

Principles, Virtues, or Detachment? Some Appreciative Reflections on Karen Stohr's *On Manners*

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Abstract Karen Stohr's book *On Manners* argues persuasively that rules of etiquette, though conventional, play an essential moral role, because they “serve as vehicles through which we express important moral values like respect and consideration for the needs, ideas, and opinions of others” (Stohr 2012: 3–4). Stohr frequently invokes Kantian concepts and principles in order to make her point. In Part 2 of this essay, I shall argue that the significance of etiquette is better understood using a virtue ethics framework, like that of Confucianism, rather than the language of Kantianism. Within the Chinese tradition, Daoists have frequently been critics of Confucian ritualism. Consequently, in Part 3, I shall consider some possible Daoist critiques of Stohr's work.

Keywords Confucianism · Daoism · Etiquette · Kant · Ritual · Rites

It is thus in the medium of ceremony that the peculiarly human part of our life is lived.

—Fingarette, *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred*

1 Introduction

Professor Karen Stohr's *On Manners* is a delightful book. It is, most importantly, philosophically interesting, original, and insightful. In addition, Professor Stohr has achieved something that I aspire to, but generally fail to realize: she skillfully integrates

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learned references to classic texts (including the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Jane Austen, and Edith Wharton) with pop culture references (including *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Miss Manners*, and Martha Stewart). She does all this with a writing style that is clear, elegant, and often quite pithy. Many phrases from this book could become aphorisms. Another aphorist, Ashleigh Brilliant, once quipped, “Philosophers never agree on anything. That is the one thing on which all philosophers agree.” This is not quite true. I found myself agreeing with a great many things that Professor Stohr said. However, admiration for a work of philosophy is best expressed in thoughtful critique, rather than in panegyric.

The fundamental claim of Professor Stohr’s book is that

... rules of polite behavior are justified by their basis in commonly held moral principles and ideals, and ... they play an essential role in enabling us to act on those principles and ideals. Social conventions ... serve as vehicles through which we express important moral values like respect and consideration for the needs, ideas, and opinions of others. (Stohr 2012: 3–4)

Another way she puts this point is through the distinction between “manners” and “etiquette”:

... the principles of manners are moral principles, and specific rules of etiquette get their authority from their relationship to those moral principles. ... [Rules of etiquette] are binding insofar as they are the established vehicle through which we express the important moral aims and goals reflected in the principles of manners. (Stohr 2012: 23–24)

Given this thesis, it is unfortunate that there are no references to Confucianism in the book. Confucians have philosophically sophisticated things to say about etiquette, which they treat (like Professor Stohr) as an aspect of ethics. In fact, Neo-Confucian philosophers describe something almost identical to the relationship between manners and etiquette: they claim that the underlying moral Pattern (*li* 理) of the universe is expressed through particular manifestations of etiquette or ritual (see Tiwald and Van Norden 2014: 121). A classic discussion of “ritual” (*li* 禮), as Confucians call it, can be found in *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* (Fingarette 1972). Fingarette is in the grip of an unfortunate behaviorism (more in the spirit of Gilbert Ryle than B. F. Skinner, thank goodness), but nonetheless he says much that is interesting and helpful on this topic.¹ Ritual is also addressed in many recent books that take a virtue ethics approach to Confucianism.² This leads me to the first

¹ For a critique of Fingarette’s more extreme views, see Schwartz 1985: 67–75. Other very valuable studies of ritual in Confucianism include Radcliffe-Brown 1965 and Shun 2002.

² Virtue ethics approaches to Confucianism first gained importance with Yearley 1990 (see his discussion of “propriety,” pp. 41–46). Recent applications of this approach include Angle 2012; Sim 2007; Tang 2012; Van Norden 2007 (see especially pp. 101–112), and Yu 2007 (see especially the discussion of “social rites” on pp. 96–102). Much ink has been spilled about whether this methodology is appropriate to the study of Confucianism. Here I shall simply suggest that the opposition to using virtue ethics to better understand Confucianism is often rooted in the mistaken assumption that “virtue ethics” is shorthand for “Aristotle’s ethical views.” In reality, virtue ethics is a family of often quite distinct ethical views that emphasizes the cultivation of dispositions to respond flexibly to complex and fluid situations. The value of the virtue ethics approach to Confucianism is that it allows us to explore the similarities *and* differences among such views.

of my two major lines of critique. In Part 2 of this essay, I shall argue that the significance of manners and etiquette is better understood using a virtue ethics framework, like that of Confucianism, rather than the language of Kantianism that Stohr often invokes. Within the Chinese tradition, Daoists have frequently been critics of Confucian ritualism. Consequently, in Part 3, I shall consider some possible Daoist critiques of Stohr's work. I am largely playing devil's advocate in the third part of this essay, because I am personally more sympathetic to Confucianism than to Daoism. However, Daoism is undeniably a profound and important philosophical and religious tradition, so it is worth taking seriously.

2 Virtue Ethics Critique

In Part 2 of this essay, I shall (1) sketch the fundamentally different intuitions that motivate Kantianism and virtue ethics, (2) use one of Professor Stohr's own examples to illustrate why exploring someone's character often seems more illuminating than focusing on the morality of individual actions, (3) use another of her examples to illustrate the differences between Confucian and Kantian views of practical reasoning, and (4) contrast Confucian and Kantian accounts of what is problematic about flaunting one's vices.

2.1 Kant versus Virtue Ethics

In explaining the significance of manners and etiquette, Professor Stohr draws freely on the resources provided by the philosophies of Aristotle, Kant, and Hume. She writes,

Taken by themselves, these moral theories are deeply incompatible in very important ways. I am mostly going to ignore those incompatibilities, on the grounds that seeing what makes philosophical theories distinct from each other is not particularly important to my project here. (Stohr 2012: 27)

On the one hand, I was impressed with her willingness to follow her intuitions where they led her, regardless of what philosophical label they are conventionally associated with. However, I continued to have a concern that there was a problematic tension between these approaches that she had not fully faced. Specifically, it seems to me that following a virtue ethics approach does a better job of handling our intuitions about manners and etiquette. I realize that Kant does discuss the virtues, and there have been efforts, some of them quite thoughtful, to reconcile Kantianism and Aristotelianism (see O'Neill 1989; Sherman 1997; Loudon 1997; and Korsgaard 1998, among others). However, I have never been satisfied that these accounts do justice to the fundamental intuitions that lead one to be an Aristotelian or a Kantian.³ Allow me to present an admittedly oversimplified account of the distinction.

³ There are, as Professor Stohr illustrates, parts of Kant that sound very much like Aristotle. My concern is that when Kant sounds like Aristotle he does not sound like Kant anymore. In other words, the distinctive aspects of Kant's moral philosophy seem lost at precisely those points where his own common sense pulls him back toward Aristotelian intuitions.

Kantianism, I believe, is motivated by the intuition that there is a clear line between the moral and the immoral, and that any normal human is capable of living morally. This intuition is connected to three commitments of Kantian ethics. First, morality can be clearly expressed in precise, generalized rules (“do not murder,” “do not steal,” “do not lie,” etc.). There can, of course, be “quandary cases,” like the runaway trolley examples much beloved of contemporary analytic ethicists. However, I think it is central to Kantian intuitions that everyday morality seldom involves genuine quandaries. In addition, as Professor Stohr notes, we have “imperfect duties,” which do not specify or forbid specific actions. However, once again, Kant does not seem to see the demands of imperfect duties as generating any especially troubling quandaries. Second, Kantianism requires that we follow the moral rules out of the right motive, but this motive is the intention to act in accordance with the moral rules qua moral rules. As rational beings, all humans are capable of acting in accordance with moral rules qua moral rules. This leads us to a third feature of Kantianism: we cannot, according to Kant, fault someone for having or failing to have emotions, since these are not within our control. (“Ought implies can,” as the slogan goes.) This leaves us with a picture in which there is a clear line between the moral and immoral, and any normal human can stay on the moral side of the line.

Virtue ethics (like Aristotelianism or Confucianism) is motivated by a very different intuition: ethics is about living the best way of life, and it is a matter of degree how well each of us does, or fails to do, this. This leads virtue ethicists to deny the other commitments of Kantianism. While Aristotelians and Confucians certainly agree that we should not cheat others out of their money or kill the innocent to achieve our goals, they also hold that much of what is most important about living well goes beyond these basic requirements of morality. Confucianism, in particular, is an “ethics of aspiration.” We must always aspire to be better than we are. Indeed, Confucians condemn those whom they call the “village worthies.” “Village worthies” are those who violate no moral prohibitions, but do not aspire to be ethically better. (Trying to be a better person here is not simply a matter of developing one’s “talents,” as required by one of Kant’s imperfect duties.) Confucius himself even says he would rather have as disciples those who are occasionally hypocritical than “village worthies,” because at least the former have high aspirations for themselves, even though they sometimes fail to live up to them (*Analects* 17.13, *Mengzi* 7B37 [translation mine], and see the helpful discussion in Yearley 1990: 67–72). Aristotelians and Confucians also reject the Kantian faith in general moral rules because they believe that living well often requires a flexible responsiveness to complex situations that cannot be fully codified in advance. Aristotle suggests we must use a “flexible ruler” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5, Chapter 10 [translation mine]) to measure things, while Confucians contrast the “standard” and “discretionary” (see *Mengzi* 4A17 and Wei 1986). Finally, Aristotelians and Confucians hold that a good person should have certain feelings or emotions. It is not enough, according to Confucianism, that I treat my parents well because of a commitment to the obligation I have incurred from their raising me. I must *feel* respect for them. What if I currently do not feel such respect? Then I must cultivate this feeling. This will take time and effort, which is why becoming a good person is a matter of degree and a lifelong process.

2.2 The Primacy of Character

Let us see how the distinction between Kantianism and virtue ethics applies to Professor Stohr's favorite pop-culture example:

In an episode of the hit television sitcom *Seinfeld*, the socially inept George Costanza starts an argument with Elaine and Jerry about their plan to bring a gift to their friends' dinner party. George begins by questioning the need to bring anything at all, and then makes a case for taking Pepsi and Ring Dings instead of wine and chocolate babka, as Elaine proposes. Elaine and Jerry insist that they have to bring something, but that it most definitely can't be Pepsi and Ring Dings. ... acquiring wine and chocolate babka proves to be a hugely difficult and time-consuming undertaking. By the time they get to the dinner party, it is late and they are too tired and grumpy to attend the party. When the hostess answers the door, they shove the wine and babka at her and go home. (Stohr 2012: 1–2)

What is wrong with Jerry, Elaine, and George? On a Kantian view, we would have to say that they have done something immoral. This seems both too strong and too weak. It is too strong, because the language of "moral" and "immoral" is a bit heavy-handed for chocolate babka. Professor Stohr acknowledges this difficulty, but suggests that some moral demands are simply very important (like not murdering) while others are less so (like being a gracious guest) (Stohr 2012: 5). However, this reveals what is "too weak" about the Kantian account in this case. Is the *only* thing wrong with Jerry, Elaine, and George that they fail (in this particular case) to be gracious guests? The Confucian view would be that their actions are merely symptoms of the fact that they lead lives that are *shallow*. George says of Jerry in one episode: "His whole life revolves around Superman and cereal" (Melhman 1993). George is right, but his own life is even more vapid. On hearing that a famous baseball player is a "Civil War buff," George comments, "I'd love to be a Civil War buff. What do you have to do to be a buff?" Jerry replies, "Well, sleeping less than 18 h a day would be a start." George laughs sarcastically, but does not deny the accusation that he lacks motivation and focus—and he never makes any effort to become a "buff" about anything (David and Levin 1992). If George, Jerry, and Elaine were real humans, they would deserve our contempt or our pity for having desultory lives, not merely our judgment that, on this or that occasion, they failed in a minor moral obligation.

Consider another fictional example: "Dr. Gregory House." An intriguing irony of the character of House is that his motto is "Everybody lies," yet one of his greatest strengths is that he bluntly tells people truths that they do not want to face. It is tempting to say that House, and people like him, pose no special problem for a Kantian account. House is simply an immoral person from a Kantian perspective, and that is all there is to it. House often manipulates others, and this is a paradigmatic violation of the Kantian demand that we treat others as ends in themselves. When House is being bluntly honest, a Kantian would point out that we are not required to offer unsolicited truths, and we are obligated to avoid telling the truth in a manner that is pointlessly hurtful.⁴

⁴ House's paternalistic treatment of his patients (see Wicclair 2008) is a clear violation of the Kantian demand that we respect others as free, rational agents. For a utilitarian reading of House, see Sartin 2008.

Once again, though, it feels as if the Kantian account leaves out something important. House has many traits that make him a talented and resourceful doctor, as well as a valuable friend. This is why it is plausible that he inspires loyalty and even love among his colleagues. Being manipulative *and* bluntly honest is central to the complexity of who House is as a person, just as being loyal *and* kind is central to the complexity of who his friend “Wilson” is as a person.⁵ Each type has strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes a person needs to hear an unpleasant truth, and only someone who is painfully blunt can tell him or her. One is reminded of the Confucian Mengzi’s 孟子 comments on the contrasting styles of the sages Bo Yi 伯夷 and LIUXIA Hui 柳下惠: “Bo Yi’s eyes would not look upon evil sights, and his ears would not listen to evil sounds”; in contrast, “LIUXIA Hui was not ashamed of a corrupt lord and did not consider unworthy a petty office” (*Mengzi* 5B1; Van Norden 2008: 132–133). Mengzi stated that “when they hear of the style of Bo Yi, the unperceptive develop discretion, and the weak develop resolution. And when they hear of the style of LIUXIA Hui, the stingy become generous, and the narrow become tolerant” (*Mengzi* 7B15; Van Norden 2008: 188). Thinking about individuals in terms of which moral rules they do or do not violate encourages us to ignore these complexities of character, while a Confucian approach encourages us to explore them.

2.3 Practical Reasoning

Professor Stohr often makes use of Aristotle. I found her discussion of Aristotelian practical wisdom in particular excellent. As she notes, “It takes practical wisdom to have good manners because behaving politely is far more complicated than simply following a list of etiquette rules in a book somewhere” (Stohr 2012: 27). (Of course, Aristotelian practical wisdom has important similarities with Confucian wisdom.) So perhaps I am unfairly saddling her with a strict Kantianism that she actually has no taste for. However, she does sometimes invoke Kant, and when she does it seemed to me to either be the case that there was nothing particularly Kantian about her use of Kant, or the use of Kant raised problems that could be easily avoided. For example, in explaining what is wrong with someone cutting in line at Starbucks, Professor Stohr invokes the “humanity formulation” of Kant’s categorical imperative: “Rational agents are ends in themselves, never to be used as a mere means to someone else’s plans or projects” (Stohr 2012: 10). Stohr suggest that someone who cuts in line at Starbucks is failing to treat others as ends in themselves, whose goals and projects are no more or less important than his own: “He is an equal member of a community of rational agents, but he is not superior to anyone in it, nor can his belief that he is superior withstand rational scrutiny” (Stohr 2012: 13).

Something about this sounds right (which is why Kant is a great philosopher whom we take seriously). However, consider how Confucius himself would describe it. One of his most famous aphorisms is: “Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” (*Analects* 15.24; Slingerland 2003: 183). You would not want someone else to cut in front of you in line, so you should not do it to others. If I ask Confucius why I should not impose upon others what I myself do not desire, I suspect that he would say that it is because we are all human beings. (As Confucius’ disciple Zixia 子夏 said,

⁵ This point is made by Battaly and Coplan 2008.

“Within the four seas, all are brothers” [*Analects* 12.5; translation mine].) This is close to what Kant says; however, notice that we get the same ethical conclusion, but without the need for a theory that invokes rational agency, or the kingdom of ends, or anything distinctively Kantian.

Consider another example. Comedic actors David Spade and Chris Farley were best friends. Farley, you will recall, was a talented but troubled entertainer, who died young of a drug overdose. David Spade was about to board the plane for Farley’s funeral. Spade got to the gate, luggage in hand, then turned around and went home, missing his best friend’s funeral. Spade would later explain that, “It was just too . . . emotional and I wouldn’t be able to handle it” (Grow 2014; ellipsis in original). Did Spade do something immoral? If so, what universal prohibition did he violate? These seem to me to be the wrong questions to ask. In order to live well, humans need to grieve the deaths of their loved ones, especially when it happens far too young and unexpectedly. But since the point of grief is catharsis, we need to grieve in a way that allows us as individuals to achieve that. These are generalizations, of course, and what they mean depends on the needs of the individual involved. Were I Spade’s close friend, I would have encouraged him to board the plane, and perhaps offered to go with him to face this ordeal. If he still could not go, I would have encouraged him to wait until he was ready and find some other way of grieving: perhaps visiting the grave at a later time, or even just having a small memorial ceremony in his own home with a few close friends. Concrete suggestions like these are relevant to living well and “ethics,” in a broad sense. In contrast, to label Spade “immoral” for violating some universalizable rule seems not just inaccurate but cruel.

2.4 Self-Presentation

Professor Stohr makes interesting use of Kant in her discussion of what she calls “self-presentation.” This is really the issue of whether we should keep some things private, particularly our own moral failings. Professor Stohr suggests that, “Although Kant doesn’t make this explicit . . . in presenting myself in a degrading fashion I am, on Kant’s view, degrading humanity as such” (Stohr 2012: 85). Again, something sounds appealing about the view that the cast members of *Jersey Shore* were “degrading humanity as such.” But let us consider how the Confucian Mengzi would describe the issue. He claims that the two most important human virtues are benevolence and righteousness. Benevolence is having sympathy for the well-being of others, while righteousness is having an ethically informed sense of shame. If I parade my wrongdoing and vices in front of others, I obviously have no sense of shame. Mengzi moans, “People may not be shameless. The shame of being shameless is shameless indeed!” (*Mengzi* 7A6; Van Norden 2008: 173). Similarly, if being exhibitionistic about my vices leads others to take such vices less seriously, or even to take me as a role model, then I obviously have no concern for the well-being of others. I find the Confucian account here more clear, plausible, and incisive than that of Kant.⁶

⁶ As an anonymous referee reminded me, this does not mean that Confucians advocate concealing one’s faults. However, they do recognize the healthy mean between a hypocritical false front and exhibitionistic crapulence.

Professor Stohr makes another provocative use of Kant in the same chapter. She writes,

In the case of drunkenness, Kant suggests that we bring ourselves below the level of animals. The idea seems to be that when we get drunk, we deliberately stunt our rational capacities, which is a worse state than lacking those capacities in the first place. ... So for Kant, getting drunk is a violation of a duty to myself, but posting on Facebook pictures of myself when I am drunk is a violation of a duty to all of humanity. (Stohr 2012: 84–85)

Now, I am not an advocate of drunkenness. In fact, I do not drink myself (a fact which will no doubt surprise old friends from graduate school). But I wonder whether Kant's condemnation of drunkenness is defensible, and even if it is, whether Kant's relentless fixation on rationality has really identified the problem. This leads naturally into another line of critique of Professor Stohr's interpretation: that of Daoism.

3 Daoist Critique

In this section I shall discuss three hypothetical challenges to Stohr's approach, based upon Daoism. (1) Is intoxication always wrong? (2) Would we be better off without ritual? (3) Even if we need to practice rituals, would it be a higher achievement to practice them without feeling any attachment to them? I think Confucianism can mount plausible defenses to these challenges, but I am interested in how Professor Stohr would respond.

3.1 Intoxication

Chinese poetry influenced by Daoism often touches on drunkenness, and typically not in a negative tone. Indeed, one of the greatest Chinese poets was Li Bai 李白 (Li Po; 701–762), who often celebrated intoxication in his poetry. A representative work is his “Waking from Drunkenness on a Spring Day” (“Chunri Zuiqi Yanzhi 春日醉起言志”):

“Life in the world is but a big dream;
I will not spoil it by any labour or care.”
So saying, I was drunk all the day,
Lying helpless at the porch in front of my door.
When I awoke, I blinked at the garden-lawn;
A lonely bird was singing amid the flowers.
I asked myself, had the day been wet or fine?
The Spring wind was telling the mango-bird.
Moved by its song I soon began to sigh,
And as wine was there, I filled my own cup.
Wildly singing, I waited for the moon to rise,
When my song was over, all my senses had gone. (Waley 1918: n.p.)

If we interpret Li Bai in his particular social and intellectual context, we realize that he is not celebrating drunkenness for the sake of drunkenness.⁷ But he certainly is getting drunk. Yet for over a thousand years countless discerning readers in China, Japan, and the West have deeply admired his poetry, without thinking that he had committed a “violation of a duty to all of humanity.”⁸ I am interested in whether Professor Stohr thinks that drunkenness is always degrading to humanity (both in oneself and in others). If so, what counts as “drunkenness”? Does it just mean being “blackout drunk,” or could it include milder states of intoxication? Finally, if I can bring up virtue ethics just one more time: I would personally judge quite differently a college student who posted a photo of himself drunk on Facebook, as opposed to someone my age who did so. This reflects my sense that life is not about simple Kantian dichotomies of moral and immoral, but involves ethical complexity and growth, so what is forgivable in a young person exploring the new freedom of college and finding out who he is, may be much more problematic for a middle-aged person with serious responsibilities.

3.2 Dispensing with Ritual

Next, I shall discuss the critiques of manners and etiquette suggested by the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.⁹ The *Daodejing* associates etiquette with the corrupting influences of higher civilization:

Those of highest Virtue do not act “Virtuously,”
And thus they have Virtue.
Those of lowest Virtue never lose “Virtue,”
And thus they have no Virtue.
Those of highest Virtue engage in nonaction,
And do nothing purposefully.
Those of lowest Virtue act
And do so purposefully.
Those of highest benevolence act,
But do nothing purposefully.
Those of highest righteousness act,
And do so purposefully.
Those of highest propriety [i.e., manners and etiquette] act
And, when no one responds, roll up their sleeves and resort to force.

⁷ As Philip J. Ivanhoe has noted, Confucians advocate moderate drinking because of its value in promoting social intercourse; however, some Daoists advocate drinking to inebriation precisely because it allows us to mute social artifice and the rational parts of our consciousness (Ivanhoe 2013). Benn has an excellent discussion of the Buddhist advocacy of “Mr. Tea” over “Mr. Alcohol” (as they are personified in the “Cha Jiu Lun 茶酒論” [“On Tea and Alcohol”]) (Benn 2005). Of course, some Westerners have advocated the use of psychedelic drugs for their alleged spiritual benefits (e.g., Huxley 2009).

⁸ Li Bai has had his share of detractors. Some accuse him of shallowness or stylistic faults (as did Bai Juyi 白居易, 772–846), but others share the moral assessment of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086): “The reason why vulgar people find Li Po’s poetry congenial is that it is easy to enjoy. His intellectual outlook was mean and sordid, and out of ten poems nine deal with wine or women; nevertheless, the abundance of his talent makes it impossible to leave him out of account” (Waley 1918: n.p.).

⁹ Obviously, there are many ways to read these famously enigmatic texts. I defend and elaborate upon my interpretations in Van Norden 2011, 1999, and 1996.

Hence, when the Way [to live] was lost, only then was there “Virtue.”
 When “Virtue” was lost, only then was there “benevolence.”
 When “benevolence” was lost, only then was there “righteousness.”
 When “righteousness” was lost, only then was there “propriety” [i.e., manners
 and etiquette].
 “Propriety” is the wearing thin of loyalty and trustworthiness;
 It is the beginning of chaos. (*Daodejing* 38; translation mine)

The argument of this passage is that humans in a pre-civilized state had a sort of Virtue that was automatic and un-self-conscious. As civilization develops, humans become more self-conscious in their actions, but this also introduces the capacity for hypocrisy. Manners and etiquette are the ultimate of this hypocrisy, purely artificial and far removed from the spontaneous harmony of a simpler civilization.

I personally find the *Daodejing*'s dream of a primitive utopia naive. I find more plausible the view that the state of nature is one of endless conflict, until a government authority is instituted to ensure uniformity of values. I am referring, of course, to the state of nature argument given by the Chinese Mohist philosophers (*Mozi* 墨子, “Shangtong 尚同” [“Identifying with One’s Superior”]). (I think it is just *adorable*, though, that Thomas Hobbes came up with a version of this argument, albeit one much less sophisticated, two millennia later.) While we may not go as far as the *Daodejing*, however, it does seem to raise a plausible concern that etiquette can become an impediment to the expression of genuine feelings.

Professor Stohr is aware of this danger. She uses Edith Wharton’s novel, *The Age of Innocence*, to illustrate “a society which values propriety above just about everything else” (Stohr 2012: 71), and remarks that “the social world that Wharton describes is, to put it mildly, unappealing” (Stohr 2012: 72). But isn’t the lesson to learn that, the less etiquette the better? In motivating a concern with manners, Professor Stohr mentions problems in contemporary society including “attack ads in political campaigns, rude and unnecessarily inflammatory protests, road rage that quickly escalates into violence” (Stohr 2012: 5). However, none of these is an issue about etiquette, per se. In fact, in many ways, we seem better off today because we have less etiquette. Are we worse off today because a couple can get married by an Elvis impersonator while skydiving? Is it a decline in civilization that some teenagers show up to Prom with pink mohawks and nose rings? Aren’t these things rather signs of greater freedom, creativity, and pluralism? We *do* still expect people to show up for job interviews dressed in sophisticated clothes, but this often becomes a serious problem for the long-term unemployed, who may have no clean dress clothes anymore, or those whose underprivileged upbringing did not equip them with the knowledge of what sort of clothes one wears to a white-collar job interview. In short, even if we cannot completely eliminate etiquette, aren’t we better off the fewer rules of etiquette there are?

Turning to the *Zhuangzi*, we note that parts are similar to the *Daodejing* in endorsing a simple rejection of conventional etiquette. When Confucius’ disciple Zigong 子貢 discovers two Daoist sages happily ignoring the rules of mourning after the death of

their close friend, he is outraged. But Confucius (who here acts as Zhuangzi's spokesman) expresses wistful admiration for their ability (which he admits he lacks) "to be deviant among humans yet to fit in with Heaven" (*ji yu ren er mou yu tian* 畸於人而侔於天; *Zhuangzi* 6; translation mine). There is also the famous story of Zhuangzi himself playing a tub like a drum when he is supposed to be following the somber mourning rituals for his wife's death (*Zhuangzi* 18).

3.3 Practicing Rituals with Detachment

Other parts of the *Zhuangzi* suggest a critique of etiquette that is more subtle, yet also more radical. Consider the description of MENG SUN Cai 孟孫才: "... when his mother died he cried without shedding tears, and felt no sadness in his heart. He took part in mourning, but felt no sorrow" (*Zhuangzi* 6; translation mine). Confucius (speaking for Zhuangzi again) comments, "You and I—are we not people who are asleep and have not yet awakened? ... Mengsun *has* awakened. Others cry so he cries..." (*Zhuangzi* 6; translation mine). I think it is illuminating to read this passage in the light of Zhuangzi's parable of the monkey trainer, who tells the monkeys that they will be fed three acorns in the morning and four at night. The monkeys are furious with this meal plan. "Fine," says the monkey trainer. "Then I'll give you four in the morning and three at night." The monkeys are completely satisfied with this "compromise" (*Zhuangzi* 2; translation mine). Zhuangzi suggests that the sage, like the monkey trainer, recognizes the pointlessness of the values that motivate ordinary people. Nonetheless, the sage can act in accordance with the superficial forms of human behavior (like Mengsun crying on the surface or carrying out the forms of mourning). In fact, someone who made a show of violating etiquette would only do so because she took human conventions far too seriously.¹⁰

Consequently, Zhuangzi might claim that the problem with Jerry, Elaine, and George is not that they fail to understand or take seriously the underlying "principles and ideals" that provide the point for etiquette. The problem is that they continue to take *themselves and their own projects* too seriously. Jerry et al. arrive tired and irritable at the party because they feel that they have wasted their time in a pointless but socially unavoidable effort to procure gifts suitable for sophisticated, tasteful adults. But what would they have been doing *instead of* trying to get chocolate babka? Presumably, they would have been chatting in the coffeehouse, or waiting in line at a Chinese restaurant, or gossiping about the other people at the party, or ... something else equally pointless. Zhuangzi's recommendation is *not* that they should have more valuable concerns and activities. Rather, if they fully and joyfully embraced the pointlessness of whatever they did, they could be equally happy in any of these situations. If they were that sort of people, they would not have been tired and irritable when they showed up for the party. In addition, they might have had the flexibility to see that something else besides babka could make a perfectly good gift (even if the Pepsi and Ring Dings that George suggested isn't it).

¹⁰ When Hugh Laurie was offered the Order of the British Empire, he considered turning it down, but he was advised by his son to accept, on the grounds that only someone who was immensely self-important would think of making a fuss by refusing the honor (World Entertainment News Network 2007).

4 Conclusion

Professor Stohr has an excellent chapter on “Giving and Receiving.” In particular, her overview of the ethical distinctions surrounding “gifts,” “favors,” and “advice” (Stohr 2012: 118) is masterful. She also notes in this chapter that, “ideally, I would both feel grateful for what I am given and express that gratitude appropriately” (Stohr 2012: 128), and that “the practice of exchanging things like gifts and favors works best when it is reciprocal” (Stohr 2012: 130). So allow me to conclude by sincerely thanking you, Professor Stohr, for writing this book. I wanted to get you a thank-you gift in return, but I was not sure what you like, so please accept these comments. I know they are not a very good gift, but I hope you enjoy them.

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