Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners*

Sarah Buss

Moral philosophers constantly remind us how very important it is to treat one another with respect. After all, we are persons; and persons have a special dignity. Persons are ends in themselves—and must be acknowledged as such.

Experts on manners have a strikingly similar drum beat. They tell us how very important it is to treat one another respectfully. We must not offend the dignity of others if we can possibly avoid doing so. We must treat other people with as much consideration as possible.

When the same words are used in very different contexts, they often mean very different things. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the "respect" and "dignity" of such importance in moral philosophy are the very same "respect" and "dignity" of such importance in manners. Systems of manners play an essential role in our moral life. What's more, playing this role is the essential function of good manners.[1]

This, at any rate, is the two-part thesis I hope to defend in the pages that follow. I will not argue that it applies to each particular rule in a code of etiquette. Rather, I will focus on the virtue that is essential to good manners: the virtue we call "courtesy." Codes of etiquette tell us how to set the fork, the knife, and the spoon. But the most important lessons in manners are the lessons in how to avoid being discourteous,

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1. Notice that this thesis is perfectly compatible with the view that the most important function of manners is to maintain social stability and order. After all, it may well be that maintaining social stability and order is the most important function of morality! In claiming that treating people with respect is the point of manners, I mean to be focusing attention on the fundamental *internal* aim of manners. This aim is compatible with, and may even contribute to, other desirable or undesirable goals—just as the internal aim of religious rituals (very roughly: to promote the worship of God) is compatible with and contributes to many other desirable and undesirable goals. (For more on this point, see the discussion on pp. 805, 809–10.)

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impolite, rude, inconsiderate, offensive, insulting. I will argue that someone who flouts these lessons behaves in a manner that is immoral as well as impolite. And if a system of manners encourages such immorality, then it can be criticized from the point of view of manners itself: it is a code of bad manners as well as a code of bad morals.

To most people uncorrupted by philosophy this will probably not be a surprising thesis: in appraising one another's behavior we are not committed to a clear division of labor between rules of manners and rules of morality. Many philosophers, however, seem to take it for granted that manners lie outside the scope of morality. They assume that doing one's moral duty is one thing, being polite quite another. In defending the moral function of manners I will at the same time be challenging the assumption that in order to treat other persons as ends in themselves, it suffices to pursue one's own ends in a way that permits them to pursue theirs. I will, that is, be making the case for a more inclusive conception of the moral duty to treat other persons with respect.[2]

To treat someone "with respect" is to treat her in a way that acknowl-

2. David Brink expresses a widely shared view when he claims that requirements of etiquette differ from moral requirements because "their inescapability is not grounded in facts about rational agents as such." "Perhaps," Brink speculates, "rational agents . . . need not live under the rule of etiquette at all" (David O. Brink, "Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy," in *Ethics and Practical Reason,* ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997], pp. 255–91, p. 281). If, as seems to be the case, Brink means to include rules of manners among the rules of etiquette, then the burden of my article is to show that he is wrong about etiquette, at least where the rational agents at issue are anything remotely like us. In defending a broader conception of our duty to treat people with respect, I will, in effect, be defending a broader conception of the right to be treated with respect. According to Joseph Raz, "one can, and people often do, show disrespect to others, including disrespect which amounts to denying their status as persons, by acts which do not violate rights" (Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1986], p. 191). Similarly, Judith Jarvis Thomson speculates that respect for persons may be "something other than respect for their rights. Then the work would remain to be done of saying what it is, and how this or that in morality issues from it" (Judith Jarvis Thomson, *The Realm of Rights* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990], p. 211). To my mind, however, to divide disrespectful acts into those that violate a person's rights and those that merely "deny his status as a person" is to obscure the intimate connection between respecting a person's rights and acknowledging his moral status. At the very least, this sort of taxonomy encourages the false belief that we have fulfilled our duty to treat others as ends in themselves as long as we have enabled them to pursue their own morally permissible ends. (Though I agree with Raz that respect for persons should not be confused with respect for their rights, I am persuaded by Cora Diamond's suggestion that a person has rights only *because* she has moral standing. See Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," in Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991]. For a discussion of Diamond, see pp. 800–801.) Raz is wrong, I think, to insist that moral rights are "based on" our interests and not, ultimately, on the independent fact that we are persons, ends in ourselves (Raz, p. 189). The moral significance of a person's *interests* depends on the fact that *she* has moral significance; our respect for a person's rights is based on the fact that we respect the person herself. (For more on this point, see Sarah Buss, "Respect for Persons," unpublished manuscript.)

edges her intrinsic value, or "dignity."[3] This is a value she has no matter what her deeds and accomplishments may be; it is tied to what she *is,* not to what she *has done.* Many of us believe that what makes someone valuable in this respect is not that she is a duchess, or some member of a privileged class, but that she is a person, capable of evaluating her situation for herself and setting her own goals accordingly. On this view, the obligation to acknowledge the intrinsic value of everyone who is intrinsically valuable is the obligation to acknowledge the intrinsic value of everyone.

But how is this acknowledgment accomplished? There is widespread agreement that we acknowledge the intrinsic value of persons by permitting them to constrain our decisions in a special way: in deciding what to do, we accommodate ourselves to the fact that other persons have their own interests and concerns, their own ends. Of course, philosophers disagree about just what the necessary accommodation requires. My point about manners, however, is that whatever we must do in order to accommodate our ends to the ends of others, we must do something more in order to acknowledge the intrinsic value of others. Acknowledging a person's intrinsic value—treating her with respect—also requires that one treat her politely (considerately, respectfully). If we treat someone rudely, then we fail to treat her with respect—even if we do not prevent her from pursuing her most fundamental goals. Having defended this claim, I will consider what it implies about one of our own most basic rules of polite behavior.

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If I am to have any hope of convincing anyone that good manners are an essential aspect of a morally decent life, I must confront those features of manners that seem to distinguish them from morals. Though there are surely many such features, I will focus on the three which, to my mind, are the most significant.

3. According to Kant, "The respect which I bear others or which another can claim from me . . . is the acknowledgment of the dignity (*dignitas*) of another man, i.e., a worth which has no price, no equivalent for which the object of valuation (*aestimii*) could be exchanged" (Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals, Part II: The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue,* in *Ethical Philosophy,* trans. James W. Ellington [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983], p. 127). There are passages in which Kant suggests that in order to acknowledge a person's dignity, it is not enough to accommodate our ends to hers. Thus, he writes, "Holding up to ridicule real faults or faults attributed as real with the intention of depriving a person of his deserved respect, and the propensity to do this, may be called bitter derision (*spiritus causticus*). . . . [It is] a severe violation of the duty to respect other men" (p. 132). (I thank an editor of this journal for calling my attention to this passage.) At the same time, however, Kant seems to reject my interpretation of the relation between morals and manners insofar as he claims that "I am not bound to venerate others (regarded merely as men), i.e., to show them positive reverence. The only respect which I am bound to by nature is that for the law generally (*reverere legem*)" (p. 133).

First, then, one of the primary objectives of sytems of manners is to encourage us to make ourselves *agreeable.* This feature is closely related to the second: insofar as one's aim is good manners, acting from a good will is less important than *appearing* to be good willed. As Miss Manners succinctly puts it: "Manners involve the appearance of things, rather than the total reality."[4] Finally, everyone seems to agree that what counts as good manners in one culture does not necessarily count as good manners in another culture; when the subject is manners, relativism is an uncontroversial thesis.

Despite these obvious respects in which rules of manners differ from moral commands, I want to argue that a moral life would be severely impoverished without good manners. What's more, I want to argue that it would be impoverished because good manners have an important moral function—a function only they can perform. It is, I believe, a striking fact that people who are boorish or sulky or obnoxious or otherwise *disagreeable* are *morally* deficient precisely because they make so little effort to please. Why should this be? The simplest answer is that we believe that, all else being equal, people have a basic moral obligation to make themselves agreeable to others. This seems to have been Hume's view in the *Enquiry.* A quick glance at his discussion, however, suggests that this answer is, at best, incomplete. Making oneself agreeable to others is not only an end in itself; it is also, and more importantly, a means to treating them with respect.

According to Hume, the primary difference between rules of polite behavior and laws of justice is the sphere to which they apply: "As the mutual shocks, in *society,* and the oppositions of interest and self-love have constrained mankind to establish the laws of *justice,* in order to preserve the advantages of mutual assistance and protection: in like manner, the eternal contrarieties, in *company,* of men's pride and self-conceit, have introduced the rules of Good Manners or Politeness, in order to facilitate the intercourse of minds, and an undisturbed commerse and conversation."[5]

4. Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), p. 13. There are actually two points here, each of which Miss Manners stresses on many occasions. First, as Philippa Foot points out, "moral judgment concerns itself with a man's reasons for acting as well as with what he does. Law and etiquette require only that certain things are done or left undone" (Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Philosophical Review* 81 [1972]: 305–16, p. 312). Second, "in manners, as distinct from morals . . . the only recognized act is one that has been witnessed" (Martin, p. 249). In an interesting article, Julia Driver challenges the view that the stress on appearance distinguishes etiquette from morality. Appearing to be virtuous, she argues, can be essential to really being virtuous (see her "Caesar's Wife: On the Moral Significance of Appearing Good," *Journal of Philosophy* 89 [1992]: 331–43).

5. David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals,* in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals,* 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), sec. 8, pp. 169–346, p. 261.

Hume lists some of the ways in which expressions of pride and self-conceit are constrained by good manners: "Among well-bred people, a mutual deference is affected; contempt of others disguised; authority concealed; attention given to each in his turn; and an easy stream of conversation maintained, without vehemence, without interruption, without eagerness for victory, and without any airs of superiority."[6]

Notice the priority Hume gives here to *appearances:* he speaks of "affecting" mutual deference, of "disguising" contempt, of avoiding "airs." This suggests another, more important, difference between the rules of manners and the laws of justice: whereas the latter impose limits on an individual's pursuit of her own self-interest, the former impose limits on an individual's doing things that *suggest* she *would* pursue her self-interest at the expense of others if given half a chance. The point of good manners is to create a certain appearance, to show others that one does not care overly much for one's own dear self.[7]

Hume is right to stress that the best way to accomplish this goal is to be considerate of others. He is also right that the things people do to show consideration are often "immediately agreeable," and that this is what makes them suitable modes of showing consideration. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Hume's account of good manners is seriously inadequate; for it fails to do justice to the fact that good manners have a value independent of the pleasure they directly inspire. More particularly, Hume underestimates the contribution that good manners make to good morals; and (more importantly) he fails to appreciate the extent to which both this contribution and the more immediate pleasure we experience when we are treated politely reflect the fundamental moral purpose of polite behavior. I will take up each of these points in turn.

Try to consider, for a moment, what it would be like to live in a society in which there were no conventions of politeness. As Hume suggests, there would be much less social harmony: people would find one another's company far less tolerable; they would not be so favorably disposed toward one another; they would be far more likely to get on one another's nerves. It seems to me, moreover, that such social disharmony could not fail to adversely affect people's willingness to regulate their behavior according to certain principles of justice, and this for at least three reasons. First, people who feel anger and resentment toward one another are far less inclined to go out of their way to avoid harming one another. Second, people so ill equipped to be agreeable to one another are likely to keep at a distance from one another; and people thus alienated are less likely to care about one another's well-being. (I will come back to this point when, in the article's last section, I discuss the re-

6. Ibid.

7. It may well be, of course, that a person will have a better chance of creating this appearance if she really does care about the others. I owe this point to Jonathan Adler.

quirement to "mind one's own business.") Finally, and most importantly, people who have never developed the habit of treating one another with courtesy are not constantly encouraged to take it for granted that people *deserve* to be so treated; that is, they are not conditioned to regard people as having a special dignity that imposes limitations on what it is reasonable for other people to do.

The importance of such conditioning has recently been called to our attention in a thought-provoking article by Cora Diamond. In "Eating Meat and Eating People," Diamond suggests that 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, she argues, the means whereby we "build our notion of human beings."[8] They are "the ways in which we mark what human life is,"[9] and, as such, they "belong to the source of moral life."[10] From our earliest childhood, we learn that *Homo sapiens* is the sort of animal whose death it is appropriate to mark with a funeral, the sort of animal it is inappropriate to eat, the sort of animal it is inappropriate to kill for convenience or sport. These lessons contrast sharply with our lessons about nonhuman animals: as children we "see insect pests killed, or spiders or snakes merely because they are distasteful; [we] hear about the killing of dangerous animals or of superfluous puppies and kittens, and are encouraged early to fish or collect butterflies—and so on."[11]

Again, the point is that human and nonhuman animals "are not given for our thought independently of such a mass of ways of thinking about and responding to them."[12] Though Diamond does not herself stress the extent to which conventions of polite behavior figure among these ways of responding, she certainly means to include them. Indeed, she notes the moral significance of the fact that human beings are the only animals whose company we accept at the dinner table.[13]

Good manners, then, 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, that one ought not to

8. Diamond, p. 324.

9. Ibid., p. 325.

10. Ibid., p. 326. A difficulty for this account of the moral status of human beings is that it does not seem to allow for the possibility of a moral critique of the practices which contribute to the conception of what it is to be human. My own view is that our practices are not the only thing to which we can appeal to defend our views about what we owe one another. I take this for granted at the end of the article, when I call into question the requirement that people "mind their own business."

11. Ibid., p. 330.

12. Ibid., p. 331.

13. Ibid., p. 324. ("We are around the table and they are on it.")

crowd them and yet ought not to be standoffish, 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 with such deference and care.

It is a small step from noting *that* manners play a key role in our moral education to understanding *why* they are so well suited to playing this role. With this step, we arrive at the second, more fundamental, moral function of polite behavior: polite behavior not only has important moral *consequences;* it has an essentially moral *point.* Though Hume did not fully appreciate this point, he did remark upon it. Thus, consider the following observation in his discussion of "qualities immediately agreeable to others": "Many of the forms of breeding are arbitrary and casual; but the thing expressed by them is still the same. A Spaniard goes out of his own house before his guest, to signify that he leaves him master of all. In other countries, the landlord walks out last, as a common mark of deference and regard." [14]

I would like to make three comments about this brief passage. First, Hume calls attention to the *expressive* function of manners: by behaving politely, we are, in effect, "saying" something to one another. Second, by Hume's own account, the message expressed is that we defer to another person because we hold him in regard. Third, Hume's insistence to the contrary notwithstanding, such expressive behavior is *not immediately* agreeable. The pleasure it inspires is *mediated* by the guest's appreciation of what is expressed. If this guest were ignorant of the symbolic significance of his host's behavior, his host would be powerless to please him with this behavior. Indeed, if the guest were a Spaniard in one of those "other countries," he might even experience considerable *dis*pleasure.

Hume's remarks thus suggest that the reason why manners play such an important role in moral education is simply because they enable people to acknowledge one another's special dignity. This is their most basic purpose. An act of politeness may be intrinsically agreeable to others; and if it is intrinsically agreeable to others, this may be why it came to be regarded as a "mark of deference." What *makes* it a mark of deference, however, is *not* that it is agreeable. Rather, it is a mark of deference because this is the expressive function that has been assigned to it. Though there is an obvious sense in which the point of behaving politely is to be agreeable, the point of being agreeable in this way is to acknowledge the dignity of others. Indeed, it is often only if this more basic point is appreciated that the behavior is capable of giving pleasure.

But why should we care so much about whether someone acknowledges our dignity? Why should we find it so disagreeable when someone fails to exhibit some mark of deference? The answer, I wish to suggest, is

14. Hume, p. 262.

simply that we believe we are worthy of respect, we believe that because we are respectworthy we deserve to be *treated with respect,* and we believe that being treated with *courtesy*—being *treated respectfully*—is a very important way—indeed, a necessary condition for the possibility—of being treated with respect.[15]

To treat people with respect is to act in a way that acknowledges their dignity, and to act this way *because* they have dignity. Moral philosophers have investigated the various ways we can make this acknowledgment *indirectly*. Very roughly: we indirectly acknowledge a person as respectworthy whenever we treat his interests and goals as constraints on our own most basic aims. There is, however, more to treating someone with respect than accommodating our ends to his. It is also essential that we more *directly* acknowledge that he is worthy of this accommodation; and in order to satisfy this requirement, we must treat him *politely*. When we treat one another politely, we are directly expressing respect for one another in the only way possible. We are, in effect, saying: "I respect you," "I acknowledge your dignity."[16]

The only way possible? Is there really no other means of acknowledging people directly? Instead of speaking the more subtle language of good manners, one could, of course, pepper one's conversation with the explicit assurance: "You are worthy of respect." As far as I can tell, however, this would not be an alternative method of direct acknowledgment. For if the phrase really did function to directly acknowledge people's respectworthiness, it would, in effect, be a stand-in for "please," "thank you," and so on. When you wanted someone to pass you the salt, you would say, "Pass the salt, you are worthy of respect"; and when someone passed you the salt, you and she would tell each other, "You are worthy of respect," "You are worthy of respect." This would be rather odd, to be sure, but not deeply different from the more specialized tokens of politeness with which we are familiar. Perhaps subtle alterations in tone of voice could pick up much of the slack. In any case, the practice would not be an alternative to being polite but just an alternative way of being polite. Nor would things be different for any other apparent alternative mode of direct acknowledgment: either it, too, would just be a different means of being polite, or it would not be a means of direct acknowledgment, after all.

15. Note that this answer is compatible with the fact that the pain we experience in being treated rudely is often, in part, the pain of being shunned, rejected, treated as an outsider. I will refer later to the capacity of manners to define in-groups. For now, it suffices to stress that the reason why it is so painful to be treated as an outsider is that this is one way of being treated as though one has less intrinsic worth than the insiders.

16. Note that an acknowledgment of dignity can be both direct and indirect. Thus, e.g., asking permission to smoke is both a way of saying, "You are worthy of respect," and a way of adjusting one's ends to the ends of others.

Still, one might wonder whether treating people with respect really requires directly acknowledging their respectworthiness. I doubt whether this is the sort of thing that can be proved. Nonetheless, I hope to build on my discussion of Hume to show that a conception of treating people with respect which includes treating them politely is more compelling than the alternative conception, according to which treating people with respect is one thing, and behaving respectfully is another.

First, then, once we see polite behavior as essential to acknowledging the dignity of others, we can better understand the moral consequences of treating people rudely. I have already noted that when people treat one another rudely, they are less likely to accommodate their actions to others, or even to believe that they ought to. It is difficult to see why this would be so, if treating people rudely were not at odds with acknowledging their intrinsic value, their dignity, their worthiness of being treated with respect.

So, too, unless good manners are essential to acknowledging another's dignity, it is difficult to see why treating someone politely so often plays an essential role in enabling her to pursue her own ends. As John Rawls reminds us, when a person doubts that others regard her as respectworthy, she tends to doubt that her "plan of life" is "worth carrying out," and that she has what it takes to carry out any life plan of value.[17] But why does rude behavior have the power to create doubts of this sort? Because, I submit, good manners are essential to acknowledging the intrinsic value of anyone who deserves to be treated with respect. It is precisely because treating people with courtesy is a direct way of acknowledging their dignity that treating them rudely can undermine their belief in their own intrinsic worth.

Additional support for the moral importance of direct acknowledgment comes from cases of nonmoral acknowledgment. Consider, for example, what is required to acknowledge that someone (A) is an expert on some topic (X). When doing a research project on X, one ought to look up A's papers. But surely this indirect acknowledgment is not sufficient. If, for example, when one is discussing X with A (and others), one repeatedly interrupts A's attempts to explain something about X or responds to her comments with a sniff of the nose, a roll of the eyes, or a "That's what *you* say," then one has failed to acknowledge her expertise (or has not acknowledged it enough, which comes to the same thing where giving people their due is concerned). Similarly, one does not adequately acknowledge A's skill at doing X if one hires her to do X, and yet in her presence enthusiastically praises the ability of others (and only others) to do X, gives them (and only them) awards for doing X, and so on.

17. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 440.

To my mind, the most compelling reason for thinking that good manners have an essentially moral function and that this function is essential to treating persons with respect is that this is what is revealed by a simple exercise of the imagination. Consider what things would be like if there were a human community in which no human being violated the Kantian Categorical Imperative or had the least worry that others would do so. Would courtesy be pointless under these ideal conditions? Would polite behavior have no moral value? Would this imaginary kingdom be a "kingdom of ends," in which the intrinsic value of each is acknowledged by all? The answer, it seems to me, is clearly "no." Even if every citizen of the realm enabled every other citizen to exercise his capacity for rational choice, it would still be possible for these people to fail to treat one another with respect. For they would still be capable of hurting one another's feelings, offending one another's dignity, treating one another discourteously, inconsiderately, impolitely.

In short, even if I were confident that everyone in my community respected my right to choose and act "autonomously," someone could still fail to treat me with respect if she stared off into the middle distance, or carefully examined her fingernails, whenever I tried to engage her in conversation. Someone can value me as a person without valuing my opinions. She can acknowledge my dignity as a person even if she condemns my opinions and actions on moral grounds. But she fails to treat me with respect if she makes no effort to hide her disinterest in, or contempt for, my feelings. When she treats me this way, she implies that my concerns, my feelings, my point of view do not matter, that is, that I have no intrinsic value, after all.[18]

Whereas acknowledging people *indirectly* involves considering how they feel about certain things, people, and projects, acknowledging people *directly* involves considering how they feel about having their feelings ignored. Prominent among this second group of feelings are shame and humiliation. When our words and deeds tell someone that it does not matter whether we hurt her feelings, we offend against her dignity by directly offending *her*.

But couldn't there be a "kingdom of ends" in which no behavior counted as rude? If this were a kingdom in which all behavior counted as polite, then it would not be a counterexample to the moral importance of direct acknowledgment. But what if it were a world in which no behavior counted as polite? In trying to imagine such a world, the best I can come up with is the "world" of many small children: though small children can easily provoke one another to tears, they generally do not take offense as readily as most adults; they say harsh things to each other,

18. As Henry Richardson has reminded me, international negotiations provide a vivid example of how important good manners are in this regard.

or ignore each other, without seeming to notice that there is anything amiss. The "world" of small children is not, however, a counterexample to the moral importance of direct acknowledgment. For it is, essentially, a child's world, and so it is not populated by full-fledged moral agents. Good manners matter less to the inhabitants of this world because these little people have not yet figured out what they and their comrades are really worth, and because, as a consequence, they do not yet treat one another with respect.

Not only are good manners essential to treating people with respect, but this is the essential point of good manners. In making this claim, I do not mean to be saying anything about the origin of rules of courtesy. Like our moral code, our code of manners may have originated as a way to encourage peaceful coexistence among people, or as a way for the powerful to maintain control over the resentful weak, or as a way for the resentful weak to claim power for themselves. Even if one or more of these stories is true, and even if the code continues to serve its original purpose, we can still ask: what does the code mean now? what do its rules signify to those who accept its authority? If, as seems obvious, the essential point of these rules is to instruct people on how to treat each other respectfully, and if, as I have argued, treating people respectfully is essential to treating them with respect, then the essential point of good manners is a moral point: to enable us to treat one another with respect.

Of course, one can directly acknowledge someone's dignity, and then go right off to plot her murder. But notice that the "polite" behavior of such a person would almost surely be deemed hypocritical; and this judgment only makes sense if the behavior does, indeed, have the moral significance I am attributing to it. More importantly, this moral significance is perfectly compatible with my earlier concession that manners involve *appearances* and so may not be in harmony with reality. For this concession is perfectly compatible with the fact that *appearing* to respect people is essential to *really* respecting them.

The fact that being polite has a moral point is compatible with the fact that in order to acknowledge a person's dignity *indirectly*—that is, in order to accommodate our own ends to hers—we may sometimes have to treat her rudely. For example, we may have to violate certain rules of politeness in order to save someone's life. Situations in which one must be rude in order to do what is right are situations in which one has a more pressing moral obligation than the moral obligation to directly acknowledge another person's dignity, and so it is not possible to treat her with respect. Lawrence Becker has argued that in this sort of situation it is permissible for us to "ignore" considerations of good manners.[19] It

19. Lawrence Becker, "The Finality of Moral Judgments: A Reply to Mrs. Foot," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 364–70, p. 369.

seems to me, however, that, as in the most straightforward cases of conflicting moral claims, we are simply forced to recognize that other considerations have greater weight.[20]

When the behavior required in order to acknowledge another person *directly* conflicts with the behavior required in order to acknowledge her *indirectly,* the requirements of indirect acknowledgment are usually overriding. My account of manners helps explain why this is so. Take, first, the case in which the conflict concerns the treatment of a single person. As I already noted, it is hypocritical to express one's belief in someone's respectworthiness while doing what one can to set back her most serious interests. If one's harmful behavior is evident to her, then it devalues one's expressions of courtesy, for it indicates that these expressions do not really mean what they normally say. Since in such circumstances, one's polite gestures are nothing but empty gestures, they are not a form of direct acknowledgment.[21] So the choice in such cases is between acknowledging someone indirectly and not acknowledging her at all.

There are, of course, cases in which directly acknowledging someone's dignity plays a key role in preventing her from discovering that she is not being acknowledged indirectly: one's oh-so-polite behavior can convince the beneficiary of this behavior that one is truly committed to accommodating oneself to her interests and goals, even though nothing could be further from the truth. In such cases, nothing subverts the symbolic meaning of the polite behavior, however insincere it may be. Nonetheless, as far as I can tell, there is no reason for someone to favor direct acknowledgment over indirect acknowledgment in such cases; for in

20. Julia Driver has called my attention to a second situation of this sort. Suppose that Bob is a master criminal whom many young men admire and wish to emulate. And suppose that near the end of his life, he has a change of heart and wishes to discourage this admiration. Bob might ask others to treat him disrespectfully in order to make his position seem less desirable. Driver suggests that those who honored Bob's request would, in fact, be treating him with respect. It seems to me, however, that this is not the right way to describe the situation. Even if one's reason for treating someone rudely is because this is necessary to save his life or to accommodate his wishes, in treating him rudely one fails to treat him with respect. Examples such as Driver's simply show that direct and indirect acknowledgment are sometimes incompatible, and that it is thus not always possible to treat someone with respect. Polite behavior's essential role in treating people with respect is compatible with the fact that a person can "betray his superficiality and small-mindedness by his overemphasis on good manners where their display is incompatible with deeper values" (Felicia Ackerman, "A Man by Nothing Is So Well Betrayed as by His Manners: Politeness as a Virtue," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 [1998]: 250–58, p. 257).

21. It is unclear to me just when failures of indirect acknowledgment render attempts at direct acknowledgment fruitless. It seems, e.g., that a master can succeed in treating his slave politely, despite failing to accommodate her most basic interests. But perhaps this is true only insofar as the rights violation consists of the basic fact that he owns her. If he were to rape her, his courteous behavior the next day would surely add insult to injury.

such cases one is not forced to choose between the two sorts of acknowledgment.

But what about those rare occasions on which no reconciliation is possible, occasions on which one must treat someone rudely in order to accommodate her capacity for rational choice—or in order to accommodate this capacity in others? It seems to me that to determine which requirements have priority in such cases we must simply employ whatever balancing test we use to adjudicate among competing rights. Perhaps it will turn out that it is always more important to acknowledge people *indirectly* than to acknowledge them *directly*. But I doubt it. There are probably many occasions on which we ought to break a promise, or trespass on someone's property, or even cause someone minor physical pain in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings, or offending her in some other way.

The fact that rules of manners tend to be trumped by other moral rules has been attributed to the fact that demands of manners have weaker "binding force" than most demands of morality.[22] But if this explanation is meant to add something to the one I have just offered myself, then it is (at best) misleading. To avoid confusion, we need to distinguish the ways in which rules of manners are "less binding" than other moral rules from the ways in which they are at least as binding. First, then, if rules of manners are less binding, this is *not* because they are any less authoritative: whether they apply to us is no more a matter of choice than whether any other moral demands apply to us. It is no more up to us whether we ought to behave rudely than it is up to us whether we ought to break a promise: if we know that a given action would be rude in a given context, our obligation to refrain from performing it is no more nor less negotiable than our obligation to keep our promises.[23] Like the obligation to keep our promises, the obligation to behave politely is not always overriding; but clearly this does not disqualify it as a genuine obligation.

Rules of polite behavior are less binding in the sense that it is often appropriate to override them. They are also less binding in two other respects. First, as I noted earlier, particular rules of polite behavior vary from social group to social group far more than do other moral rules; they bind the members of one group without necessarily binding anyone else. Again, my account of manners helps to explain why this is so: good manners are morally significant because they have *symbolic* significance, and there are few limits to the symbolic meaning that a group of people can assign to any given act.

22. The phrase comes from Foot.

23. Foot herself makes this point when she calls attention to the sense in which imperatives of etiquette are categorical.

This also explains why the requirements of manners are less binding in the further respect that our code of manners counsels us to violate its own rules on occasion, even when these rules are not in conflict with one another. Since the point of good manners is to let someone know that one recognizes her dignity, one must be sensitive to how she will interpret one's behavior. If she is likely to mistake one's courtesy for discourtesy, it may be advisable to break the rules—*not,* again, because it may be advisable to "ignore" considerations of manners altogether but precisely because in order to treat her politely, one must ignore one's own particular code of polite behavior. (I will return to this point later when I discuss the "code of the street.")

There is, finally, one respect in which codes of manners are *more* binding than other moral codes: they leave less room for "neutral" behavior, which is neither morally praiseworthy nor morally criticizable. As long as we refrain from harming others, and as long as we come to the aid of some of them some of the time, we satisfy the demand to acknowledge other persons indirectly. In contrast, there is hardly a human interaction in which a code of manners does not require certain quite specific behavior. Are we meeting someone for the first time? Then we had better look him in the eye, offer our hand, and say, "Hello. How do you do? Nice to meet you," or something pretty similar to this. Are we visiting a friend (at home, at work, in the hospital)? eating at a restaurant? driving through town? asking for directions? On each of these occasions, and on most others too, there is something in particular (and usually *several* things) we must do to avoid being rude. My point is not that the rules of manners apply on more occasions than do other moral rules; after all, there are very few occasions on which it is appropriate to kill someone. Rather, my point is that whereas a wide range of behavior counts as "refraining from killing someone," there are far fewer ways to assure someone that she has the sort of value that makes it unthinkable to kill her, except in self-defense.[24] This feature of manners is linked to its importance as a *constant* reminder that persons are worthy of respect: it cannot serve this function unless there are many occasions on which there is something rather particular people must be sure to do in order to be polite to one another.[25]

According to Miss Manners, when we violate some code of polite behavior, we typically feel "embarrassment" rather than a "troubled conscience."[26] Paradigmatic *moral* failures are not of this sort. But this

24. At the end of the article, I remind the reader that though our options for avoiding rudeness are relatively restricted, codes of polite behavior provide us with more than one script for most occasions.

25. The importance of this point was called to my attention by Alexander Nehamas.

26. Martin, p. 10. According to Gabriele Taylor, embarrassment is occasioned by "failures to present oneself in an appropriate manner to a given audience" (Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-assessment* [Oxford: Oxford University Press,

obvious contrast between violations of paradigmatic moral laws and violations of rules of manners does not show that manners have less "binding force" than morals; nor, more generally, does it challenge the moral status of manners. Manners are morally significant, I have argued, because appearing respectful is morally significant. This does not mean that a mistake in manners has the same significance as other moral mistakes. But it does mean that someone ought to have a troubled conscience if the reason why she made a mistake in manners is because she was indifferent to the moral value of appearances. Being indifferent—being immune to feeling embarrassed or ashamed or remorseful about lapses in courtesy—is not a moral option.

I have noted that because convention plays such an important role in what counts as a token of respect, codes of manners vary greatly from place to place and era to era. In particular, they vary to a much greater extent than most other codes of morality. Nonetheless, as long as manners have a purpose, and as long as this is a purpose which, in principle, a code of manners might fail to achieve, there are nonconventional limits to what could possibly count as good manners. If, as I have suggested, rules of manners are rules for expressing respect, the main point of which is to enable people to directly acknowledge the intrinsic value of others, then it is possible for there to be codes of manners which are bad codes of manners, that is, codes of bad manners. We are committed to this possibility, if we believe that people ought to respect one another no matter what their particular way of life, and if we also believe that there are nonconventional limits to what can count as directly acknowledging another person's dignity. Just as from a moral point of view, we can criticize a moral code for failing to appreciate that all persons are intrinsically valuable, so too, from the point of view of manners, we can criticize a code of manners for failing to appreciate that all persons are intrinsically valuable.

Again, it is important to stress that the possibility of this sort of criticism is perfectly compatible with the possibility that our own code of manners can be traced to a time in which very few people were deemed worthy of respect. And again, an analogy helps make the point. Even if many of our fundamental moral rules had their origin in religious beliefs which most of us no longer accept, and even if the first people who took these rules seriously did not believe that all people are intrinsically valuable *as persons,* we can appeal to our present understanding of what justifies the rules in order to criticize codes of behavior that instruct certain people to ignore the interests and concerns of certain other people. So,

1985], p. 74). "The overall demand of the situation [that inspires embarrassment] is always that [the person] make a certain impression or correct a certain impression which he thinks the audience is left with either because of his own behavior or because of the behavior of a member of his group with whom he thinks he will be identified" (p. 75).

too, even if our fundamental rules of good manners have their origin in antidemocratic beliefs about the significance of class and caste, so that the first people who took these rules seriously did not believe that all people are intrinsically valuable *as persons,* we can appeal to our present understanding of what justifies the rules to criticize codes of behavior that instruct certain people not to bother letting certain other people know that their interests and concerns are important. In the first case, we charge the code with being immoral; in the second case, we charge it with being a code of bad manners.

Of course, any claim that a code of behavior is a code of bad manners can be challenged as an expression of cultural bias. But in this respect, too, manners are on an equal footing with the rest of morality. In other words, we have no better reason for thinking that there are considerations internal to *morality* which can give us good grounds for condemning a given code of behavior than we have for thinking that there are considerations internal to *manners* which can give us good grounds for condemning a given code of behavior.

Some codes of behavior single out certain persons for rude, even contemptuous, treatment. Consider the case of India. Until recently, Brahmins adhered strictly to a code of behavior that stipulated "various kinds of ritualized humiliations and insults that Untouchables [were] obliged to undergo as part of the norms of avoidance and social distance that [were] aimed at maintaining the cultural definition of Untouchables as inherently inferior and impure."[27] The code also required the untouchables to acknowledge their own worthlessness in various ways. They were "obliged to call their children 'calves' or some other term denoting young animals. When addressing Brahmins, [they could never use] the first-person pronoun 'I' to refer to themselves, but rather were required to say something like 'Your humble dog respectfully requests.' " [28]

Such a code is not acceptable from the point of view of manners. The behavior it sanctions is not only immoral but impolite, discourteous, inconsiderate in the extreme. This is not because the code is hierarchical. Though we might criticize this aspect of the code from the point of view of justice, it is perfectly possible for rules that distinguish among classes (or castes) to enable each person to treat every other with dignity and courtesy. Indeed, it is precisely because class-sensitive rules of manners can provide members of each class with ways of treating members

27. Charles P. Flynn, *Insult and Society: Patterns of Comparative Interaction* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1977), p. 44.

28. Ibid., p. 45. Felicia Ackerman acknowledges that such cases are "debased" "systems of politeness." "At most," she claims, "this seems to be a one-way system of politeness, where members of the subordinate class have obligations to members of the superior class, but not vice-versa" (Ackerman, p. 253). My point is that such "one-way systems" can be criticized from the point of view of manners itself for encouraging certain people to treat others impolitely.

of the other classes politely that when someone from the upper class breaks these rules in his interaction with someone in the lower class, the latter may quite reasonably take offense at the former's "familiarity."

The problem with the Indian code, from the point of view of manners, is that it tells people in one group to treat people in another group discourteously; and it tells people in this other group that they do not deserve polite treatment since, after all, they are altogether lacking in dignity.[29] This is also the problem with the racist code of behavior to which so many in our own country adhered before and after the emancipation of the slaves. The racist code can be criticized from the point of view of manners because it perverted the proper function of manners: it instructed whites not to acknowledge blacks as worthy of respect.

If certain people are systematically excluded from the community of those whose dignity must be directly acknowledged, then, necessarily, they are systematically treated impolitely. But for all I have said, a code need not go this far to be a code of bad manners. That is, for all I have said, a code of manners could be a code of bad manners even if it stipulates modes of expressing deference to every mentally competent adult human being. In speaking of the caste system, I noted that its hierarchical structure is not what makes it unacceptable from the point of view of manners: a code of manners can encourage us to treat all people respectfully without encouraging us to treat all people the same.[30] Nonetheless, there are limits to how differently we can treat certain people without ceasing to express the view that they, too, have the dignity which does not vary from person to person. Perhaps, from the point of view of manners, there is nothing wrong with a code that tells students to defer to teachers in ways that teachers need not defer to students or a code that tells children (even adult children) to defer to their parents in ways that their parents need not defer to them. Perhaps, from the point of view of manners, there is nothing wrong with a code that tells us to address visiting dignitaries, employers, doctors, and so on with greater formality than we use in addressing our friends. But what about a code that requires men (and only men) to hold the door open for women (and only women)? that tells men to pull the chair out for women, to tip their hats to women, and so on?

Reasonable people can (and do) disagree about whether the code

29. Insofar as the code of the Indian caste system is intended to ensure certain people against contamination by others, those who live by the code do not take it to be a code of manners. But it is important to see that this is irrelevant to whether it can be criticized from the point of view of manners—just as it is irrelevant to whether it can be criticized from the point of view of morality.

30. As Ronald Dworkin puts it, the duty to treat people as equals is not the duty to treat them equally (Ronald Dworkin, "DeFunis v. Sweatt," in *Equality and Preferential Treatment,* ed. Marshall Cohen et al. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977], pp. 67–68).

of manners to which these imperatives belong is a code that permits all persons to treat all other persons respectfully.[31] The disagreement is not over whether the code reflects and reinforces discrimination against women. Both sides can grant that it is, in this sense, a sexist code, and that it can and ought to be criticized as such. The point of contention concerns a more fundamental question regarding the evaluation of codes of manners: when these codes stand in various intricate causal relations to various unjust practices, is it appropriate to regard the beliefs that underlie the injustice as an essential part of the message that is communicated by the behavior required by the code?

Those who favor an affirmative answer to this question are inclined to think that the requirements of the sexist code prevent men from directly acknowledging the dignity of women. On this view, the code instructs men to behave in ways that, in effect, tell women that they are inferior beings. So, the problem with the code is a problem internal to manners: it is precisely because the required behavior expresses a lack of respect for women that it encourages men (and women too) to regard women as the sort of beings who do not deserve the opportunity to vote or to pursue the careers of their choice.[32]

According to the opposing view, the sexist code of manners cannot be criticized from the point of view of manners itself, for it permits all people to express a respectful attitude toward all others. Whereas the critics assimilate the sexist code to the racist code mentioned above, the defenders assimilate it to codes that require the differential treatment of teachers and students, parents and children. It must be possible, they argue, to acknowledge a person's dignity in ways that also acknowledge some way(s) in which she differs from other persons. What is wrong with the code is not that it prevents men from directly acknowledging women as worthy of respect but that it reflects and contributes to the view that women are different from men in ways they are not. (Teachers really are different from their students in morally relevant respects; but men really are not different from women in morally relevant respects.) It is thus unacceptable from a point of view *external* to manners.

It is important to distinguish the claim that a code of manners can be a code of bad manners from the claim that someone can behave impolitely by conforming her behavior to some rule of manners. Even if a code of manners is a code of good manners, it can, on occasion, be used for other purposes. Just as in speaking sarcastically, we mean the opposite of what we say, so, too, rules of politeness can be used to make people

31. I thank the members of Philamore for helping me to appreciate the extent and the nature of this disagreement.

32. Note that the person who defends this view might be willing to say that a man who refrains from holding the door open for a woman behaves "impolitely." But by this he will only mean that such behavior is widely thought to be impolite by those in the man's community.

uncomfortable, and even upset. In particular, precisely because rules of manners vary from group to group, they can be used to remind others that they are outsiders. When someone does this she is not behaving politely, even though her behavior conforms to a rule of manners that is perfectly acceptable in itself. Thus, someone who makes a point of treating a shy stranger with the formality her in-group deems proper may well be guilty of rudeness.

* * *

Again, it is not possible to prove that one conception of manners is superior to all others. Nonetheless, I believe I can strengthen the case for the view I have been advocating here by considering the light it sheds on a code of behavior that is playing an increasingly influential role in the life of our cities: "the code of the street." The basic idea of the street code is that in order to avoid being "dissed," one must demonstrate that one is not to be "messed with"; and this often requires that one treat other people as mere means. According to Elijah Anderson, a social scientist who has recently studied the code, there is a "widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest 'nerve.' Nerve is shown when one takes another person's possessions (the more valuable the better), 'messes with' someone's woman, throws the first punch, 'gets in someone's face,' or pulls a trigger."[33]

There is something deeply problematic about this code of behavior. But what, exactly, is the problem? Clearly, the code discourages people from acknowledging one another *indirectly:* it is a bad code because it tells people to ignore the interests and concerns of certain (most) other people. But this is not the whole story. For this problem reflects the further fact that the code tells people that it is inappropriate to express themselves respectfully to certain (most) other people. At one level, this is because, according to the street code, people are not worthy of respect unless they have certain "trophies," and these trophies are in short supply. As Anderson points out, this turns earning respect into a zero-sum game.[34] And since, according to the code, one does not *deserve* to be treated respectfully unless one has *earned* respect, the result is that many (indeed, most) people are declared by the code to be unworthy.

The connection between deserving respect and earning respect is the deeper, more fundamental explanation of why the street code is unacceptable from the point of view of manners. To understand the problem it will help to consider for a moment the testimony of one who has lived by the code. "Where I lived," writes Sanyika Shakur, aka Monster

33. Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Street: How the Inner-city Environment Fosters a Need for Respect and a Self-image Based on Violence," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1994), p. 89.

34. Ibid., p. 92.

Kody Scott, "stepping on someone's shoe was a capital offense punishable by death. This was not just in a few isolated instances, or as a result of one or two hotheads, but a recognized given for the crime of disrespect. Regardless of the condition of the shoes, the underlying factor that usually got you killed was the principle. The principle is respect, a linchpin critical to relations between all people, but magnified by thirty in the ghettos and slums across America." [35]

Anderson notes that "for people who are unfamiliar with the code —generally people who live outside the inner city—the concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible." [36] But this misdiagnoses the perversity of the rule Shakur describes. Nothing is more typically human than "the concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions." Think of the significance we attribute to the subtlest gestures (the curl of the lip, the raised eyebrows), the slightest differences in vocal tone. It is hardly an extraordinary occurrence, moreover, for someone to take great offense at a simple act that does him no material injury. Think of how very distressed we become when someone points his hand in our general direction while raising his middle finger.

Still, there *is* something wrong with the situation Shakur describes, and his remarks provide the clue. The problem, he suggests, lies not with the number or type of social interactions that contain the potential for showing or withholding signs of respect. Rather, the problem lies with the exaggerated significance attributed to each of these symbolic expressions: rude behavior is not really so important that it justifies fighting to the death.

I think this diagnosis is right as far as it goes. But it still does not go far enough. To get the full story we have to ask ourselves *why* the practitioners of street manners place too much value on giving and withholding marks of respect. The answer is, I believe, that the code of the street downplays the role that marks of respect play in enabling people to *acknowledge* one another's respectworthiness, subordinating this role to the role they play in *conferring* respectworthiness. People raised according to the code of the street are encouraged to think that they have no value independent of the value they acquire from being acknowledged by others. Of course, their worth will increase if they have trophies of various kinds. But trophies themselves confer value only insofar as they elicit recognition from others. According to the code of the street, when someone fails to acknowledge you, you have no value; when someone offends you, you have no dignity. This is why men of the street attribute so much

35. Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 102.

36. Anderson, p. 92.

significance to every failure to behave courteously: recognition is a necessary condition for the possibility of *self*-respect.

When a code of behavior suggests that a person is respectworthy only if he is actually treated with respect, then it is a bad code of behavior. It is a bad code of behavior because it is a code of bad manners: it undermines people's ability to acknowledge one another's dignity directly; it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for each person to assure every other that he appreciates the other's intrinsic value. This undermining effect comes about in two ways. First, no one can apply the rules correctly without understanding that a person's value depends on how he is treated. So, even leaving to one side the zero-sum aspect of the code, a conscientious practitioner will encounter many people who, in his view, lack dignity—because their dignity has not been acknowledged by anyone else. Second, when so much is at stake in expressions of respect, no one can afford to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. Failures to treat someone with courtesy cannot be excused as inadvertent mistakes or signs of ignorance. They are threats to one's very worth, and so one has a powerful reason to treat the offending person as though he has no intrinsic value himself.[37]

Again, this hostility toward expressions of respect is a problem *from the point of view of manners*. Indeed, one way of characterizing the problem is that by giving rules of behavior a value-conferring role, the code of the street violates what is probably the only universal principle of good manners. To quote Miss Manners: "The polite thing to do has always been to address people as they wish to be addressed, to treat them in a way they think dignified. But it is equally important to accept and tolerate different standards of courtesy, not expecting everyone else to adapt to one's own preferences."[38] In short, a courteous person behaves courteously even toward those who fail to treat her in a way she thinks is respectful. This principle reflects the moral function of manners: rules of manners should not get in the way of people's acknowledging one another's dignity.

37. A second code which seems to have had this characteristic was the code of southern honor. Flynn recounts the following tale of what happened to "a transplanted northerner who was not fully socialized to the stringent norms governing interaction with upper-class women." A judge was playing cards with two ladies and another judge. "As the game progressed, one of the ladies exclaimed [and here Flynn quotes directly from his source, Harnett Kane, *Gentlemen, Swords, and Pistols*]: 'Judge Selden, we have the tricks and honors on you!' Judge Selden blinked. Even the fact that he came from the North did not require him to accept an obvious error. 'That is not so,' said Judge Selden, quietly. The lady, very much mortified at the ungracious reply, put up her handkerchief to hide her quivering lips, and also her aggrieved ladyhood. The other judge at the card table immediately defended the lady's honor by challenging Judge Selden, without the formal preliminaries, to a duel. Several days later Selden was killed on the field of honor" (Flynn, p. 51).

38. Martin, p. 100.

Once we understand that good manners are essential to treating people with respect, we gain insight into what is wrong with the code of the street. At the same time, we better understand why things have gone so very wrong in this way. Most adherents of the street code believe that they have been "written off" by the larger society of which they are marginally a part. They believe that few, if any, in the larger group are willing to adjust their own ends so as to enable them, the inhabitants of the street, to exercise their own capacity as end-setters—their capacity to form and carry out their own "plans of life." Under these circumstances, they naturally attribute exaggerated significance to manners: some sort of acknowledgment is better than none; one element of treating people with respect becomes especially important when the other element is missing.[39] In short, the hypersensitivity to rude, discourteous, inconsiderate treatment which is characteristic of those who live by the street code makes sense because, and only because, the point of good manners is to assure people that one really does believe they are worthy of respect.

As I suggested earlier in discussing the work of Cora Diamond, it is this fact about good manners that explains their powerful influence on our beliefs about what justice requires of us in our relations with others. Thus, we should not be surprised that injustice is an *effect* of the street code as well as a *cause* of the exaggerated significance it places on direct expressions of respect. Precisely because the value-conferring function of the street code and its zero-sum nature discourage people from acknowledging one another's dignity *directly,* they discourage people from acknowledging one another *indirectly*. In other words, the most outrageous behavior of the code's adherents is largely a function of the fact that it is a code of bad manners. If this is not immediately obvious, just consider what would happen if the code encouraged every person to treat every other with courtesy: respect could not be earned by treating others as though they had no dignity; and lapses of courtesy would not be such a blow to one's dignity that one would have no choice but to let everyone know how little one values the offender.

* * *

The code of the street illustrates the considerable extent to which the two elements of treating people with respect are interdependent. From this interdependence, moreover, it not only follows that bad manners and (other) bad morals are often mutually reinforcing, but that it is often very difficult to discover when the requirements of courtesy are in conflict with the requirement to accommodate our ends to the ends of others. In the remaining pages, I want to call attention at once to the fact that such conflict is possible and to the fact that this possibility is easily obscured by the powerful effect which our manners exert on our morals.

39. I thank Maggie Little for reminding me of this sad fact.

I will do this by taking a close look at one of our own important rules of manners: the requirement that we "mind our own business."

The rule I have in mind is as well entrenched and pervasive in its influence as any I can think of. It is impolite, we are told, not to mind our own business. More particularly, politeness requires that, for the most part, we refrain from offering unsolicited information and/or advice to anyone with whom we are not pretty intimately acquainted.[40] Since this rule does not undermine our ability to acknowledge one another's respectworthiness *directly,* it does not encourage bad manners. Nonetheless, it may not be a morally defensible rule, for it may undermine our ability to acknowledge one another's respectworthiness *indirectly.* I do not intend to settle this issue here. Rather, my aim is to provide some grounds for taking it seriously and, in so doing, to extend my exploration of the significant role that manners play in our moral life.

My worry is this. Our obligation to treat one another with respect seems to entail a duty to come to one another's aid.[41] When someone is drowning in a pond, and I can save her at little cost to myself, I would be wrong to walk on by: the fact that *she* is drowning is *my business.* Most of us accept this as more or less obvious stuff. Yet many of us shrink at the very thought of leaning over to tell the stranger waiting with us for a job interview that he seems to have sneezed something onto his collar. And we would be even more reluctant to approach a coworker with whom we have no social relationship to inform her of the nasty rumors circulating at her expense, or to warn her that one of her habits seems to be getting on the boss's nerves, or to remind her of the very good reasons not to become romantically involved with another coworker. It is essential to our way of life that we cannot do any of these things without sticking our nose in *someone else's* business. And to thus force ourselves where we are not welcome is to insult those upon whom we intrude.

To insult someone is to offend him, and there can be no doubt that we are offended when someone is bad mannered enough not to mind

40. As Miss Manners explains, "If the urge overwhelms you, it is better to write leaflets and hand them out to strangers on the street, than to offend your friends by giving them unsolicited advice" (Martin, p. 520). Susan Wolf has suggested to me that the requirement to mind one's own business is a peculiarly WASPy requirement. The important point for my purposes, however, is that it is a widely accepted requirement, deeply entrenched in many societies. More importantly still, no matter how widely accepted or deeply entrenched it may be, it is useful to consider whether it can be reconciled with our duty to treat one another as ends.

41. Kant, of course, makes this point in the *Groundwork* (Immanuel Kant, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. H. J. Paton [New York: Harper & Row, 1964]). See, esp., his third illustrations of both the formula of the universal law and the formula of the end in itself, pp. 90–91, 98. For an interesting discussion of Kant's views regarding our duty to come to one another's aid, see Barbara Herman, "Mutual Aid and Respect for Persons," in Herman's *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 45–72.

her own business. The mere fact that some pattern of behavior offends us, however, is hardly a decisive reason for concluding that one ought not to behave this way. After all, a Brahmin would be deeply offended if an untouchable refused to comply with the rules of the caste system; a slave owner would be deeply offended if one of his slaves refused to behave as though he were less respectworthy than members of the master race. We need to ask, then, whether we *should* be offended by a person's failure to mind her own business. More particularly, we need to consider whether it might not often be necessary for a person to mind *our* business if she is really to value our capacity to set our own ends, and so avoid offending against our dignity. In attempting to justify our reaction to violations of the requirement to mind one's own business, we are tempted to treat the conventional lines we draw between our own business and that of others as though they were natural lines and to insist that someone who sticks her nose in other people's business is being presumptuous, even violating a basic "right to privacy." But justifications of this sort are nothing more than restatements of the belief they purport to justify. To truly justify this belief we must rebut the suggestion that minding another person's business is often the only way to treat this person as an end in himself.

As the dictionary tells us, to be presumptuous is to be "too bold or forward," to "take too much for granted," "to show overconfidence, arrogance, or effrontery."[42] The mere fact that someone knowingly violates a rule of polite behavior is often enough to qualify her as "too bold or forward." But there also seems to be something about failures to mind one's own business which explains our belief that such failures are paradigm instances of impolite behavior. Someone who approached her coworker in the manner described above would, it seems, be too bold and forward, arrogant, and so on not only because she would be presuming that the rules of polite behavior did not apply to her but also because she would be presuming to know things of which she might well be ignorant. She would be presuming to have information that could be helpful to her coworker; and she would be "taking for granted" that she knew things of which her coworker was ignorant, and that she understood the relevance of this information to her coworker's life. We find such presumption insulting because it seems to imply that our lives are far simpler than they really are and that, their simplicity notwithstanding, we are incapable of taking care of ourselves.

This defense of the requirement to mind one's own business is quite compelling. Nonetheless, it does not directly address the charge that the requirement is in tension with our duty to come to one another's aid. In the interest of pressing this charge, I want to make several points. First,

42. David B. Guralink, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language,* 2d College ed. (Cleveland: William Collins, 1979), p. 1126.

though we can never be certain about whether we have correctly sized up a situation, we can often be pretty confident. Do we need a more secure basis than this to justify intruding ourselves into someone else's life? Surely not. Think, again, of the case of the person who is flailing her arms in the water. Perhaps she is not drowning. Perhaps she really *wants* to drown. If she does not call out for help, we cannot be *certain* that she needs our help. Nonetheless, we would be wrong to let this stop us from trying to pull her out. Similarly, we cannot be certain that the little old lady who is struggling with her parcel needs our help to keep it from falling to the ground. But there are suggestive signs; and when we see them, we would be wrong to hold back.

Consider, now, the job candidate.[43] If you have witnessed this person's unfortunate sneeze, then you know exactly what has happened to his collar; and surely you can have no legitimate worry that he might really want to preserve it in its present condition! Of course, unlike the behavior of the drowning victim, or of the lady struggling with her parcel, the job candidate's behavior cannot be interpreted as an appeal for help. But this is simply because he does not know that he is in trouble; and the fact that he is ignorant is precisely why he needs your help. Like a person who is about to step onto a faulty bridge, the job candidate would surely be grateful for the information you could so easily give him, even though he has done nothing to indicate that he desires your assistance. It is true that he would *not* be grateful if he took offense at your "interference" in his affairs. But why would he take offense, unless it were simply because he subscribed to the very code of polite behavior whose legitimacy we are here calling into question?

It seems to me that similar reflections apply to the case of the coworker about whom people are circulating nasty rumors. Surely, it is no less reasonable to suppose that someone would prefer to silence such rumors than it is to suppose that she would prefer not to drown. True, it might not be clear to you whether she is *capable* of doing what it takes to clear her reputation. But even in this case, it would be reasonable to assume that she would want to *try,* or at least to "know where she stands."

Finally, even if, as in the case of the coworker who is getting on the boss's nerves, one runs a risk of telling someone what she already knows and so of treating her as less observant, less perceptive, less self-sufficient than she really is, why should this relieve one of the obligation to try to help? I suggested that there might be something naturally insulting about being treated as though one is not self-sufficient. In fact, however, I simply do not see what nature has to do with it. We all need help sometimes. We are all vulnerable in countless ways. We are all susceptible to making mistakes. A way of life according to which it was impolite to remind people of these most basic facts of human nature would almost

43. The following discussion was prompted by a question from Alexander Nehamas.

surely be a way of life according to which one would have to offend against someone's dignity in order to avoid offending her. In other words, to participate in this way of life, one could not treat other people respectfully without failing to treat them with respect.

To see just how perverse this way of life would be, consider, once again, the case of someone flailing in the water. Imagine that she lives in a community in which people are so exquisitely sensitive about their own finitude that they cannot bear to be reminded of their mortality. They would rather die than have a stranger imply that she believes they are at risk of dying. Under such circumstances, any attempt to save the flailing person would be an intolerable intrusion, a profound blow to her dignity. Nonetheless, we can criticize such a culture from a moral point of view. For its rules of polite behavior are in tension with the fact that, in some sense, the ends of each are the business of all. (According to the barrister in the movie *A Fish Called Wanda,* British rules of manners are perverse in much the same way as the rules of my imaginary hypersensitive culture: the British are so terrified of mentioning any fact that might be the least bit disagreeable that they can hardly say anything to one another; they must even avoid asking one another how their families are doing, since it is always possible that this question will force the admission that someone has recently died.)

Not only may it be permissible, and even obligatory, to mind someone's business when we are in an epistemic position far weaker than that of paradigm aid-givers but there may also be far more occasions than our rules of politeness allow on which we ought to mind the business of someone who makes it quite clear that she does not want to alter her situation. Suppose, for example, it is clear that your coworker enjoys rubbing her boss the wrong way. If this is so, then there is no point in telling her that she is, in fact, getting on his nerves. This hardly settles the matter, however, for she might still need your help; she might need to be reminded of how vindictive the boss can be and of how important it is for her to keep her job. In short, even if there is an obvious sense in which someone does not want to change her situation, it may be reasonably clear that there is another sense in which she does: it might be that her situation must change if she is to have what she cares about most.

The coworker who deliberately irritates her boss resembles the coworker who has become romantically involved with another coworker: in this last case, too, there is an obvious sense in which the person to be helped does not *want* any help; for (I will assume) it is reasonably clear that nothing prevents her from terminating the relationship. Having admitted as much, however, we can still ask whether the relationship is really compatible with the things the coworker cares about most. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it poses a serious threat to these things. In reminding her of why it poses a threat, you would not be forcing her to alter her behavior; you would not even be forcing her to alter her immediate priorities. You

would not be interfering with her capacity to think and choose for herself; and, in particular, you would not be "imposing your values" on her. You would simply be calling her attention to certain considerations she may have temporarily overlooked and letting her know that you think these considerations ought to be taken more seriously than she seems to be doing. This reminder might well be just what it takes for her to pursue the goals that are most important to her—and thereby to avoid considerable suffering. Under these circumstances, how can it be wrong to speak up?

Given the prohibition against minding someone else's business, the sort of reminder at issue here is likely to cause offense. But again, in order to evaluate this convention, we cannot take its legitimacy for granted. We must also be careful not to draw unwarranted conclusions from the fact that, conventions aside, some information and advice will do more harm than good. To defend our conventions regarding minding one's own business, it is not sufficient to point out that there are many occasions on which violations of these conventions would be violations of our duty to treat one another with respect. We must also show that upholding these conventions does not tend to undermine our ability to treat one another with respect. This undermining effect could occur even if there were many occasions on which the behavior recommended by the conventions coincided with the behavior required to treat someone with respect. People can be faulted for misappraising their qualifications for giving advice; they can be faulted for giving advice in an antagonistic or patronizing manner or at the wrong time or place. So, too, people can be faulted for using a child abuse hotline to make a claim unsupported by the evidence.

By exerting a powerful influence on our very conception of what is required to treat one another with respect, our rules of polite behavior play a decisive role in whether we do, in fact, treat one another with respect. Among these rules, moreover, the requirement that we mind our own business has an especially significant moral influence. No matter how irreproachable our motivation for obeying this requirement, it encourages a preoccupation with self which may itself merit reproach; for, by discouraging us from treating another person's end-setting as our own business, it makes it easy for us to refrain from considering whether her circumstances are such as to give us reason to adjust our own ends. Even if we are determined to mind our own business, we may find it quite entertaining, even profitable, to observe one another closely. But insofar as we thus relate to one another from the vantage point of the disinterested spectator or the self-interested exploiter of resources, we treat one another merely as means.

Of course, in order to treat people as more than mere means, it will not do to help them achieve their own ends by pushing them around: when we interfere with someone's attempts to accomplish some goal, we

are interfering with his goal of accomplishing something himself.[44] If our conventions of minding our own business encourage us to regard one another as mere means, this is not because they discourage us from trying to run one another's lives but because they discourage us from considering when an offer of help might actually enhance someone's ability to lead his own life. People thus discouraged "take it for granted" that by lying low and keeping quiet they can remain beyond reproach.

Advocates of the ethics of care attribute the detached stance of someone determined to mind her own business to a misplaced preoccupation with the value of respect.[45] But this diagnosis cannot be correct. If treating people with respect requires that we accommodate our own ends to (some of) theirs, then it would seem to require that, in some sense, we regard (some of) their ends as ends *for us* (for otherwise, these ends would not impose any constraints on us that did not depend on the ends we already have anyway). Since we cannot be indifferent to someone if we are to regard his ends in this way—since indifference to someone is incompatible with accommodating our goals to his—it follows that without care, there can be no respect.[46] A preoccupation with behaving *respectfully* can coexist with real indifference, but this is because behaving respectfully does not suffice for treating someone with respect.

These reflections suggest yet another way to put my question about minding one's own business: does this rule of manners permit us to *care enough* about one another, and if so, does it permit us to make the offers of help it is appropriate for us to make when we care this much? I do not know the answer to these questions. I only know that it is important to try to answer them. Again, the task is made especially difficult by the powerful conditioning influence which manners exert on our moral intuitions. We know that there are occasions on which we must violate a rule of polite behavior in order to do the right thing. But our sense of what counts as directly acknowledging another's dignity makes it easy for us to overlook the fact that the rules themselves might actually conflict with our obligation to treat one another with respect.

Fortunately, there have always been people to remind us of this possibility. Thus, even while marshalling powerful arguments against paternalism, John Stuart Mill defends the view that "human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be forever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties and

44. This is a point which opponents of paternalism will not let us forget.

45. For a discussion of the relation between care and respect from the perspective of an ethics of care, see Robin Dillon, "Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1992): 105–31.

46. In making this point, I mean to leave open the question of whether a special emotional component is essential to the sort of caring that is contrasted with indifference.

increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations. . . . It would be well, indeed, if this good office were much more freely rendered than the common notions of politeness at present permit, and if one person could honestly point out to another that he thinks him in fault, without being considered unmannerly or presuming."[47]

In bringing this article to a close, I want to extend my reflections on the moral status of minding one's own business by trying to imagine what it might be like to take Mill's remarks seriously, and, more generally, what it might be like to regard "minding one's own business" as a rule of manners at odds with our duty to come to one another's aid. This difficult task is made easier by George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Toward the end of this novel, Dr. Lydgate is in disgrace. The citizens of Middlemarch are abuzz with speculations about the role he has played in the death of the man who has been persecuting Lydgate's benefactor. Dorothea Brooke refuses to believe the slander; and she longs to come to Lydgate's aid. "What do we live for," she asks, "if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?"[48] To this question, the representatives of propriety have a ready answer: "But Dorothea," they protest, "you can't undertake to manage a man's life for him in that way. Lydgate must know—at least he will soon come to know how he stands. If he can clear himself, he will. He must act for himself."[49] Dorothea replies: "I should not be afraid of asking Mr. Lydgate to tell me the truth, that I might help him. . . . There is the best opportunity in the world for me to ask for his confidence; and he would be able to tell me things which might make all the circumstances clear. Then we would all stand by him and bring him out of his trouble. People glorify all sorts of bravery except the bravery they might show on behalf of their nearest neighbours."[50]

Dorothea will not be deterred from minding Lydgate's business. That is, she insists on regarding his business as hers. "The idea of some active good within her reach, 'haunted her like a passion,' and another's need having once come to her as a distinct image, preoccupied her desire with the yearning to give relief, and made her own ease tasteless. She was full of confident hope about this interview with Lydgate, never heeding what was said of his personal reserve; never heeding that she was a very young woman."[51] As soon as the two are alone together, she assures him that she does not believe he has done anything dishonorable. Then she gets right to the point. " 'I beseech you to tell me how everything was,' said Dorothea, fearlessly. 'I am sure that the truth would clear

47. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin, 1979), pp. 142–44.
48. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 789.
49. Ibid., p. 790.
50. Ibid., p. 791.
51. Ibid., pp. 817–18.

you.' " " 'Tell me, pray,' said Dorothea, with simple earnestness; 'then we can consult together. It is wicked to let people think evil of any one falsely, when it can be hindered.' "[52]

Eliot describes the effect of this petition and of the discussion that follows. Lydgate "felt that he was recovering his old self."[53] "He gave himself up, for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy, without any check of proud reserve."[54] In this state of mind, he confesses that he has not been able to speak of his troubles with his own wife, Rosamond. And this initiates yet another intrusion. " 'May I go and see her?' said Dorothea, eagerly. 'Would she accept my sympathy? I would tell her that you have not been blamable before any one's judgment but your own. I would tell her that you shall be cleared in every fair mind. I would cheer her heart. Will you ask her if I may go to see her? I did see her once.' "[55]

Lydgate agrees to the visit, but he does not inform Rosamond. Thus, Dorothea sets out to discuss the most sensitive personal matters with a woman she has seen only once, to offer information and advice, and to do so despite having received not so much as a sign from Rosamond that such a discussion would be welcome. On her arrival, she discovers Rosamond in an intimate discussion with a friend of Lydgate's. Flustered, she leaves without accomplishing her goal. But after much soul searching (occasioned in large part by the fact that she is herself in love with the friend), she concludes that she must do whatever she can to save Rosamand's marriage. After all, "what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her."[56] "There might still be time to rescue [Rosamond] from the misery of false incompatible bonds."[57]

Dorothea believes that Rosamond's business is her own. And because this is neither the arrogant belief that she knows more about this business than Rosamond does nor the equally arrogant belief that she is entitled to push Rosamond around, her astounding intrusion into this hostile, self-centered woman's life inspires gratitude, and her rescue attempt is successful. Dorothea is a very naive young woman, but Eliot is on her side. "If Dorothea, after her night's anguish, had not taken that walk to Rosamond—why, she perhaps would have been a woman who gained a higher character for discretion, but it would certainly not have been as well for those three who were on one hearth in Lydgate's house

52. Ibid., p. 819.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 820.
55. Ibid., p. 823.
56. Ibid., p. 846.
57. Ibid., p. 854.

at half-past seven that evening."[58] The moral of the story is clear: if we really take seriously our duty to come to one another's aid, then we will reject any rule of polite behavior that would systematically dissuade us from fulfilling this duty. Eliot shows us that it is hard to accept the requirement to mind one's own business without developing a strong disinclination to acknowledge any circumstances in which an exception is warranted. And she invites us to consider whether duty may not require us to make so many exceptions to the rule that the rule itself must be abandoned.

Of course, it could be permissible to abandon the rule even if it is not our duty to violate it; and it might well seem that Dorothea goes *beyond* the call of duty in extending a helping hand to Lydgate and Rosamond. Eliot forces us to reconsider this intuition, however. She presents the vision that inspires Dorothea to return to Rosamond as a genuine insight into the claim that one human being has on another: "She felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining."[59]

It takes courage for even as ardent and innocent a young person as Dorothea to buck convention in the way that she does. How much more courage, then, would be required of the rest of us, who would have to overcome powerful inhibitions against appearing presumptuous? We would have to run the very great risk of causing offense, aware all the while that we might really have misjudged the situation. And we would have to accept whatever long-term responsibilities might follow from having claimed another person's business as our own.[60] Clearly, this is not a job for the faint of heart. Yet if we were to accept this job, we would not be without resources. Manners themselves come to the aid of those who decide to flout even the most fundamental rules of manners: there are many different marks of deference; we have many ways of reassuring one another that we do, indeed, regard one another as worthy of respect. Dorothea behaves with utmost courtesy even as she minds the business of others. She balances the "'indiscretion" of forcing herself upon Lydgate and Rosamond with great discretion in her mode of addressing them. She reassures them with the tone of her voice, the expression on her face; she never asks them about their domestic troubles; and she never acts superior—"as if she herself were perfection addressing er-

58. Ibid., p. 861.

59. Ibid., p. 846.

60. See Mill, p. 174: "When a person, either by express promise or by conduct, has encouraged another to rely on his continuing to act in a certain way—to build expectations and calculations, and stake any part of his plan of life upon that supposition—a new series of moral obligations arises on his part towards that person, which may possibly be overruled, but cannot be ignored."

ror."[61] Under such circumstances, Eliot shows us, it is remarkably easy to "rescue" another human being from distress, depression, confusion, temptation. Surely, there will be failures. But, surely, the stakes are high enough to justify the risk.

Of course, to any uncertainty we may have about how we might be able to help someone must be added the uncertainty of whether it is really our business to try. If it is *not* our business, then in forcing ourselves upon someone, we will have offended this person for no justifiable reason. On the other hand, if it *is* our business, then in conforming to the accepted rules of polite behavior we will have failed to treat this person with the respect he deserves.

If we had a clearer notion of where our business stopped and someone else's business started, we would know when it is appropriate for us to offer unsolicited advice and information and when it is not. As far as I can tell, however, we are very much in the dark. Our code of manners conspires with our self-interest to urge us to err on the side of giving too little aid. And since morality offers ambiguous instructions, it might seem obvious that we ought not to follow Dorothea's example. On the other hand, there are few things more important than accommodating our ends to the ends of others. And this seems to entail that we ought to do what we can to help one another, when we can do so at little cost to ourselves.[62] To my mind, this, in turn, suggests that we have an obligation to test the hypothesis that our own business exceeds the boundaries marked off by manners. Since, ultimately, the importance of manners reflects the importance of treating one another with respect, our code of manners should not itself raise any strong objections to this experiment—at least not if we conduct it with the utmost delicacy. It seems to me, moreover, that no well-mannered person will take offense at such polite intrusions into what she takes to be her own business. On the contrary, she will politely assume that the intruder simply has a "different standard of courtesy."

61. Eliot, p. 855. As Jonathan Adler has reminded me, it is relatively easy for us to be confident that Dorothea's behavior is morally praiseworthy because Eliot gives us a clear view of her heroine's motives. But my point about the resources of manners is, in part, that even without this clear view, there are countless aspects of a person's behavior that can give us insight into whether she is acting from benevolent motives and with a due appreciation of the value of acknowledging the dignity of other human beings.

62. I am assuming here that the discomfort we feel at breaking a rule of manners, and risking another person's wrath and contempt, is not a significant cost. Perhaps this assumption is not justified. If so, then I would need to explain why it is proper to assimilate this discomfort to the discomfort of a very selfish person who would suffer greatly if she had to alter her plans to help someone in need.