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**Book review:**
Lenman, J. (2024) Review of Amy Olberding: The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 198pp., 9780190880965, US $40.99 (Hb). Journal of Value Inquiry. ISSN: 0022-5363

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-024-10000-1

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Review of Amy Olberding: *The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 198pp., 9780190880965, US $40.99 (Hb).

You say to me, “You really must meet my friend Mr Kong. He really is the most impressive person I know.”

“How so?” I say.

“Well,” you reply, ‘the thing that is so impressive is, you see, Mr Kong has *perfect* manners. Not good manners, not excellent manners. Really quite *perfect* manners. He has the most extraordinarily deep understanding of the social norms of our society and he enacts them with an impeccable correctness of judgement that is quite extraordinary to see. This makes him the most impressive and extraordinary person I know.”

And now I guess I am thinking, OK, sure I will meet your friend if you would like me to. But really my expectations are not so high. Perfectly correct manners? That might be amiable enough but I fear it may also be a bit cold, a bit stiff and formal, a bit strained and artificial, nothing very warm and genuine, possibly even a little creepy. At least that is what I might naturally expect. But then I meet Mr Kong and, oh my, he is a revelation.

He is indeed exactly as described, an extraordinary exemplar of perfect courtesy. But he is none of those bad things I feared he would be. In fact he is the opposite of those things, real and genuine, relaxed, and easy to be around. Spending time with Mr Kong you come to see that those very mannerly people you have met who seemed cold, stiff, artificial were just doing it all wrong. Mr Kong, on the other hand, is doing it, impressively, strikingly right and in doing so transforms our understanding of what real courtesy, at its best, can be and do.

A long time ago there was a man who lived in a place called Lu in what we now call China, a man still known today by his family name of Kong to which the honorific title Zi is usually appended, a man usually referred to in the West as Confucius, the Latinized name he was given centuries later by Jesuit missionaries to China. Like Western philosophers, Kongzi articulates an ideal of a virtuous person. He was also widely supposed by his followers fully to realise and exemplify the ideal he articulates, even if he himself appears to have been more modest on this score (See *Analects*, 7.33. 7.34. 14.28).

We can really only guess what Confucius was like. What we do know for sure is that there was something immensely impressive about him, impressive enough for him to attract a body of followers to whom he would be a supreme exemplar of moral excellence and leadership, the source of an inspiration they would keep alive and pass on to others leading it profoundly to shape the future development of Chinese and other East Asian cultures. We know too that he was immensely keen on good manners.

The developed virtues of a mature virtuous person work together in harmony under the control of a guiding intelligence which keeps them from being derailed into their associated vices, as for example when frankness can be derailed into rudeness, or caution into spinelessness. For Aristotle, this guiding intelligence is *phronesis*, practical intelligence. For Confucius, it is something more deeply social, a sensitive awareness of the moral culture we have inherited from our forebears, an awareness realized through the core Confucian virtues of devoted cultivation of 學 xué, learning (see esp. An., 17.8), and 禮 lǐ, which is often

translated “ritual”, but which embraces, without being limited to what we would class as civility and good manners (see esp. An., 8.2). It is the absolute centrality of lǐ in particular that is perhaps most distinctive of early Confucian ethical thought. Asked by (in his own estimation) the best of his followers, Yan Hui about how to be a morally excellent (仁 rén) person, Confucius enjoins him to:

> see nothing that is contrary to lǐ, hear nothing that is contrary to lǐ , say nothing that is contrary to lǐ, do nothing that it contrary to lǐ.” (An., 12.1, quoted WR, 70)

To see what lǐ is for Confucius it helps to be clear what it is not. It is not something merely formal, dead ritual, ritual enacted without the emotions it serves to express and direct is emphatically not what interests him. Thus at *Analects* 3.26 we read:

> High office occupied without generosity. Rituals performed without respect. Funeral ceremonies conducted without grief. Such things are not to be thought of.

And at *Analects*, 17.11:

> Are we to understand music as merely bells and drums? Are we to understand ritual as merely jade and silk? Are we to understand music as merely bells and drums?”

It may still be urged, as Amy Olberding urges in her book, that “even empty polite habit will often be preferable to no polite habit at all” (WR, 100) though Confucius himself, as I read him, definitely prefers his lǐ emotionally real.

It also emphatically isn’t what we might call *charm*. Confucius has little time for those who are speciously eloquent. (An., 1.3, 5.5, 15.11, 16.4, 17.7) It is perhaps apt to suppose he thought such smooth, ingratiating types were to those possessed of real courtesy what rude people are to frank exhibiting a vice that gives the associated virtue a bad name.

If that is what it’s not, what is it? Here Olberding looks for guidance to two metaphors aired in the scholarly literature. Following Chenyang Li she suggests we can understand it as a kind of *grammar* of social behaviour. “If I intend to communicate respect, I need to show it in a way you will recognize, and this is what our etiquette forms provide.” (WR, 96) And following Robert Eno she suggests understanding it as a form of *choreography*, “providing us with organized steps, gestures, and movements that coordinate our conduct with that of others.” (WR, 97)

In the opening chapters of the book Olberding writes eloquently about the real and unmistakable appeal of “righteous incivility” and the temptation to bad manners. The former is the civic, political domain of civility in public discourse to those whose moral and political beliefs and attitudes we may find contemptible: the wrong people. You know, “*those people”* (WR, 67-68) Being uncivil to *them* can certainly seem pretty cool, even heroic or noble. Though we are not so impressed when they do it back. Maybe that is OK, you see, they are wrong, you see, and we, my people, are right. It takes a fair measure of confidence to be sure enough both of the rightness of my judgements and that that rightness warrant my incivility (WR, 21, 23), a confidence that looks all too like folly and arrogance when *those* people display it. There may be noble moral reasons for incivility but in reality my motives may often be less pure and less noble that I might wish to suppose. If their confidence is evidently

misplaced, I should be open to the possibililty than mine is also. Confucius was keen on this kind of humility: When you encounter a person of worth, turn your thoughts to reaching their level. When you encounter a person without worth, take a careful look at yourself." (An., 4.17, quoted at WR,74) To say nothing of his famous and familiar injunction not to conduct ourselves to others in ways we don't care for when directed at ourselves. (An., 4.15, 5.12, 15. 24)

Incivility is bad, Olberding proposes, in much the way bad manners is in the more personal sphere, representing a failure to cultivate and exercise dispositions to behave in ways expressive of "respect, consideration and toleration" (WR 28). Indeed Olberding thinks the idea that these things, civility and good manners, are very distinct is not so credible (WR4-9, 47-48). Yet bad manners, she reminds us in chapter 3, have their own appeal. It is, or very readily seems, cool to be rude. Good manners can be stifling and oppressive, obstacles to all that is joyful and authentic, (a possibility made vivid, Olberding suggests, in Edith Wharton's novels). It is not, we might think, *comme il faut*, to eat your pizza with your fingers or your fried chicken straight from the bucket (WR, 41) but don't we think it ethically pretty sensible not to care about being *comme il faut* with all its silly, trivial prohibitions or at least not to care about it very much? And yet, Olberding again urges, when we find ourselves to the receiving end of rudeness, when others treat us, as it may seem, as if we were nothing or as if we were beneath their consideration.

That is not a trivial concern. Indeed it is right at the heart of what Olberding (WR, chapter 4) calls *the big values*, certainly as Confucius understands them (cf. An 4.15).

> Good manners, Confucius insists, are not only an expression of our fundamental sociality, they promise to transform the one who practices them. Indeed, this is the crux of the Confucian program for moral self-improvement: steady, reliable mannerly conduct will shift me internally, rendering me less prone to find to my inclinations at war with what I ought do, less given to emotional turmoil over obligations I would rather not fulfill. Above all, it will instil attitudes and dispositions that honor my sociality and what is finest in my humanity… Practicing good manners is not simply about honoring our dependencies on others or securing the goods of flourishing with others, it is also about how my actions shape the person I am and will be. (WR, 70-71)

Earlier she writes:

> Indeed, for the Confucians, maintaining our social bonds with others is what renders us fully, magnificently *human*. We all are, in a trivial biological sense, human, but to be a human being, in a morally and existentially significant sense, is to be a human being in relation with other human beings. (WR, 55)

How so? Well, because

> manners promise to transform cooperation into some- thing both more substantive and more meaningful than transactional need fulfilment. (WR, 54)

We are deeply interdependent creatures with an urgent need to cooperate in countless ways. We could do so grudgingly, warily, reluctantly allowing others to instrumentalise us I return for being permitted in our turn to instrumentalise them. Or we can seek to make a human

community where are social relations are informed, at their best transformed, by mutual respect, concern and consideration.

Manners then are not trivial. Nor are they inauthentic. Their practice is transformative: "my actions shape the person I am and will be."

> Practicing manners is not simply how we *express* prosocial attitudes, it is also how we can *get* them… Altering one's conduct to simulate attitudes one does not immediately possess can help bring those attitudes along, can prompt them into being. (WR72-73)

I can become a good person, decent, respectful, considerate, by acting like one, even if I am not one yet. And by acting like one, I may very well become one. What we fake it with enough conviction can cease to be fake, disarming the charge of hypocrisy.

Alongside this picture of how good it can be Olberding draws inspiration from the writing of 3rd century BCE Confucian Xunzi ("the most misanthropic optimist the world has yet produced", as she approvingly describes him - WR, 61) also to paint a picture of how bad it all too often is. Here, she suggests, good manners "ornaments" our relations with each other in much the way the arts of the undertaker "ornament" the corpses of our loved ones. (WR, 63) These corpses are things to be treated with sorrowful reverence and respect as we go through the process of grieving and prepare them and ourselves for funerary rituals. But such respect can all to readily be derailed by the disgust a decaying human cadaver is apt, without the ornamenter's art, to instil. And the living, no less than the dead if in different ways, can instil real revulsion and disgust. People are so often and in so any ways just horrible. Nonetheless we cannot simply shun each other. We need each other and sometimes – in spite of everything - we even find we love each other. So we have an uplifting narrative about how the civilising influence of good manners allows us to be maximally, magnificently human. And a rather more down to earth, not so uplifting narrative about how the civilising influence of good manners is the means we employ to make ourselves bearable to each other.

That people are so awful is a perfectly general observation. But it natural too for us to think we live in what are, in many ways, awful times. Our social world has become, Olberding suggests "divisive, hostile, unpleasant, and ugly", our civic life "venomous", our public culture "degraded" and "uncivil". (WR, 138) This only adds to the lure of incivility: in a coarse and unfriendly world civility can look a little foolish. It is tempting to simply morally give up on people, or at least and especially on some people, *those* people. But Olberding urges we resist this thought. One point she makes here concerns what she calls "the power of civil dissent" (WR, 142). If we are smart and imaginative we can find ways to push back against ideas we may deplore, ways that are not incivil but that can leave people, sometimes even *those* people, morally embarrassed, shaken, disarmed or even shamed. We need also to recognize just how big a deal, how socially tragic and catastrophic it is to give up on people, the people with whom we share our civil space and whose common humanity is too easily hidden as we pigeonhole them with lazy stereotypes and assumptions.

> Disagreement can readily become all that we see and understand of another person: lacking any substantial knowledge of another's history, personality, or wider values and absent any context of relation to them, a comparative stranger who disagrees with me can readily register less as a person than an idea. (WR, 148)

We are lost if we cannot recognize our human kinship even with those we are most tempted to dismiss and repudiate.

Recent years have seen a growing interest among Western philosophers in the rich philosophical literature of ancient China. Amy Olberding's work on Chinese philosophy stands out among the richest and most interesting manifestations of this, to me, very welcome trend. In this book what she offers is not a scholarly study of the texts she focuses on, the *Analects* and the *Xunzi*, but rather a rich and interesting original essay on the importance of civility and courtesy that takes these texts as a core source of inspiration and philosophical guidance. In doing so she makes case to her readers to see them not as lifeless historical curiosities but as vividly real and relevant resources to the moral questions that engage us today.

I might conclude by saying how strongly I would recommend anyone with a serious in Classical Chinese philosophy to read this wise and beautifully written book. But that would perhaps be idle. This is a rather tardy review of an important book published in 2019 and I think it is safe to assume that everyone of that description has *already* read it. So I will stress instead how much there is to learn from this book, as from many of Olberding's other writings, for anyone seriously interested in growing in philosophical understanding of human ethical life.