

Chapter 10

Cultural and Philosophical Resistance to Ritual in Contemporary Culture

David Solomon

Ethics is concerned with action. It investigates questions about how we should act and for what reasons. Since actions take place in different settings, ethics is also concerned with the settings of actions. Among the settings that are important for actions are the social and physical environs in which they are performed. And, among the social settings of particular importance for ethics, are ceremonial and ritualistic frames within which we act.

Rituals are a particularly diverse class of social settings. We perhaps think first of rituals in religious settings (e.g., baptism and celebrations of the eucharist), but they are also ubiquitous in educational settings (e.g., graduation rituals), law (e.g., the swearing in of a jury or the official opening of a judicial body), and in the humdrum aspects of ordinary life (e.g., rituals of greeting, leave-taking, congratulations, and commiseration). Given the variety of rituals and the diverse settings or purposes for them, it is difficult to define 'ritual' by means of necessary and sufficient conditions. We should rather treat the concept of ritual as Wittgenstein proposed we treat the concept of a game.¹ Wittgenstein proposed that in the case of concepts like 'game' and most other general concepts originating in ordinary language, we should look not for essentialist definitions, but rather for mere "family resemblances", i.e., a set of properties widely shared by many instances of the concept in question, but where no one of the properties is universally shared by the instances of the concept.

It is also difficult to distinguish rituals from rites, ceremonies or other forms of institutional settings. Although social scientists have been at pains to attempt to draw careful distinctions among these concepts, the precision they bring to distinguishing these concepts does not fit well with the relatively loose manner in which these concepts are used in ordinary life. For the most part in what

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, pp. 30–31

D. Solomon (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture,
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA
e-mail: wsolomon@nd.edu

follows I will assume that for our purposes the distinctions among rituals, rites, ceremonies and other forms of carefully structured institutional settings for human activities may for the most part be ignored. Although there are no doubt distinctions worth making among these different concepts, for our purposes these distinctions are of little importance.

Rituals, as we understand them, will be rule-governed forms of human activity where the authoritative foundation of the rules lies outside the power of the individuals participating in the ritual and where participating in the activity transforms the significance of the agent's action in some important way. Weddings are rule-governed activities defined by religious or legal authority, or by traditional practice, which have the power to transform the significance of certain behavior (e.g., uttering the words, "I do", in an appropriate manner) so that by uttering those words one is married. Similarly, certain actions depend simply on the rules of linguistic practice to transform the significance of certain forms of linguistic behavior. As an example, when I utter the words, "I promise to pay you five dollars on Friday," in the appropriate circumstances (I am, for example, not acting in a play or reading from a book or under an hypnotic spell) I thereby make a promise. Although the institutional and social background for the practice of promising may seem quite thin compared to the practice of marrying, it seems reasonable to think of both of these social phenomena as rituals.

Given the ubiquity of rituals in any culturally complex setting for human action, it should not be surprising that questions about the nature and significance of ritual and ceremony will be important for ethics. Surprisingly, however, there are certain tendencies in contemporary ethics to play down the significance of the ritualistic—or so, at least, I will argue in what follows. I will first discuss some of the more specific ways in which the presence of ritual settings for actions are important within ethics, and then I will turn to an exploration of a number of reasons why ritual is looked on with a certain suspicion in modern ethics. I will conclude with some general reflections on the tension in modern ethics which both recognizes the significance of ritual, but also seeks to diminish its importance.

10.1

Why is ritual important for ethics—and important for successful human living in general? In asking this question, I would like to move beyond what seem to me the obvious reasons why it would be difficult for most human lives to be lived without ritual. The importance of religious rituals, and the rituals of community life generally (e.g., enrolling in school, singing the national anthem at football games, celebrating one's birthday, etc.) are obviously connected in deep ways with individual identity as well as social identity. Without the social anchors of regular participation in the rites, rituals and ceremonies of religion, the workplace and marketplace, and domestic life, most human lives would be

at risk for a kind of meaninglessness and anomie that would put the very existence of anything like genuine human life in danger. What I would like to focus on, however, is not this general background necessity for ritual settings for human life, but rather on some more specific reasons why ritual is important for ethics.

A particularly important contribution of ritual to human life is found in the power of ritual to expand the repertoire of human action. Without the norm-governed contexts made possible by ritual the range of human action would be severely impoverished. Human beings could not, for example, hit home runs unless they are able to participate in the ritualized game of baseball. Merely hitting a small spherical object over a fence with a short piece of wood is not sufficient for one's action to constitute a home run. In order for this set of actions to be a home run one must perform them in the setting of a baseball game. Moreover, one has to perform them at the right time and in the right way within a baseball game. One cannot, for example, come on to the field between innings and hit a ball over the outfield fence and expect that to count as a home run. One has to perform the appropriate "home run basic actions" when one is legitimately at bat and while the game is legitimately underway. Without baseball there would be no home runs. There is much that we don't know about Socrates' life, but we can know with certainty that he never hit a home run since we know that he had no access to the game of baseball.

There is, of course, much more that needs to be said about how rituals make particular actions possible. There are particularly difficult questions about how similar a norm-governed activity has to be to baseball in order for it to make home runs possible. What if a game were to have five bases instead of four but was otherwise identical to baseball? Would fair balls hit over the fence in such a game be home runs? It is not clear that there is a definitive answer to this question—nor that there need be a definitive answer to it. Some hard cases may not be so hard, however. We would all surely agree that hitting a fly ball over the boundary rope in a cricket match is not a home run. These kinds of cases suggest that we should not look for too much definitiveness in the area of the necessary institutional conditions for a ritual action. But the fact that there is a certain open texture to the norms governing a ritual does not detract from its power in making new kinds of action possible. Just as we can't hit home runs without baseball, we can't be married without weddings—nor can we be divorced. We can't be baptized without religious rituals nor can we earn a Ph.D. without academic rituals. Apart from the threat of meaninglessness that we have already seen is a part of life without ritual, the range of actions open to us would be severely reduced if we were without the resources of rituals.

The problem here is not just that the *number* of distinct human action-types would be severely reduced in a world without ritually constituted actions. It is not merely a quantitative matter. It is also that the actions that would be impossible in such a world are some of the most important actions open to us, and ones that seem uniquely expressive of some of the deepest features of our natures. Our ability to express our love and commitment to others, our ability

to worship and hence to establish a relationship with God, as well as our ability to engage in complicated human practices like games and academic disciplines that allow us to extend our powers in extraordinary and unpredictable ways would all be severely curtailed, if not made impossible, were it not for rituals.²

A second way in which ritual is important for human action is that it facilitates our ability to perform socially complex actions. There are some actions that it might be possible to perform without a well-defined institutional setting, but it would be difficult—for a number of different reasons—to perform them. Consider the case of a simple greeting. It might be possible to greet someone using natural signs of greeting, but without conventional (ritualized) forms of greeting it will be difficult and wasteful of energy. With greeting rituals (a hand-shake, a hug, a pat on the head), the task of greeting someone is much more straight-forward. Just as money facilitates the exchange of goods and renders the tedious and inefficient practice of barter obsolete, so too social rituals serve an analogous function with regard to many of the commonplace actions of human social interaction. Rituals of this sort are particularly important in relations among persons separated by language barriers. Expressions of gratitude, regret, affirmation and many other common attitudes in addition to simple greetings can be made much more easily using the language of ritual and ceremony. And it goes without saying, I take it, that the human ability to insult or demean others is greatly facilitated by the range of ritualized behaviors for expressing such negative attitudes.

This second way in which ritual is important for human action is closely related to a third, and much the most important, way I think. The use of ritual not only makes it easier to perform certain actions, but it is absolutely essential in the task of teaching certain centrally important moral attitudes and in inculcating virtue. The power of ritual in shaping sensibilities and even belief is quite obvious. Pascal in a famous passage suggests that if someone wants to acquire religious belief, the best way to do so is to engage in religious practices faithfully for a period, pretending, as it were, that one already had religious belief. In time, he claimed, religious belief will almost certainly come.

It is in this way, I suspect, that we should read some of the difficult passages in Book II of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he is discussing how

² It is difficult, I think, to overestimate the importance of rituals associated with practices in enriching the possibilities of human life. Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of the significance of practices in Ch. 14 of *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) explores more fully than any other recent work the range and significance of practices for allowing human beings to extend their powers and capacities in pursuing what he calls the goods internal to practices. He also argues that it is only in the context of practices that the full significance of the virtues for successful human life can be appreciated. I cannot here pursue his discussion of these matters in detail, but any adequate discussion of the role of ritual in expanding the range of human actions must take MacIntyre's views on these matters into account.

agents can acquire the virtues.³ He famously says, for example, that the best way to acquire the virtue of courage is to perform courageous actions under the direction of some person or some community that already possesses the virtue. This position is problematic for Aristotle, however, since he has also claimed that for an action to be genuinely courageous it must be performed by a person with a fixed disposition to act courageously—that is, by someone who is already courageous. He seems committed therefore to both the view that one cannot perform a courageous act unless one possesses the virtue of courage and, also, the view that in order to acquire the virtue of courage, one must perform courageous actions. It is obvious however that both of these views cannot be true. Aristotle attempts to render them compatible by suggesting that there are different senses in which an act can be courageous. A fully courageous act is only possible for a person who possesses the virtue of courage, while a person attempting to acquire the virtue can perform actions that share certain features with the actions of the genuinely virtuous persons, but are not fully courageous. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to suppose that Aristotle here is suggesting that in order to acquire genuine courage one must perform rituals, as it were, that seem to ape the courageous actions of the genuinely courageous person. Indeed, isn't this what we do when we encourage our children to engage in games and other endeavors that demand that they learn to deal with feelings of fear and insecurity. These games are occasions for the young to practice courage with the hope that their characters will come to be imbued with it.

There are many other attitudes central to morality that seem to be capable of being taught only through the teaching of ritualized behavior. Consider, for example, the difficulty in teaching young children to respect their elders, especially their elderly relatives. This is especially difficult since we wish to teach these attitudes of respect when children are quite young and when they normally lack even the concept of respect that we adults apply in our relations with our grandparents, our teachers, or our betters. If children lack even the concept of respectful behavior, however, it is difficult to teach it to them by appealing to intellectualized and discursive accounts of respect and its function in the good life. It is quite easy, however, to help children to acquire the concept of respect for elders by initiating them into certain rituals with respect to their elders. In

³ The crucial text is at 1105b5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ross translation) where Aristotle says, "Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them *as* just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good." If this same section of the NE, Aristotle heaps scorn on those who believe that one can acquire virtue by mere intellectual means. He says, for example, "But most people . . . take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy."

the southern United States, where I grew up, children are taught to address any older person with the terms, 'sir' or 'ma'am'. Also, conventional signs of respect such as removing one's hat in the presence of one's elders, or standing when they enter the room are easily taught.

A critic of this style of moral education might comment that it is possible to observe these rituals of respect while lacking respect "in one's heart." In one sense, indeed, this is obviously true. The reason we have to resort to such ritualized forms of moral education is that those being taught do lack "respect in their hearts." Indeed, as we have seen, they may lack even the concept of respect. The critic here, however, may mean that even after the education in respect is complete, the students may continue to ape the rituals of respect without being genuinely respectful. But that simply illustrates a commonplace—there are bad and hypocritical persons in the world. It also calls our attention to the fact that moral education of this sort, like moral education of any sort, can go badly wrong. It may not work every time. Even Pascal would surely admit that some of those persons who practice religion in order to achieve genuine belief, never attain belief. It certainly does not show, however, that the rituals of respect are incompatible with genuine respect. Nor does it even show that they are likely to fail in inculcating respect. It is true, of course, that at an appropriate age this education through ritual has to be supplemented with a more discursive account of respect and its importance to family life and to the notion of a good life in general if the children are fully to acquire the appropriate attitudes toward their elders. The use of training in rituals may not be sufficient for virtue, but it is surely necessary.

One might ask further, though, whether it is possible to show respect to one's elders while flouting all of the ritualized and conventional expressions of that feeling. Couldn't a young southern man genuinely respect his southern grandfather while never addressing him as "Sir," always remaining seated when he walked into the room, and by wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap to his dinner table every night? I don't think so—unless we suppose that there is an elaborate and special social background in this case. It might, of course, be possible to do this, if both the young man and the grandfather have been initiated into another set of conventional expressions of respect. But then we wouldn't be talking about relations among southerners and the case has changed. In general, we should recognize that a person who wants to express respect for another is hostage to the conventions of respectful behavior adopted by the other. This is just one of the reasons why human interactions across cultural boundaries are fraught with hazards.

10.2

We have examined above a number of different ways in which ritualized settings for human action are important to human life. We have emphasized in particular three of these ways.

- (1) Ritual settings allow us to increase radically the repertoire of human actions;
- (2) Ritual settings facilitate the performance of socially important actions which without a ritualized setting would be difficult to perform.
- (3) Ritual settings are valuable in moral education both in inculcating certain moral attitudes in persons and also in helping them to acquire the virtues.

One would expect, given the importance of ritual to human action, that ethics would find an important place for reflection on ritual at its heart. Among the questions that would seem to be particularly important are the following:

- (1) Under what conditions can new rituals be brought into existence and how can we create new rituals without excessively coercive action?
- (2) How do we keep rituals in healthy condition? In particular, how do we keep participation in rituals from degenerating into mindless conformity? And how do we prevent those whose roles within rituals give them power over others from abusing that power?
- (3) How can rituals be used to help others acquire appropriate moral attitudes and to acquire the virtues? And which particular rituals are apt for inculcating particular virtues or moral attitudes?

As important as these questions seem, though, we find that in late modern culture the use of ritual or ceremony as a setting for human action is regarded with suspicion as is the use of ritual or ceremony in projects of moral education. Also, we find that modern philosophy has shown little interest in these questions about the role of ritual in human conduct.

Philosophically, modern normative ethical theories have focused on features of human action that have left little room for discussion of ritual or the institutional settings of human action. Within normative theory, the dominant approaches to ethics have been broadly Kantian and consequentialist theories that focus on particular actions of individual agents. For Kantians, primary emphasis is placed on the rationality of the actions of fully autonomous agents while consequentialists focus on the causal contributions of the actions of individuals to the sum total of the satisfaction of desires. In neither case, is significant attention paid to the larger social setting of actions in which ritual plays such an important role. Even the recently revived Aristotelian virtue theories, which one would expect to pay more attention to the role of ritual, tend to focus, in a particularly non-Aristotelian way, on particular agents and their character traits with little emphasis on the social involvement of these agents.⁴

⁴ This is not universally true, of course. In particular, the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Elizabeth Anscombe has been especially attentive to the social involvement of their theories of the virtues.

In addition to philosophical neglect of the importance of ritual in ethics, there has been a cultural resistance to the importance of ritual as well. In contemporary culture there has been an emphasis on individualism and autonomy in human action that has led persons to be suspicious of the role of ritual in human action. These cultural attitudes first come to be dominant in the decade of the 1960s in North America and Western Europe when there were radical changes in citizen attitudes toward traditional loci of moral authority. The decade of the sixties was characterized by an emphasis on individualism and autonomy which called into question many received moral beliefs and the institutional settings and supports for those beliefs. Individuals were empowered to “make their own choices” about fundamental ethical issues, and self-fulfillment was increasingly understood in terms of emancipation from restricting and suffocating traditional norms. This new emphasis on individualism and autonomy found expression both in popular culture (“do your own thing”, “different strokes for different folks”) and in academic moral and political thought—in the work, for example, of such influential social theorists as David Riesman with his criticism of “other-directed” persons, and the philosophical work of such continental thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse who emphasized the role of personal autonomy in defining one’s ethical stance.

These changing cultural attitudes embodied a kind of “privatization” of moral opinion which had implications for the whole culture. In the schools, for example, the fashionable model for moral education came to be “values clarification,” in which the emphasis was on encouraging each student to work out his or her own “value system,” free from coercion or authoritative pronouncements by teachers. Ritual did not figure largely in the schemes of moral education devised by the value clarification movement. In the courts, the most significant decision of this period was the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision in 1973 which invalidated virtually all of the restrictive abortion laws in this country. What was remarkable about the *Roe* decision was not just its dramatic overthrow of ancient legal prohibitions at the heart of Jewish and Christian culture, but also that in overthrowing them the court felt no need to comment substantively on the nature of the moral controversy associated with abortion. The decision rested rather on an interpretation of a constitutional right to privacy which had been recognized by the Court for only a few decades, and its argument was based almost entirely on the claim that the state has no right to interfere with the private decision of a pregnant woman to have an abortion. The courts too, then, along with philosophy, popular culture and fashionable educational theory licensed a kind of privatization of moral judgment. This trend toward privatization reached its apex with the much discussed “mystery passage” in the *Casey* decision rendered by the Supreme Court in 1992. In its decision, the Court wrote, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” The radical autonomy of each person was thus found to be another constitutional guarantee.

These cultural developments were not friendly to the claims of ritual to play an important role in shaping human action. Participation in ritual settings requires that one recognize the authority of the norms governing the ritual as coming from outside the individual wills of the participants in the ritual. It is for this reason that we commonly encounter images of “losing oneself in the ritual” associated with participation in ritual. A culture driven by ideals of autonomy and individualism, however, and which can produce the radical subjectivism at the heart of the “mystery passage”, will have few members with an interest in “losing themselves.” Their interests will rather be in living in a world constituted by their own individual decisions—a world of their own making.

A concrete example of the resistance of late modern culture to the power of ritual can be seen in many of the reforms within the Roman Catholic Church in the decades since the Second Vatican Council. The adventures of the Roman Catholic Church in simplifying the traditional liturgical procedures and settings of Catholic sacramental life is an excellent example of change driven by suspicion of ritual. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the social dislocations of the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church utterly transformed church architecture, the language and procedures of the liturgy, the standards for sacred music, the dress and deportment of consecrated religious persons and other “surface” features of Catholic life in the interest of a more authentic religious experience for both lay persons and the clergy. The rhetoric accompanying this change appealed to the need to strip away social encumbrances that interfered with direct and personal participation in religious encounters with God and with fellow worshipers. This great “simplification” is widely regarded today as a disaster for the Church and steps have been taken to undo many of the changes. The return to an appreciation of ritual in the Roman Catholic Church was driven largely by the sense many worshipers had that the thinning out of ritual did not increase one’s personal contact with the Divine, but rather made it more difficult and less satisfying. It also became clear that the liturgical reforms of the Council did not replace ritualized religious practice with non-ritualized, but rather replaced rich and engaging ritual with thin and alienating ritual. It proved impossible, as one should have suspected, to escape ritual altogether.⁵

There are many strands of thought and practice within late modern culture that can partially explain our resistance to a whole-hearted acceptance of the importance of ritual in human life. Of particular importance, however, I think is a particular conception of the importance of authenticity in action that has

⁵ The history of the liturgical reforms in the Roman Catholic Church in the last four decades is complex and controversial. I offer this paragraph as the mere result of close observation of these changes at one of the centers of American Catholicism over the last forty years. Others will no doubt disagree with my characterization.

been discussed by a number of contemporary thinkers, but especially by Charles Taylor.⁶

This ideal of authenticity is associated with a widespread feeling in modern culture that ritual settings for action bring with them a kind of self-deception and a tendency toward mere social conformity. The thought seems to be that ritual settings for human action are mere window-dressing that allows the thing done by the agent in a narrow sense to be transformed into something else. And, of course, there is something right about this. Ritual, as we have seen, always involves our doing one thing which is transformed into something else by the ritual setting in which it is performed. This can seem both magical and deceptive. By uttering the words, "I do", in the appropriate setting, I marry someone. By uttering the words "I promise to A" in an appropriate setting, I actually promise to A. One can have the feeling that such actions involve a violation of some law of the conservation of significance in that we seem to create significance out of nothing.

Now one might think that it is more accurate to say in both of these cases that all I really did was utter certain words. The rest of the work was done not by me, but by the ritual. It is by some such reasoning that one might be led to be suspicious of ritual. Charles Taylor, among others, has explored the idea that this notion of authenticity is especially powerful in the contemporary ethical imagination. He says of the ideal of authenticity that it "accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures toward outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance to myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice. And then it greatly increases the importance of this self-contact by introducing the principle of originality: each of our voices has something of its own to say. Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within."⁷

He goes on to say that, "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization in which it is usually couched . . . It is what gives sense to the idea of "doing your own thing" or "finding your own fulfillment."⁸

⁶ Taylor has discussed these issues in a number of places, but his most important discussions are found in the following three books. *The Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p, 29.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29.

Taylor's larger point, defended in a number of his recent works, is that the retreat of many moderns into a life dominated by self-centeredness and a kind of soft relativism about ethics is fueled by this ideal of authenticity. Being true to myself requires me to recognize as my actions only those things that fully originate in me. My actions are *mine* because of their determinate contact with me—my will, my capacities, my practical reasoning. The kinds of action that are only possible in social settings that originate outside me and are sustained by the collective actions of others cannot be *truly* mine. And to treat them as if they are mine is to be self-deceived and to live in a state of bad faith.

It is reasoning of this sort that surely lies behind the extraordinary interpretation of human liberty that is articulated by the U.S. Supreme Court in the "mystery passage." It is surely also this kind of reasoning that has moved so many moderns to strip away rich ritualistic settings from their lives and practices, as in the example of the liturgical reforms within the Roman Catholic Church.

Taylor argues that a debased ideal of authenticity lies at the heart of many of the cultural and philosophical trends that resist the significance of ritual for a successful human action. This notion of authenticity gains much of its power from its claim that in acting authentically (in Taylor's sense) we gain a certain kind of control over our own lives and our situation. By eschewing full participation in norm-governed institutional settings like rituals, I allegedly am able to take back my life and make it my own. We have argued in the first section of this chapter, however, that participation in the very norm-governed practices eschewed by the fans of authenticity increases the repertoire of actions open to us and facilitates our ability to perform many important actions and to inculcate appropriate moral attitudes and virtues in our fellows. It seems inconceivable to many moderns that by subjecting ourselves to the authority of rituals and other norm-governed social practices, that we can actually gain in power and in the range of actions open to us. That this is the case, however, seems to follow from a careful examination of the nature of ritual and its relation to human action.