

## Manners and Morals

Being new to Missoula I recently made the mistake of trying to drop off some laundry at the laundry mat near Eastgate Shopping Center on a game day. Not surprisingly, there were no parking places. Just as I was ready to give up I noticed a couple coming out with a basket of folded clothes. I positioned myself and patiently waited as they adjusted their seat, mirror, hair and so forth. Finally they started to back out slowly. Just as they cleared the space a Grizzly fan snuck in and grabbed it. From the I'm-so-sorry, what-can-I-do gestures made by the passenger it was clear the driver's rudeness was intentional. Having been programmed from parenting not to tolerate rudeness I confronted the driver and presented my case for the parking space. The driver gave me a so-what-get-lost-sucker look until I indicated something to the effect that the owners of the laundry mat would certainly tow the car. The driver informed me that I was not being very nice, perhaps not in those exact words, and then left.

Since I've lived in several large cities this incident was pretty much a matter of course. However, when these things happen I wonder if such behaviors are immoral or merely rude. What is the relationship between manners and morals?

From my brief time in Missoula, this incident was out of place. On the whole Missoulians seem polite. In fact, for the most part even the dogs in Missoula seem to be reasonably well mannered, no doubt due to the persistent training of responsible owners. On several occasions I've heard dog owners discipline their canine friends with phrases like "be nice", "be polite", "don't bite". However, Missoula might be unusual in its general politeness.

In the U.S. most people think most other people are rude. In fact a majority believes politeness is giving way to rudeness. In a 2002 study on rudeness, funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, 79% of the survey's respondents felt that lack of politeness was a serious problem in the United States, and 61% felt rude behavior was on the rise. These kinds of subjective impressions are hard to support. After all, we might just dwell on that one rude person and take for granted the twenty polite ones. Even so, at minimum people are saying politeness is seriously important. But why are manners so important? I think it is because there is a strong connection between manners and morals.

One might object that this is a mistake: morals are one thing and manners are another; politeness and rudeness fall in the lowly sphere of mere social conventions and morality is in the higher sphere of good and evil. I agree but think the two spheres overlap. Some think there are not two spheres; morals are nothing more than manners dressed up in fine clothes. In some sense they are the same. As the ancient historian Herodotus remarked: "custom is king."

In his recent popular book, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville provides a convincing story connecting manners to morals without reducing morals to manners. Comte-Sponville begins his discussions on the great virtues with the most humble of virtues, politeness. In fact, he is not sure politeness is a

virtue. One can be polite without being virtuous. For example, he notes that many of the Nazis excelled in being polite to their victims. They were well mannered, yet unimaginably immoral.

The polite villain creates a disturbing contradiction. The recent film *Downfall*, which portrays Hitler's last hours in his bunker in Berlin, illustrates this tension. Many critics were outraged by the film's portrayal of Hitler as being polite and considerate, human, toward those around him. It makes sense when villains are rude and ill mannered. Ogres, trolls, dragons and barbarians did not get a proper upbringing. They were never civilized. But when civilized people commit barbarous acts we are confused. Perhaps, this is because we intuitively expect manners to lead to morals, so when they fail to do so we are surprised and disturbed. This is what makes a polite Hitler even more evil than a rude one. His politeness indicates that he should have known the vileness of his acts.

This then is the connection between manners and morals: we are taught manners so that we might become moral or virtuous. Manners solve a particular problem in explaining how one develops the virtues. Here is the problem: in his account of the virtues, Aristotle says that in order to become just one must perform just deeds. But how does one perform just deeds unless one is already just? There is a circle here, and the problem is how to get the process started. The solution, according to Comte-Sponville, is we start by being polite, which is merely a "pretend" virtue. When our children are young we don't explain our commands to be polite, any more than we would explain these same commands to our dogs. We just say, "Be nice." "Be polite." "Don't bite." It is only later that we start explaining why we demand that they obey these social rules. Our hope is that the child will internalize and rationalize them, thus transforming rule following to genuine morality. So, manners are not morals; they are "pretend" morals. But, if Comte-Sponville is right, there is a strong connection between the two. In his words, "We must practice at being good before we can become good." Manners sometimes fail to do their job, but why this happens opens another discussion.

So, is sneaking in front of someone for a parking space rude or immoral? It's probably just rude, but a moral person wouldn't do it.

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