another self” such that she wishes and pursues good for the friend for the friend’s own sake and for her sake because she identifies with the friend’s good. We can achieve greater fulfillment through this identification and sharing of life than we can otherwise; but to achieve such fulfillment we need to be capable of this best sort of friendship, which requires that we become virtuous or at least “decent” (i.e., quasi-virtuous, since full virtue is a demanding ideal). In short, we must make ourselves *lovable*. The vicious person, by contrast, is not lovable in the required sense and so is incapable of such friendship.⁵ Aristotle says: “If, then, to be very much that way is wretched, we should be intensely active in avoiding depravity and in striving to be decent, since that way a person will be both fitted for friendship to himself and become friend to another” (2014 [c. 325 BC]), IX.4, 1167a24–9). We can see here another aspect of why it is important to teach children good manners so that social life goes well: the cultivation of good manners, by which we become virtuous (or decent), makes us loveable. This point is well put by Roger Scruton:

In teaching [children] manners, we are putting the finishing touches on potential members of society, adding the polish that makes them agreeable (Etymologically, “polite” and “polished” are connected [...]). From the very outset, therefore, we strive to smooth away selfishness. We teach children to be considerate by compelling them to behave in considerate ways. The unruly, bullying, or smart-aleck child is at a great

⁵ I affirm that there is a love of humanity that is appropriate due to the equal intrinsic dignity of humanity, but this is not the kind of loveliness at issue here.

disadvantage in the world, cut off from the lasting sources of human fulfillment. His mother may love him, but others will fear or dislike him. (2012, pp. 24–5)⁶

II. Showing Respect and Reverence

A second key function of good manners is that they often involve *ways of showing respect or reverence for that which is respect- or reverence-worthy*, which, as we'll see, can also reveal this respect- or reverence-worthiness. This can be connected to the previously mentioned function (helping social life to go well). However, we should show respect for what is respect-worthy (i.e., what has dignity) and reverence for what is reverence-worthy (i.e., what is sacred or holy) even if this does not aid our social life. Moreover, this function is important for cultivating and expressing virtues related to showing respect and reverence, such as justice (understood broadly as concerned with giving what's due), considerateness/courtesy, piety (which is concerned with a proper relationship in feeling and action to the reverence-worthy), humility, and gratitude.

According to Sarah Buss (1999), the main internal purpose of good manners consists in “appearing respectful” towards others. By “appearing” here she does not mean a mere outward show that is inwardly false. Rather, she believes that the (Kantian or Kantian-esque) moral requirement of respect for human beings (i.e., acknowledging their equal intrinsic dignity) requires not only that we do not trample on their rights and interests (i.e., use them as a mere means to our ends), but also that we engage in courteous behavior that is expressive of an

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the “virtue of agreeableness,” which includes Aristotle’s virtues of social intercourse (viz., friendliness, truthfulness, and wit), see Kristjánsson (2006).

attitude of respect and avoid rude behavior that expresses disrespect.⁷ For instance, saying “please” is a way of respecting someone’s dignity and acknowledging her autonomy in being able to choose whether to agree to our *request*, which is not the case if we were simply to *demand* something. In this context saying “thank you” also becomes appropriate because it gratefully acknowledges that someone has freely done a good deed for us.⁸

One of Buss’s key insights pertains to how courteous behavior is important not only for showing proper respect for others, but also for *forming* our sense of human respect-worthiness. Drawing on Cora Diamond’s work (1978), she writes:

[Our] conventions of courtesy influence our assumptions about the moral status of human beings. The countless little rituals we enact to show one another consideration are [...] the means whereby we “build our notion of human beings.” They are “the ways in which we mark what human life is,” and, as such, they “belong to the source of moral life.” [...] Good manners [...] not only inspire good morals. They do so by constructing a conception of human beings as objects of moral concern. To learn that human beings are the sort of animal to whom one must say “please,” “thank you,” “excuse me,” and “good morning,” that one ought not to interrupt them when they are speaking, that one ought not to avoid eye contact and yet ought not to stare, [...] to learn all this and much more is to learn that human beings deserve to be treated with respect, that they are respectworthy, that is, that they have a dignity not shared by those whom one does not bother to treat

⁷ While my approach is Aristotelian, I accept this Kantian-esque function of good manners, though I understand it more in Confucian terms and will seek to expand the range of what is seen as respect- or reverence-worthy.

⁸ See Buss (1999), p. 802 and Stohr (2011), pp. 27–9.

with such deference and care. (pp. 800–1)

In order to avoid the moral constructivist or non-realist impression that might be given by these remarks about “constructing a conception of human beings as objects of moral concern” – which if endorsed would undermine the moral phenomenology of respect-*worthiness* at issue – I think we should say that these manners (or “little rituals”) and the conception of human beings they help to “construct” or “build up” enable us to *see* and *experience* what human beings *really are*, i.e., respect-worthy, and thus that they are *fittingly* treated and regarded in these ways. In other words, these manners are *revelatory*; they enable a *transfigured* or *regestalted* vision whereby the equal inherent respect-worthiness of all human beings can come into view. This is a revelation that depends upon *enactment* of this respect-worthiness through manners in that we only come to fully grasp the significance at issue through living it out.⁹

Buss’s remarks in the above passage are the most direct comments she makes about the importance of manners for moral education, though she doesn’t explore this in much detail. I think these remarks in fact connect up with and lend support for the truth of the epigraph to this essay, where the rise of moral anarchy is explained in terms of overlooking “bad manners”: “Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight.” The idea here is that if young people do not practice courteous behavior, then they will fail to build up a conception of human beings as inherently worthy of equal respect such that they set limits upon one’s will. Failing this, “anything goes.” Or it also might be that bad manners don’t lead to complete moral anarchy but to bad morality: e.g., we might think of a community with racist norms in which only one’s own race is treated with deference and care, while other races are treated with disrespect. Instead of building up a conception of human beings as inherently worthy of equal respect, here one

⁹ On enacted meaning, see Taylor (2016), pp. 42–7.

builds up a conception of human beings that *blinds* one from seeing and experiencing the equal inherent dignity of humanity. Thus, a lot depends upon being brought up with *good* manners (i.e., those that enable us to see and appropriately respond to moral reality), rather than bad ones (i.e., those that blind us from moral reality); and if we happen to be brought up in manners that are to some degree bad, then it is important that we are able to reform these bad manners and acquire good ones (I will return to discuss these matters further in the last section).

While Buss's account in the above passage makes some crucial points, I think we need to go beyond it and see that manners can express not only respect (for what has dignity), but also reverence (for what is sacred or holy). Moreover, the sense of respect or reverence that manners can express is directed not only towards the equal inherent dignity or sanctity of humanity; it can also be directed towards the specific achievements or good deeds or role of others. Further, it is not always directed towards human beings. We can see how all of this is so by looking in more detail at the role of teaching manners in the process of moral education.

The first context in which children learn to show respect and reverence is of course the home. Although saying "Sir" and "Ma'am" may not be necessary with regard to one's parents – indeed it is perhaps inappropriate insofar it conveys an emotional distance – it is still important that children learn appropriate ways of honoring their mother and father and thereby acquire the virtue of filial piety.¹⁰ The respect or reverence owed to parents here does not primarily have to do with their intrinsic dignity: it is owed in virtue of what they have given and will give. First of all, parents give the gift of life (which is often seen as something sacred or profoundly precious). The "gift" here does not have to be intentional, though it may be. The point is that one's parents

¹⁰ For an illuminating and moving discussion of the commandment (in the Ten Commandments) to honor one's mother and father, see Robinson (2004), pp. 134–9.

are the source of one's existence, and if such existence is regarded as having great value (and hence as a gift), then filial piety and gratitude are appropriate (something similar could be said about other sources of one's existence). Secondly, parents – when acting as they should – give life-sustaining care and provide education that enables a child to move towards realizing what is most admirable in her human potential and thereby achieving her good. Here filial piety and gratitude are again appropriate. In this context filial piety or respect for parents is also important because it enables a needed kind of humility: viz., “docility,” understood as being *teachable*, including with regard to good manners and the virtues. Here we see the truth in Confucius's rhetorical question: “Might we not say that filial piety [*xiao*] and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness [*Ren*]?” The child needs to begin by trusting the parent to lead her in the way (*dao*) of truth and goodness. It is possible that this trust will turn out to be misplaced, as unfortunately there are bad parents. But this is something a child cannot fully know until later on, and she will still need a parent-surrogate who can provide the sort of education required for best realizing her good. In short, filial piety and trust of parents or parent-surrogates are necessary for acquiring and exercising all of the virtues.

As part of teaching virtue, good parents will teach their children manners that express respect or reverence not only for all human beings in virtue of their intrinsic dignity but also for teachers, elders, ancestors, traditions, customs, community, sexuality, life, death, etc. It is in regard to teachers and elders where saying “Sir” or “Ma'am,” “Mr.” or “Ms.,” “Dr.,” and other honorific titles are particularly appropriate. This can communicate respect for teachers and elders in virtue of the good things they have to offer as well as openness to instruction. Filial piety can in fact be understood in an expanded sense to include respect or reverence not only for parents but also for teachers, elders, ancestors, traditions, and the community and its laws and customs.

Each of these can rightly be seen to have a parent-like role in guiding us towards the realization of our good, and thus respect or reverence is owed to them along with an appropriate openness to instruction (as we'll see later, this is compatible with criticism, especially as one matures).

In the case of elders, there is also a reverence owed to human life itself as embodied in the lifespan, and something similar can be said for ancestors. The proper reverence for human life is in fact expressed in many forms of good manners. For instance, certain reverent behavior is expected at funerals. Something is similarly true with regard to rituals welcoming and honoring new life, such as baptism, and likewise with regard to wedding ceremonies, though here reverence is due to the sacred or profound nature of human sexuality and the bond of erotic love ("holy matrimony"), as well as to the possibility of new life resulting from it. In general, *sacred things* – i.e., that which is reverence-worthy and "set apart" – require certain *reverent manners*, and *dignified things* require *respectful manners*.

The rites of passage mentioned in the preceding paragraph recall Buss's remarks about the "countless little rituals" whereby we build up our conception of human respect-worthiness. But, as we've seen, these rituals are not necessarily "little" and they can express respect or reverence not only for particular human beings but also for life, death, sexuality, tradition, custom, etc. We should also recall here the Confucian concept of *li*. Although *li* has its root meaning in religious ritual (or "sacred ceremony"), Herbert Fingarette points out that Confucius uses "the language and imagery of *li* as a medium within which to talk about the entire body of *mores*, or more precisely, of the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society," which are important for cultivating and expressing virtue (1972, pp. 6–7). So "manners" and "*li*" (ritual) can be used interchangeably. Good manners or *li*, I am also suggesting, go to build up a sense of human beings and other features of our world as respect-worthy or reverence-worthy.

Indeed, Confucius's use of the language and imagery of religious ritual to understand traditional manners is intended to enable us to see everyday life as imbued with profound dignity and sanctity: "The image of the Holy Rite as a metaphor of human existence brings foremost to our attention the dimension of the holy in man's existence" (p. 16).

A main lesson to be drawn from the foregoing is that if we throw off all customary manners or rituals, then we do so at our moral and spiritual peril. The person who discards all social conventions does not in fact see most clearly but instead becomes blind to the reality of that which is respect-worthy and reverence-worthy and so invites moral nihilism.¹¹ The "countless little [and big] rituals" in human life are not mere add-ons to the way the world is, but provide the lens through which a more profound reality can come into view.

III. Ennoblement

The third and final key function of good manners that I want to discuss – which is at the heart of my Aristotelian-*cum*-Confucian approach – is that they *ennoble our animal nature via an acquired second nature*.

By "second nature" I mean the abilities and dispositions (e.g., language, rationality, morality, spirituality, etc.) that we come to possess through education, broadly construed to include all those aspects of self-formation that are part of our upbringing within a particular tradition-informed cultural life.¹² As human beings we have a "first nature" (i.e., native) capacity

¹¹ Another Southern (U.S.) writer – besides Cormac McCarthy – who depicts this point well is Flannery O'Connor; see her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* and her short story "Good Country People."

¹² See McDowell (1994), Lectures IV–VI.

for acquiring a “second nature” that sets us apart from non-human animals by making possible the ennobling (or elevating) of our animal nature through virtue. However, our second nature can also lead us to become the worst of all animals. Aristotle writes: “For as a human being is the best of the animals when perfected, so when separated from law and justice he is worst of all. [...] Hence he is the most unrestrained and most savage of animals when he lacks virtue, as well as the worst where food and sex are concerned” (1998 [c. 325 BC], I.2, 1253a32–7). Leon Kass comments on this passage in *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (1999):

Man’s rationality lies behind his potential savagery, no less than his excellence, because it lies behind his broad, open, and undetermined appetites. [...] The capacity to think almost everything makes possible the capacity to do almost everything, by means of the desire to appropriate or control whatever is alien. [...] If he is not to become the worst of the animals, he must be restrained by law and justice. And if he is to become the best of animals, he must be perfected by rearing in customs that bring out and complete what is best in his nature. (pp. 92–3, 98)

We should add that our “broad, open, and undetermined appetites” also – because of the way our rationality is connected to our conceptual abilities – allow us to find significance in both virtue and vice, where the latter includes finding significance in certain “dark” things, such as cruelty, revenge, humiliation, domination, and so on.¹³

So in order to avoid these problematic aspects of our humanity we must be restrained by justice, including just laws, and if we are to become the “best of animals,” we must, as Kass puts it, “be perfected by rearing in customs that bring out and complete what is best in [our] nature.”

¹³ On “dark significances,” see Morgan (2003). Morgan writes: “what leads human beings to treat each other worst is not so much our animality as our humanity” (p. 386).

Key to “rearing in customs” is teaching good manners, i.e., patterns of behavior, which habituate us in virtue and give a taste for the noble.¹⁴ On an Aristotelian account we become virtuous by repeatedly doing virtuous actions: e.g., we become just by doing just actions, courteous by doing courteous actions, pious by doing pious actions, and so on, and the sign that we are acquiring the virtue in each case is that these actions begin to come “naturally” (as part of our second nature) and we have a sense of fulfillment in performing these actions for their own sake as inherently noble and worthwhile activities, and we would feel ashamed if we did not perform these actions in appropriate situations. Of course, we also become vicious by repeatedly doing vicious actions, such as acting unjustly, inconsiderately, and so on. Thus, Aristotle remarks: “it makes no small difference whether people are habituated in one way or in another way straight from childhood; on the contrary, it makes [...] *all* the difference” (2014 [c. 325 BC], II.1, 1103b23–5). Earlier he says: “A nobly brought up person, then, either has the starting-points or can easily get hold of them” (2014 [c. 325 BC], I.4, 1095b7–8). And here I am suggesting that teaching good manners – e.g., saying “please,” “thank you,” “you’re welcome,” “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you,” and acting kindly, generously, fairly, considerately, respectfully, reverently, etc. – provide crucial “starting-points” for cultivating and expressing the virtues (e.g., justice, courtesy, generosity, kindness, piety, gratitude, etc.¹⁵) and thereby ennobling our humanity.

Herbert Fingarette writes: “Men become truly human as their raw impulse is shaped by *li*. And *li* is the fulfillment of human impulse, the civilized expression of it—not a formalistic dehumanization” (1972, p. 7). Or as the proverbial saying goes: “Manners maketh man.” Indeed,

¹⁴ See Aristotle (2014 [c. 325 BC]), X.9, 1179b3–35.

¹⁵ Obviously Aristotle himself does not emphasize all of these virtues, but when we attend to the role of manners in the moral life I believe we can see their importance.

practicing good manners is often seen as part of the “civilizing process,” where there is an ideal of “civility,” which contrasts with being barbarous, bestial, crude, etc.¹⁶ This ideal of civility (or “politeness,” which is the Greek-derived cognate of the Latin-derived “civility”) in fact captures well Aristotle idea that it is only in the *polis* (or *civitas*) with just laws and where virtue is cultivated that we can realize what is noblest in our humanity and thereby become the “best of animals” and achieve our good.

In order to see better how practicing good manners can ennoble our animal nature we should consider two basic desires that we share with other animals but which can be transformed in light of human meanings: the desire for food and sexual desire. As Aristotle says in the above passage, human beings are “the most unrestrained and most savage of animals when [they lack] virtue, as well as *the worst where food and sex are concerned*.”

In *The Hungry Soul*, Kass seeks to show how we can eat in a way that actually contributes to the “perfecting of our nature.” He discusses how certain customs with regard to eating help to tame our human omnivorousness (which is representative of our “broad, open, and undetermined appetites”) and transform animal feeding into distinctively human eating. Some of these customs are concerned with what is *just* in the realm of eating: e.g., the taboo against cannibalism; restraints on inhumane treatment of non-human animals used for food; and rightful expectations of hospitality. Other customs are concerned with what is *noble* in human eating, i.e., with bringing out and expressing what is most admirable in our humanity in this context. For instance, we eat around a table (or a similar surface) with others in order to foster conversation, family life, friendship, and refinement. Moreover, there are basic *table manners* – e.g., sitting upright; using utensils; being neat; acting temperately in not overeating or eating too fast or

¹⁶ See Kass (1999), pp. 131–2; Elias (1978).

otherwise being enslaved to animal appetite; avoiding rude behavior such as burping, chewing with one's mouth open, talking with food in one's mouth, etc. – and the purpose of these manners is to foster human communion around a meal, avoid putting off one's fellow diners, and ennoble, dignify, and beautify our animal necessity and give expression to virtues such as temperance, generosity, good taste, tact, grace, and gratitude.

Such “civilized” eating enables the possibility of higher modes of human experience found in fine dining and feasting. While both are ennobled forms of eating, feasting also involves the “sanctification of eating,” where the custom of saying a prayer or blessing over the meal is especially important (though it is arguably important in all human eating). Here, in an activity rooted in our animal necessity, we reach the heights of human self-consciousness as feasting involves a celebration of our place within the larger whole. Kass adds: “one can speak also about piety and reverence, and the human impulse toward transcendence, beginning in awe and fear and, sometimes encouraged by wine, moving through feelings of gratitude and songs of praise in the direction of encountering the divine” (p. 163).¹⁷ In short, when “the hungry soul” comes to the table she desires not only bodily nourishment but also spiritual nourishment: the hungry soul yearns for beauty, nobility, conviviality, and even sanctity.

If we turn to consider sexual desire, we see how a similar transformation can occur through “rearing in customs that bring out and complete what is best in [our] nature.” Like human omnivorousness, human sexual desire can also be seen as representative of our troublesome “broad, open, and undetermined appetites.” In order to ennoble and thereby humanize sexual desire, we must transform mere *lust* (which is common in animal life) into *erotic love* (which is distinctively human), which, at its best, can be one of the highest modes of

¹⁷ See also Kass's discussion of Isak Dinesen's “Babette's Feast,” esp. at pp. 188–9.

human experience, and where the categories of the noble and the sacred also find expression.

And this again will require good manners that cultivate and express virtues in the sexual domain, such as chastity (i.e., right intention in sexual desire), fidelity (which is often connected to marital vows), modesty, and erotic love itself. These manners have traditionally fallen under the ideals of *gentlemanliness* and *ladylikeness*, as seen, e.g., in Jane Austen's novels,¹⁸ and in the following lines from W.B. Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter":

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.¹⁹

Yeats in fact gives poetic expression not only to the morally and spiritually elevating function of custom and ceremony (or *li*), but also to the potential for moral anarchy when these are neglected, as seen in the famous lines from "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

¹⁸ See also Percy (1960), esp. at pp. 222–6.

¹⁹ I thank Sophie Grace Chappell for calling this poem to my attention.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

To recall again the epigraph: “It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners.”

IV. Responding to Objections

I want to conclude by responding to the three objections to manners that were mentioned at the outset: viz., that manners are (1) arbitrary and (2) potentially oppressive social conventions; and that they also (3) involve dishonesty or inauthenticity.

I begin with the last since my response is shorter. It is true that manners can be practiced as a mere outward show and in a way that conceals one’s real feelings: e.g., one may “appear respectful” towards others but in fact feel only contempt. However, there is nothing dishonest or inauthentic about manners – e.g., saying “please” and “thank you” and acting in ways that are kind and respectful – when they are practiced with the right intention: viz., when they express virtue or when they are practiced with the aim of cultivating virtue, which requires that one comes not only to act appropriately but also to feel appropriately as a matter of character.²⁰

So what about the charges that manners are arbitrary and potentially oppressive social conventions? The idea here is that manners are merely relative to particular social groups, and perhaps are defined by class interests (i.e., they are a “bourgeoisie” concern), and thus they do not have any legitimate justification. Even if there is some justification, there can be a concern that the ennobling function of good manners brings with it a kind of elitism or classism that can

²⁰ There is also the particular issue of whether we should engage in “polite lies” in certain circumstances. I cannot explore this issue for reasons of space, but see Stohr (2011), ch. 5. I will only say here that I don’t think all manners are forms of “polite lies.”

be harmful and end up undermining a sense of the equal inherent dignity of humanity (thereby putting the second and third functions of good manners in conflict). This worry might especially arise in the contrast above between civility and barbarism.

In response, it should be said that the display of a “holier-than-thou” attitude is itself bad manners. Indeed, I contend that – in light of what has been said about good manners building up a conception of human beings as worthy of equal respect – any adequate ideal of civility would have to include the demand for equal respect for humanity. Thus, elitism that prevents one from recognizing this equal dignity would be lacking in genuine civility. While in some cases it might be appropriate to describe certain behavior and attitudes as barbarous, this should always be combined with an affirmation of the equal intrinsic dignity of the human being behind the behavior or attitude, who just fails to live up to what is most admirable in our humanity.

In regard to the charge of arbitrariness, I have tried to show the integral role of good manners in cultivating and expressing virtue and thereby achieving human fulfillment, and if manners indeed have this role then it seems that this charge can be overcome. Moreover, the fact that we distinguish between “good manners” and “bad manners” suggests that there is a way of “getting it right.” Of course, the exact specifics of manners (e.g., of table manners) are often culturally variable, but the idea here is that they have a general point that is applicable to all human beings insofar as they promote human fulfillment. However, the account that I have given depends upon a particular understanding of the virtues and human fulfillment, and so the whole picture is open to being contested. One might also disagree with some details of this picture while leaving intact the general claim about the integral role of good manners in the life of virtue. But some such account of manners, virtues, and human fulfillment must be seen as rationally defensible to avoid the arbitrariness charge. How might this be done?

It can only be done in light of an upbringing within the ethical outlook of a particular tradition-informed cultural life through habituation in the virtues, which I have suggested first involves being taught good manners. Wherever we find ourselves, the needed sort of upbringing will be provided first by parents and then often also by other family members and teachers and by the laws and customs of the larger community. This social situatedness provides us with our moral “starting-points,” but this does not mean that a particular acquired ethical outlook is to be uncritically accepted. Here we have what John McDowell (1994) calls a “Neurathian” predicament. Drawing on the metaphor of Neurath’s ship, which has to be rebuilt while at sea, he writes: “[One] can reflect only from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about. So if one entertains the thought that bringing one’s current ethical outlook to bear on a situation alerts one to demands that are real, one need not be envisaging any sort of validation other than a Neurathian one. The thought is that this application of one’s ethical outlook would stand up to the outlook’s own reflective self-scrutiny” (p. 81; cf. pp. 125–6).

We must begin by learning from “the best which has been thought and said” (Arnold 2006 [1869], p. 5) and from the best moral and spiritual exemplars in our culture. However, this is not the end of the story: while we begin from a certain passivity, as we learn and mature we become active participants in our tradition-informed cultural life – as a “living tradition” – and we may come to criticize and seek to reform parts of this inherited form of life that seem defective: e.g., when certain of our manners serve to blind us to the equal intrinsic dignity of humanity rather than reveal this to us, or when they serve to cultivate vice rather than virtue. The critical (Neurathian) test for any such form of life is whether it can coherently be seen – by our best lights when we are engaged within that form of life – as best revealing our ethical demands and enabling us to live well. What we cannot do is completely throw off all tradition and culture

since these provide the lens by which ethical demands come into view in the first place and by which we can live well.²¹ As Flannery O'Connor puts it: "Somewhere is better than anywhere. And traditional manners, however unbalanced, are better than no manners at all" (1988 [1963], p. 856). In short: manners are the *sine qua non* of the moral life.²²

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²¹ For more on this theme, see McPherson (2017).

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