

The Boundaries of Manners: Ritual and Etiquette in Early Confucianism and Stohr's *On Manners*

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Abstract Early Confucian philosophy affirms and lends support to Karen Stohr's argument that manners are a primary means by which we express moral attitudes and commitments and carry out important moral goals. Indeed, Confucian views on ritual can extend her insights even further, both by highlighting the role that manners play in cultivating good character and by helping us to probe the conceptual boundaries of manners. The various things that we call etiquette, social customs, and rituals (all of which the Confucians saw as expressions of *li* 禮 “ritual”) do much of the same work for us, ethically, and this work not only expresses moral attitudes and commitments, but cultivates them as well. Accordingly, Confucian thinkers can help us to recognize how Stohr's argument can be applied more broadly than etiquette, and how good manners both express and cultivate good character.

Keywords Ritual · Manners · Etiquette · Xunzi 荀子 · Confucianism

1 Introduction

In *On Manners*, Karen Stohr offers a compelling argument that etiquette has been wrongly overlooked and dismissed by ethicists, and that manners are a primary means by which we express moral attitudes and commitments and carry out important moral goals. Although she was unaware of it when she wrote the book, her argument has a sophisticated and fascinating precedent in the work of some of the most influential philosophers in the Confucian tradition. Indeed, I believe that these thinkers lend support to Stohr's argument and that their views on ritual can encourage us to extend her insights even further, both by highlighting the role that manners play in cultivating good character and by helping us to probe the conceptual boundaries of manners.

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I will begin by introducing Stohr's work before turning to the early Confucian conception of *li* (禮) (ritual), which includes much of what we regard as etiquette, as well as social customs and religious rituals. After examining early Confucian views concerning the ethical importance of *li*, I argue that Xunzi's 荀子 focus on the expressive power of ritual can help us to see why etiquette and ritual ought to be viewed as overlapping spheres. I compare Stohr's account of the expressive power of manners with early Confucian views on the function of ritual, and I offer a defense of the Confucian view that the various things that we call etiquette, social customs, and rituals (all of which the Confucians saw as expressions of *li*) do much of the same work for us, ethically, and that this work not only expresses moral attitudes and commitments, but cultivates them as well. If this is correct, then Confucian thinkers can help us to recognize how Stohr's argument in *On Manners* can be applied more broadly than etiquette, and how good manners can both express and cultivate good character.

2 The Ethical Significance of Manners

On Manners critiques the widespread contemporary view that we can easily draw a sharp distinction between the concerns of morality and the concerns of manners. Such a view is rooted in our experience; after all, Stohr notes, "Most of us know people with excellent manners and rotten characters, and likewise people with sterling moral qualities and cringe-worthy manners" (Stohr 2012: 14). However, Stohr argues that in fact manners and morality are closely linked. Indeed, "the reasons that we have for being moral are also reasons for being polite. More specifically, I will argue that behaving politely is a way of behaving morally. Manners, we might say, are the outward expression of moral character" (Stohr 2012: 13).

One of the key issues Stohr tackles is the excessively narrow understanding of etiquette that many people in contemporary American society have, and which leads them to regard questions of etiquette as frivolous, "something mostly of concern to people getting married or hosting formal dinner parties" (Stohr 2012: 14). On such a view, "manners are about the external trappings of life, not its vital substance" (Stohr 2012: 14). It is certainly true that etiquette includes things that we do not normally associate with good character—"a set of rules about things like what fork to use during the salad course, or what color of shoes to wear after Labor Day, or how to address a social invitation to a pair of veterinarians" (Stohr 2012: 14). Such examples lead people to dismiss matters of etiquette as having any moral significance. Against such views, Stohr makes two important arguments. First, she demonstrates that matters of etiquette encompass a broader set of things than most of us realize. The ability to distinguish a pickle fork from an oyster fork may not have moral significance, but addressing people in the proper way certainly does. Etiquette is a broad category of practices, containing some practices that are of little significance morally and others that are of great significance. In order to appreciate how important matters of etiquette are morally, we must recognize that the category includes much more than rules about which fork to use. Second, despite the fact that not all rules of etiquette have moral significance, Stohr argues that we still tend to wrongly brush aside many matters of etiquette as insignificant when they in fact express important moral attitudes and aims. While some might question the moral significance of addressing people in the proper way, Stohr shows

that it can be very significant. This is because rules of etiquette are “communication devices through which we express moral attitudes and aims, like showing respect for others and consideration for their needs” (Stohr 2012: 43). Once we recognize this feature of our lives, we can appreciate how “many of our everyday practical problems involve issues of both morality and manners, and there is no very good way to draw a distinction between them” (Stohr 2012: 15).

What does Stohr include in her definition of manners? This is an important question because as she points out, “most people who do not take etiquette seriously do so primarily because they take an unreasonably narrow view of it, or because it seems like a matter of common sense” (Stohr 2012: 66). Her use of the term is broad but not unreasonably so; in the introduction to her book, she writes about “the pervasive ways in which social conventions and etiquette rules structure our day-to-day lives” and throughout the book she demonstrates that virtually anywhere we go, “some customs and conventions are operating and many of us feel ourselves bound to act in accordance with them, though without always being sure why” (Stohr 2012: 2–3). Her language here shows that she is not narrowly circumscribing “rules of etiquette” in an overly technical sense, but realizes that manners and etiquette are part of a broader set of practices we regard as social customs. Indeed, she moves freely between talking about social customs and conventions and talking about etiquette and polite behavior:

We can ask whether the social customs and conventions by which we live make our collective lives better, or whether they do more harm than good What’s the point of etiquette and what reason, if any, do we have for following its dictates? Who has the authority to declare what counts as polite behavior and why should any of us pay attention? Does having good manners make me a better person? Does it improve my life in any way, or the lives of those around me? (Stohr 2012: 3)

In addition to overlapping with social customs, she notes that matters of etiquette often overlap with traditions as well. Good etiquette writers “do not simply see themselves as the upholders of stiff and stuffy rules and traditions; rather they are adapting and extending those traditions in new ways to meet the changing demands of society” (Stohr 2012: 66–67).

Stohr is explicit that one of her aims is to expand our definition of good manners, for as she argues, “Making the connection between morality and manners requires rethinking and expanding our understanding of what it means to have good manners in the first place” (Stohr 2012: 4). Following Judith Martin, she takes “manners” to refer to the principles underlying any system of etiquette (e.g., guests should show respect for their hosts), and “etiquette” as referring to the particular rules used to express those principles (e.g., removing one’s shoes when entering a home in East Asia). Stohr argues that “the principles of manners are moral principles, and specific rules of etiquette get their authority from their relationship to those moral principles” (Stohr 2012: 23). She goes on to argue that rules of etiquette are able to express or further the moral ideals and aims expressed in the principles of manners because they serve as vehicles of communication and expression; they involve actions that send a message to other people (Stohr 2012: 27). On this view, “the politeness of an action depends on the extent to which it reflects correct underlying moral principles and attitudes” (Stohr

2012: 34). Stohr emphasizes that this allows room for conventions to be revised as moral commitments change: the criterion for whether something is a legitimate rule of etiquette “is not simply whether it is the convention actually in use, but whether it is consistent with the underlying principles of manners. It enables us to subject our conventions to critical scrutiny, and also to adapt and change them as our moral attitudes and principles evolve” (Stohr 2012: 32).

Stohr offers wide-ranging examples that serve to demonstrate just how many of our actions are included in the broad category of etiquette:

When I join a line by going to the end of it, I signal to the other people waiting that I intend to abide by the established conventions regarding lines. My expressed willingness to adhere to the convention communicates my belief that I stand on an equal footing with them, that I don’t regard my needs and priorities as more important than theirs just because they happen to be mine. (Stohr 2012: 29)

The examples and illustrations she uses—drawn not only from contemporary daily life but from history, film, and literature—show both how often we underestimate the moral significance of our actions and how many of our actions are matters of etiquette. Discussing Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Stohr points out that when King spells out ways in which black people were being treated unequally and unjustly, his list is not confined to such actions as police brutality, church bombings, and the segregation of schools and public buildings.

King also made a point of mentioning the conventions by which African Americans were standardly addressed at the time. He remarks that his wife and mother were never given “the respected title of ‘Mrs.’” as they would have been had they been white. King was surely right that this practice was deeply disrespectful of black women, and it is noteworthy that he thought it important enough to include it in his list of grievances, despite it being primarily a matter of etiquette. . . . People who followed that convention were, deliberately or not, communicating disrespect and contributing to the oppressive structures of racism. (Stohr 2012: 31–32)

This example also serves to illustrate how changes in etiquette occur. As she points out, “the principle that respect-worthiness depends on skin color is morally abhorrent, and our society’s ever-so-gradual recognition of this has led to accompanying changes in our social behavior. . . . As our views about equality evolved, so have our conventions about forms of address” (Stohr 2012: 33).

To be sure, Stohr demonstrates that the boundaries of manners are wide; it is a bigger category of practices than we normally recognize, and it has greater importance for our lives than we tend to appreciate. But as we shall see in a moment, matters of etiquette in Confucianism were a part of an even larger category of practices known as ritual. Confucian views of ritual share a number of important features with Stohr’s view of manners, which raises the question of where the boundaries between manners and ritual really lie, whether our understanding of one might help us to deepen our understanding of the other, and whether they ought to be regarded as part of the same family of practices.

3 The Ethical Significance of Ritual

The account of moral cultivation seen in the thought of Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius, 551–479 BCE)—which served as the inspiration and foundation for the subsequent work of early Confucians such as Mengzi 孟子 and Xunzi 荀子—emerged as a response to the instability, suffering, and unrest in his society. As a potential remedy to what he views as primarily a moral malady, Kongzi argues that people should return to the way of life embodied in the earlier part of the Zhou 周 dynasty, which was a time of peace, harmony, and stability. Maintaining that the key to political stability lies not in the governmental policies or laws of the Zhou, but instead in Zhou *culture*—and in particular the virtues and the moral and religious practices that were prized during the Zhou—Kongzi insists in the *Analects* that the solution he offers is not new. Rather, he claims to be a transmitter of Zhou culture and not an innovator of some new ideal or value system (*Analects* 7.1). In *Analects* 3.14 Kongzi says, “The Zhou surveyed the two dynasties that went before, its ways are refined and elegant. I follow the Zhou.”¹ While Kongzi maintains that humane laws and policies are important, he does not think the problems in his society could be resolved primarily through legal and policy reform. Rather, the solution could only be found in leading people to reflect on and reshape their values and priorities—including their attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

For Kongzi, the Way (*Dao* 道) of the former kings and sages resembles a well-trodden path that is defined by a particular set of virtues, certain kinds of roles and relationships with others, and cultural practices such as the rites or rituals (*li* 禮). The rites are a diverse set of traditional moral and religious practices and norms, including what we would call rules of etiquette, social customs, and religious rituals. They specify how one should behave across a broad range of circumstances, including how one should move, speak, dress, eat, and so on, while also including rituals such as funeral rites and ancestral sacrifices. While most English speakers today separate social customs and matters of etiquette from religious rituals, early Confucians saw them as unified under the category of “ritual.” They further regarded all of these things—things we would refer to as manners, as well as funerals, weddings, and forms of religious worship—as having tremendous moral significance, partly because they understood them to serve both developmental and expressive functions for participants as well as observers. As Philip J. Ivanhoe has argued, early Confucian thinkers maintained that rituals “shaped the character of those who practiced them, expressed and refined the virtue of those who knew them well, and influenced those who participated in or observed a given ceremony” (Ivanhoe 2000: 4).² Accordingly, the rites were the primary means by which one developed and expressed the virtues.

Together, the rites constitute a unified code of conduct, and specify much of the content of Zhou culture, in terms of the patterns of behavior that govern interactions between members of families, communities, and society as a whole. While acting in accordance with the rites does not guarantee a harmonious outcome, the rites are a necessary feature of a harmonious society: “What ritual values most is harmony. The

¹ All quotations from the *Analects* follow the numbering found in Lau and Chen 2006, and are cited parenthetically by passage number. Translations follow Watson 2007 unless I have indicated that the translation is my own.

² For an excellent discussion of the importance of ritual in early Confucianism, see Wilson 2002.

Way of the former kings was truly admirable in this respect. But if in matters great and small one proceeds in this manner, the results may not always be satisfactory. You may understand the ideal of harmony and work for it, but if you do not employ ritual to regulate the proceedings, things will not go well” (*Analects* 1.12). To be sure, one important function of ritual is that it helps to guard against an overly narrow focus on achieving ends such as harmony; it also helps to specify how, or in what way, harmony or other ideals should be realized. More generally, the rites enable the kind of moral cultivation that helps to define the Way because following them helps us to behave in ways that promote values like harmony, and that both express and cultivate the right sorts of attitudes and feelings toward others. (Sporting events offer good examples here. Shaking hands before and after a game, if done with a sincere heart, really does set the tone for the event and how it is understood.)

Kongzi repeatedly stresses the importance of not simply going through the motions when one follows the rites; one should cultivate the appropriate feelings and attitudes as well. In *Analects* 3.26 he remarks on the emotional attitudes and demeanor that are a part of the virtue of ritual propriety: “Standing above others but without magnanimity, carrying out rites but without reverence, conducting funeral proceedings but without grief—how can I bear to view such as these?” Further, when Kongzi is asked about the roots of ritual, he responds, “A big question indeed! In rites in general, rather than extravagance, better frugality. In funeral rites, rather than thoroughness, better real grief” (*Analects* 3.4). One of the primary reasons why Kongzi cares so deeply about how we feel when performing the rites is that these practices are, on his view, meant to shape our character, and they cannot serve this function if we do not have the right sorts of feelings about what we are doing.

For some of the same reasons, Kongzi also contends that people ought to understand the purpose of various rites. This is especially clear in his remarks on when it is acceptable to change or amend a given ritual. In *Analects* 9.3, he says, “Ritual calls for caps of hemp, though nowadays silk is used, because it is more economical. I go along with others in this. Ritual calls for one to bow at the foot of the stairs. Nowadays people bow at the top of the stairs, but this is presumptuous. Although it means differing from others, I perform the bow at the foot of the stairs.”³ As traditional commentaries on this passage explain, replacing the more expensive cap of hemp for a silk cap is an acceptable amendment to the ritual because it allows those who cannot afford the more expensive cap to continue to practice the ritual, which helps to keep the ritual alive. This change does not alter the meaning and purpose of the ritual, since the head-covering has symbolic importance, but not the material. This is what makes bowing after—instead of before—ascending the stairs an unacceptable change for Kongzi: bowing is a way of asking permission to enter, and as a result, to bow after one has already entered and ascended the stairs defeats the purpose of the ritual. His remarks emphasize the importance of knowing the reason *why* we perform certain rituals in certain ways, including the symbolic significance of different ritual objects as well as ritual actions. The therapeutic value of rituals is enhanced when we understand their

³ In general, Kongzi seems to think the need to amend or change rituals is the exception rather than the rule and most often defends a stricter adherence to traditional ritual practice. See, for example, *Analects* 3.4, 3.17, 6.25, and 7.19.

meaning and purpose; rituals are unlikely to shape our character if we do not understand what we are doing and why.

The rites also encourage and often require us to reflect on our actions and to think more about others, which can shape our character in critical ways, even when the ritual being followed appears to be a “minor” matter of etiquette. For example, addressing and greeting an older family member or a teacher in the proper manner is not only an expression of respect and appreciation for them (something which usually contributes to more harmonious interactions); it reminds us of our relationship with that person, the things she or he has done for us, the ways in which she or he is a role model for us, and so on, which can shape our character in subtle ways by contributing to the cultivation of virtues like reciprocity and humility.⁴ When one follows the rites properly, one not only makes certain gestures and behaves in certain ways, but also reflects on the reasons for doing so. In *Analects* 10.25, we are told that Kongzi acted in accordance with the rites by bowing down from his carriage when he passed someone dressed for a funeral, even when the mourner was a lowly peddler. This behavior not only expresses one’s concern for those who have suffered a loss—regardless of their position in society—but further cultivates that concern as well by requiring us to pause as we bow and reflect on what it is like to grieve the loss of a loved one. This further prompts us to reflect on the ways in which we are bound to others by common human experiences, thereby cultivating a deeper sense of concern for others. This sort of practice can help to promote a more harmonious and humane society by demonstrating an appropriate level of respect and regard for others, regardless of their social station. When we follow a ritual like this, it effects those around us in profound ways; anyone who has grieved the loss of a loved one knows that even the smallest expressions of care and concern can offer great comfort and do much to strengthen our relationships with others. Those who observe such expressions are also often influenced in significant ways. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the virtue of ritual propriety that is associated with mastery of the rites is an expression of excellence of character for the early Confucians.

4 The Expressive and Developmental Power of Ritual and Etiquette

Of all of the classical Confucians, Xunzi offers the most systematic and detailed account of the rites and their ethical significance.⁵ Indeed, Xunzi appears to have been the first ritual theorist in the world. Much like Kongzi, Xunzi understands the rites as a particular set of formal practices that “mark out” the Way: “Those who cross waters mark out the deep places, but if the markers are not clear, people will fall in. Those who order the people mark out the Way, but if the markers are not clear, there will be chaos. The rituals are those markers” (Hutton 2014: 181).

Xunzi argues that the rites can bring about profound change in our character, and he expresses this view by utilizing a series of craft metaphors: “Through steaming and bending, you can make wood straight as a plumb line into a wheel. And after its curve

⁴ See also Kongzi’s remarks on correcting or rectifying names (*zhengming* 正名) in *Analects* 13.3. For a discussion of Kongzi’s view of rectifying names, including its role in his philosophy as a whole and contemporary scholarship on this matter, see Van Norden 2007: 82–96.

⁵ For further discussion, see Berkson 2014.

conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because steaming and bending have made it a certain way” (Hutton 2014: 1). It is not just that we are reshaped externally; Xunzi also contends that we come to acquire new feelings and our desires are shaped in such a way that acting in accordance with the Way—including following the rites—comes naturally. Ritual, Xunzi argues, “is a means of nurture” (Hutton 2014: 201). It is not, however, a way of eliminating the unlimited desires that create problems for us in our natural state.⁶ Rather, we must allow ritual to “nurture” us by giving our desires an appropriate outlet and also shaping and channeling them:

Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short. It subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient. It achieves proper form for love and respect, and it brings perfection to the beauty of carrying out *yi* [義, the standards of righteousness]. Thus, fine ornaments and coarse materials, music and weeping, happiness and sorrow—these things are opposites, but ritual makes use of all of them, employing them and alternating them at the appropriate time. (Hutton 2014: 209)

On Xunzi’s account, ritual offers our desires a healthy outlet—one that channels, shapes, shortens or extends them as appropriate, but that does not seek to eliminate them. We can easily appreciate how this works by considering examples such as marriage and funerals. The social institution of marriage allows us to meet various physical and emotional needs (seen in various kinds of desires) in a way that not only gives rise to stable families (and, as a result, a more stable society) but that also prevents us from harming ourselves and others in certain ways, and that allows us to flourish more fully by experiencing the joys, challenges, and satisfaction that are uniquely found in sharing a life with someone. Similarly, funeral rituals set aside the space and time to grieve openly and deeply within a supportive community—a process that can help to prevent unhealthy responses to death such as denial or depression, which undermine our well-being (and the well-being of others in our families and communities) in clear and dramatic ways. However, it is important to remember that “ritual” for Xunzi also includes those things we would call manners or etiquette, including many of the same things Stohr discusses, such as wearing appropriate clothing to a funeral, appropriate conduct during meals, or expressions of respect and gratitude to a host. These things, too, express important things about our character and also help us to cultivate certain virtues.

In addition to their developmental function, another reason why Xunzi values rituals so highly is their *expressive* power. As Eric Hutton points out,

Mostly by convention, the rituals embody certain attitudes and emotions, such as concern for loved ones, respect for elders and leaders, delight in happy and auspicious events, sorrow at occasions of loss and misfortune, etc. Thus, in a

⁶ Xunzi presents a theory of human nature according to which humans are born without any moral sensibilities at all and led exclusively by their physical desires. He argues explicitly against the view of his fellow Confucian Mengzi, who defends the view that we have natural incipient moral inclinations that need to be cultivated. For an excellent overview of their competing theories of human nature and corresponding accounts of moral cultivation, see the chapters on Mengzi and Xunzi in Ivanhoe 2000.

context where people have a shared understanding of what the various rituals mean, practicing them becomes a way to express these attitudes and emotions in a manner more concrete and powerful than words alone. (Hutton 2015: 118)

Why is such expression important, on Xunzi's view? First, as we have already seen, Xunzi contends that it is good for us to have an outlet for emotions like grief; it can become detrimental to our well-being if we do not express such emotions or if we express them uncontrollably. But Hutton argues that Xunzi has additional reasons as well. One of these concerns the power of rituals to create and sustain our relationships with others. Specifically,

since people's social interactions are highly influenced by what they take to be the emotions and attitudes that motivate others, the successful expression of these psychological states is crucial for fostering harmonious and orderly relations among people: for instance, a person can hardly be expected to respond positively to someone who does a caring act toward her if there is no reliable way for her to recognize it as a caring act. (Hutton 2015: 119)

A third reason why Xunzi values the expressive power of ritual is that on his view it is simply part of some virtues to express certain kinds of sentiments. Xunzi maintains, for example, that benevolent people are respectful toward others, which includes making others *feel* respected. As Hutton argues, "Insofar as practicing the rituals is a primary method for such expressions, and especially expressing the emotions and attitudes of the virtuous person, it is not hard to see why Xunzi values them so highly, and why he moreover treats devotion to ritual as itself a kind of virtue" (Hutton 2015: 119). Indeed, while the term *li* most often refers to the rituals themselves, Xunzi also uses it to describe a person's faithfulness to the rituals—one's "ritual propriety"—one of the primary character traits of cultivated persons and sages.

Since much of what Xunzi calls ritual is what we would now call etiquette, there are important resonances between his view and that of Stohr, who argues that an important part of being virtuous is having good manners—which usually requires following the rules of etiquette. Stohr, too, highlights the expressive aspect of etiquette, arguing that rules of polite behavior "are justified by their basis in commonly held moral principles and ideals, and . . . play an essential role in enabling us to act on those principles and ideals. Social conventions help us communicate and act upon shared moral aims. They serve as vehicles through which we express important moral values like respect and consideration for the needs, ideas, and opinions of others" (Stohr 2012: 3–4). One of the most important differences between Stohr's account and early Confucian views is that Confucians focused on both the expressive *and* developmental power of ritual, whereas Stohr focuses on the expressive power of manners. For instance, in her discussion of self-presentation, she notes that a common objection to etiquette as a normative force in society is "the idea that its rules impose on us an artificial standard of behavior, one that doesn't reflect who we really are or what we really think Politeness demands that we present a public facade that covers up our real attitudes, opinions, and feelings" (Stohr 2012: 70). In responding to this charge, Stohr develops a Kantian line of argument that "there is something morally troublesome about making our flaws public, particularly when we do so deliberately and unapologetically," and as

a result, she argues, “we have moral reason to present a polite public face to the world” (Stohr 2012: 77). When we put on a polite public face, we bridge the gap between what we actually are like and what we believe we should be like. Stohr argues that this is “a way of expressing our commitments to important moral ideals in the face of our own weaknesses and failings. I may not be able to summon up the gratitude that I should be feeling, or hide the envy that I am feeling, but I can at least say the right words and act as I think I should” (Stohr 2012: 83). From a Kantian standpoint, “the front of good manners is morally important because it expresses our status as an end in Kant’s sense” (Stohr 2012: 83). Stohr also points out that etiquette experts such as Judith Martin take a similar view. Martin has argued that “the conventions of etiquette are what enable us to behave in appropriate ways, regardless of how we are feeling at the moment when action is required” (Stohr 2012: 75). Since our private feelings and attitude are not always what they should be, “it is a good thing for us to be able to hide them when necessary, say, to avoid hurting someone’s feelings” (Stohr 2012: 75).

As Stohr points out, when we are polite—even when we don’t feel like it—we are expressing our commitment to certain moral values. One way that a Confucian perspective can add to Stohr’s view is by highlighting the developmental power of manners in addition to the expressive power Stohr discusses. Good manners, like rituals, not only express our character, they shape it as well. A few times, Stohr hints at this feature of etiquette. She points out, for instance, that Kant believed that we all have a duty of self-improvement: “On his view, I should constantly be striving to be a better person, both in terms of my moral character and in terms of my talents. Of course, being human, I often fail at this. But it is important that I express my ongoing commitment to those ideals and my desire to live up to them” (Stohr 2012: 84). A Confucian perspective would add something important here, namely that in addition to *expressing* my ongoing commitment to the moral ideals they express, observing rules of etiquette can actually help to *cultivate* my character so that I can live out those ideals more fully.⁷ When I take the time to write a thank-you note even when I do not feel very grateful, or congratulate a colleague and ask her about her recent accomplishments even though I feel envious of her, these actions can do more than express my moral commitments in the face of my own shortcomings; they can actually help to address my shortcomings. Writing a thank-you note for a gift that I dislike gives me an opportunity to pause and take the time to reflect on what another person has done for me, their kindness and good intentions. When done carefully and sincerely, putting those reflections into words deepens gratitude that is already felt and summons gratitude that is not yet there.⁸ In this way, following rules of etiquette, much like observing rituals, can serve to cultivate our character, helping us to overcome

⁷ Of course, there are important differences between Kant and Confucian philosophers that are rooted in his deontological orientation and the virtue ethical orientation of Confucians. As we have already seen, Confucians believed that we could cultivate our feelings and attitudes and that a virtuous person not only acts in an exemplary way but also has the right kinds of feelings and attitudes. Kant famously argued against this sort of view. However, while my proposed Confucian addition to Stohr’s view might make it a bit less Kantian, I do not think it is incompatible with her overall account, which is not wedded to every feature of Kant’s ethics.

⁸ For a fascinating contemporary illustration of how writing thank-you notes can have a transformative effect on a person’s character, see Kralik 2010.

vices such as envy and develop virtues like gratitude. Stohr is correct to note that “these behaviors do not reflect my actual attitudes; rather, they reflect the attitudes of what we might call my ‘better self,’ the self I should be. In acting like this better self, I express my commitment to my own self-improvement and to the dignity of humanity itself” (Stohr 2012: 86). I would add that in acting like this better self, I engage in the process of self-improvement or self-cultivation. Stohr points out that acting as our “best selves” even when we don’t actually feel like it “seems like a constraint, but in fact it is a way of liberating us from the worst aspects of our natures. If I can present a front of gratitude when I am not in fact feeling grateful . . . then I have a way of acting on my moral commitments despite my own personal failings” (Stohr 2012: 87). Here I would add that acting in accordance with etiquette or ritual even when we do not feel like it is all the more liberating when we recognize that we can be transformed in the process, for politeness, like ritual propriety, can help to liberate us from our vices by summoning in us the right sorts of feelings and attitudes to accompany our actions.

Another way in which Xunzi’s view might add to Stohr’s work is suggested by Eric Hutton in his essay, “Xunzi and Virtue Ethics” (Hutton 2015), and I would like to briefly explore it here. As Hutton points out, the fact that Xunzi sees rules of etiquette and religious rituals as unified in the single category of “ritual” raises the question of where we should draw the conceptual boundaries of etiquette—something Stohr does not address in her book. While Xunzi does not explicitly defend his more inclusive notion, Hutton suggests one line of thinking that might lead in this direction and which, he argues, might implicitly underlie Xunzi’s view:

As most people understand etiquette—and as Stohr tends to discuss it—it is keyed to specific circumstances: it is a set of rules that tell one what to do in a situation of a given type. However, when we go beyond just what the rules dictate to any one individual, and consider how they orchestrate a series of behaviors among multiple individuals, we can see these rules as forming a sort of “script” that can itself constitute a particular kind of situation. (Hutton 2015: 120)

On this view, we not only observe etiquette *at* a funeral; it helps to define the status of the event *as* a funeral. As Hutton points out, “sufficiently numerous and/or egregious violations of etiquette will seriously disrupt” both the way a funeral is normally supposed to unfold, and its very recognizability as a funeral. Hutton argues that from this perspective,

we can see why one might want to treat etiquette as being of a piece with specific types of events, such as various secular and religious ceremonies. If so, then the argument that Stohr applies to etiquette, namely that we should practice it in order to express proper moral commitments, but should also be ready to abandon or change the practice when it fails to express such commitments, would seem to be equally applicable to larger wholes—events, situations, and even institutions—in terms of which much human activity is structured. (Hutton 2015: 120)

If we take etiquette and ritual as overlapping spheres, then it may be the case that Stohr's argument can be extended to rituals, and at this point, I would like to offer an example that will allow us to talk in more specific terms about this set of issues. One thing that etiquette and ritual have in common is that it is much easier to appreciate what they do for us when there is a serious failure to observe rules of etiquette or to follow a ritual. In my hometown, an odd trend has emerged in recent years. Following a death, a number of families have decided to postpone the funeral or memorial service for their loved one by six months to a year. The reasons for this are not always clearly stated (which both expresses and contributes to the problems I will outline in a moment). They sometimes include the claim it will be more convenient for extended family to travel to the funeral at a later date, but the primary reason seems to be that the family feels too overwhelmed by grief to organize and host a funeral, accompanied by a discomfort with grieving publicly or sharing their grief with others. There is a strong sense of individualism in the mix here: the family seems to feel irresponsible to (and is perhaps unaware of) the broader community that the deceased was a part of. Their decision is based wholly on their assessment of their own needs and desires.

This practice leaves many members of the community feeling empty; after a death, friends have no opportunity to grieve and to come together with others and formally remember the deceased and honor her or his life, and to offer comfort in person to the family of the deceased. There is a felt need for these things across the community, and interestingly, when the family finally holds the belated funeral, the occasion simply does not meet these needs. It fails to constitute a funeral because it does not—and cannot (due to the timing)—serve the same expressive functions as a funeral. It does not meet the same needs that a funeral meets; people are no longer experiencing the same feelings of grief that one experiences in the days and weeks following the death of a loved one. Interestingly—partly out of a sense that it is inappropriate to hold a funeral a year after someone has died—one family tried to host a different sort of memorial gathering in place of a funeral. Attendees described the event as a concert that celebrated the family. Community members did not know quite what to make of it, but several noted that it did not serve the function of a funeral.

I want to point out a few interesting things here. First, the families' choice to postpone these funerals shows a lack of understanding of, and appreciation for, the purpose of a funeral. This helps to illustrate the contemporary relevance of Kongzi's view that people ought to understand the purpose of rituals. Second, in rejecting the traditional practice, the families showed a lack of regard for others by depriving them of the opportunity to grieve, which has important therapeutic value for us all, as it meets an immediate need (and one which is not served if one "postpones" grieving for 6 months to a year). Importantly, though, they also deprived themselves of this opportunity, partly because they do not understand the purpose of the ritual. Third and finally, when one family chose to do things this way, it set a precedent for other families to do so as well and led to a new "trend"—and not a healthy one.⁹ Now, as

⁹ There is an argument to be made here in favor of a more conservative position on ritual change, perhaps not unlike Kongzi's position. The concern—illustrated in this example—is that if people change or disregard rituals without understanding their various functions, they will incur some serious losses. In this example, the families and others in the community lost a variety of important goods that would have been gained by holding a funeral.

Stohr points out, “Once we understand the communicative function of social conventions, we can see why they simultaneously provide us with a very compelling reason to adhere to them and also permission to override, change, or ignore them on occasions where the convention isn’t necessary to fulfill the moral aim” (Stohr 2012: 30). In this case, however, all indications suggest that a funeral *was* needed to fulfill the moral aims in question. Across the community, people felt unmoored, but because the meaning and purpose of ritual is not usually discussed in our culture, no one could quite put their finger on why they felt this way. An analogy with language is helpful here. The families that opted for this new practice took upon themselves something no one can take upon himself: rewriting the social rules that govern us all. This does not work any more than inventing a new language or expression works. At first, no one will even understand what you are trying to say. If more people adopt the new practice, then there will be confusion between the old and the new, especially as the sense and aim of the latter is not shared (but only guessed at, as I noted above). This is a point Stohr makes in the course of her argument concerning changes in rules of etiquette as well: “If social customs serve as the vehicles through which we communicate moral attitudes to others, we cannot single-handedly change the language through which those attitudes are spoken” (Stohr 2012: 30).

In the example of the delayed funeral, we see a number of the attitudes and emotions that rituals embody, on Xunzi’s view, and that matters of etiquette often express, on Stohr’s view: holding a funeral following the death of a loved one expresses not just sorrow and grief, but concern for family and friends of the deceased, as well as respect and appreciation for their relationships with the deceased and with those who are still living. Holding a funeral—and attending a funeral—is a way to express these attitudes and emotions in a manner more concrete and powerful than words. Here I want to emphasize the communal and inclusive nature of what occurs when a funeral is held following a death: an important therapeutic function is served when a grieving family expresses their attitudes and emotions by hosting a funeral; a distinct though related therapeutic function is served for extended family and friends when they express their attitudes and emotions by attending a funeral. One of the reasons why Xunzi discusses the importance of funeral rituals at such length is that grief is particularly tricky terrain. Grief can blind us to our own needs and the needs of others. When we are experiencing a loss, we do not usually fully realize how much we need to see and hear—in person, in a tangible way—how important our loved one was not just to our own family but to others as well. In addition, we quite naturally desire to avoid the pain we feel so keenly, and therefore to avoid the painful process of grieving. But on Xunzi’s view, this is precisely what is so important about rituals: they guide us through the emotional highs and lows of life, giving us a space in which to express and process our feelings and experiences while also ensuring the presence of a caring, supportive community. This is what Xunzi means when he says that rituals are the markers that allow us to cross rivers safely: they ensure our safe passage in a variety of different ways.

My example illustrates each of the reasons why Xunzi thought it was so important to express the feelings and attitudes that rituals embody. First, it is good for us to have an outlet for emotions like grief. It would have been good for the family *and* the community to have a chance to grieve these losses in the form of a funeral, on Xunzi’s

view.¹⁰ Second, the expression of these psychological states fosters meaningful and harmonious relationships among people. It made community members feel isolated from the families of the deceased when the funerals were not held as expected. It was more difficult for them to reach out to the families and express their care and concern (and the forms of outreach were less personal than a hug or a conversation in person following a funeral). In addition, it made some members of the community feel that the family members only cared about themselves, because they clearly failed to realize that others were grieving, too—even if their grief was not as deep as the family’s grief. Indeed, I want to emphasize this particular point because I do think some of these families chose not to host a funeral because it was not what *they* felt like doing. But on Xunzi’s view—and I think he is right about this—one of the reasons why rituals are so important is that they remind us that it *is not* all about us. Ritual also reminds us that we are not always our own best guides to what we need; sometimes the things we least feel like doing are the things that are, in the end, best for us. Third, as Xunzi argues, it is part of some virtues to express certain kinds of sentiments. If we describe a person as compassionate, caring, or grateful, we do so because she routinely exhibits or expresses those virtues. Organizing and hosting a funeral following the death of a loved one expresses a number of different virtues, including gratitude, respect, sympathetic understanding, care, and compassion. Attending and participating in a funeral expresses a number of virtues as well. The Confucians—as self-cultivationists—would remind us that when we have opportunities to express these virtues, we also have opportunities to further cultivate them, and others have opportunities to observe our expressions of those virtues and thereby cultivate them as well. On their view, we lead happier, more fulfilling and satisfying lives when we embody these virtues. For the Confucians, these are all good reasons to embrace being part of a tradition, and to practice ritual in the traditional ways.

Ritual—like etiquette—is a topic that Western philosophers have not traditionally engaged, but which has been and continues to be engaged at length by scholars of religion and theologians. Indeed, in probing the boundaries of manners, we are also invited to probe the boundaries between philosophy and religion. When we do so, I argue that one of the things we will find is that philosophers should be interested in ritual for some of the same reasons Stohr argues that they should be interested in manners. This means that philosophers have good reasons to attend to the work of scholars of religion who study ritual, particularly in the field of religious ethics. There are other important connections between ethics and religion that are worth exploring here as well, such as the role that certain kinds of religious beliefs can play in preserving rituals that have important ethical functions. Philosophers who wish to explore the role of ritual in ethics will need to work across the boundaries between philosophy and religion, but because the Confucian tradition is not simply a philosophical tradition but a religious tradition as well, this should not surprise us. Indeed,

¹⁰ Funeral rituals were obviously quite different (and much lengthier and more elaborate) in Xunzi’s culture, but it is worth noting that Xunzi does recognize the need for family members who live far away to have time to travel, and for the appropriate material preparations to be made. In such cases, however, the entire ritual should not be delayed; Xunzi specifies that it is to be *extended*, with different people participating at different times, some much sooner than others (see Hutton 2014: 208, 215). This means that it can last anywhere from 50 to 70 days in length, depending on the circumstances (Hutton 2014: 208). He also notes that drawing out the mourning period serves “to magnify the event, to emphasize it” (Hutton 2014: 215).

perhaps the invitation to interdisciplinary work—and perhaps even collaborative interdisciplinary work—is one of the gifts the Confucian conception of ritual can give us.

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