Workplace Civility: A Confucian Approach

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ABSTRACT: We argue that Confucianism makes a fundamental contribution to understanding why civility is necessary for a morally decent workplace. We begin by reviewing some limits that traditional moral theories face in analyzing issues of civility. We then seek to establish a Confucian alternative. We develop the Confucian idea that even in business, humans may be sacred when they observe rituals culturally determined to express particular ceremonial significance. We conclude that managers and workers should understand that there is a broad range of morally important rituals in organizational life and that managers should preserve and develop the intelligibility and integrity of many of these rituals.

KEY WORDS: civility, Confucianism, sacred, ritual, management ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

IN THIS ESSAY, we explore the moral importance of civility in the workplace, arguing that a particular interpretation of Confucian ideas illuminates issues of workplace civility.[1] We argue that Herbert Fingarette's interpretation of Confucian theory (1972, 1983, 2008) makes a fundamental contribution to understanding why morally decent ritual is necessary for a civil and hence a morally decent workplace, and why it is an important responsibility of management to support and develop such ritual.[2]

Our essay begins, in section 1, by reviewing some limits that face traditional Western moral theory in analyzing the wrongness in workplace incivility. In section 2, we present our positive Confucian account of workplace civility and explain how, on our account, workplace civility is wrong . Our presentation starts through the discussion of a concept that is important in Confucian ethics, but that transcends Confucian ethics, and will be familiar, at least in name, to those who approach philosophical ethics from a Western perspective—the concept of respect for persons. For Confucius, on Fingarette's account, to respect a person is to value him as sacred, and sacredness emerges from participation in rituals, which form the basis for well-mannered behavior and civility. Rituals by their nature are conventional, in much the same way that language is conventional: both ritual and language depend for their meaning on the shared understanding and purpose of people who use them. Rituals are essential for expressing respect as prosaic language is essential for expressing prosaic thought. Confucius maintains that excellent human relations are constituted by proper rituals, and that moral sacredness emerges from participation

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in these rituals. On the Confucian account that we develop, because ritual plays an important role in respectful action, it is a responsibility of the manager to preserve the intelligibility and integrity of these rituals within the workplace. Finally, in section 3, we consider objections to our account.

A few difficult terms are crucial for the development of our argument, including "civility," "ritual," "sacredness," and "respect." We will provide working definitions of these terms after reviewing some alternative approaches to understanding the importance of civility in the workplace and launching the fuller articulation of our own account.

Our account is practical. We believe that it is required in order to make sense of moral problems that otherwise may seem recalcitrant. Consider this:

> THE RETAIL BANK CASE
> You work in a retail bank. Your supervisor shows up at your desk first thing in the morning, ushers you into his office, and assigns you the task of redistributing workloads among the tellers. His tone is expressionless and indifferent. When you ask him about the work, he does not seem to hear you, or even look you in the eye.[3]

On standard substantive measures, the supervisor does nothing wrong. He metes out work assignments, salaries, benefits, and burdens fairly and efficiently. We maintain that the supervisor's behavior may be wrong even though it measures up well on traditional substantive dimensions of fairness and efficiency. Indeed, we will argue that the supervisor fails to treat you with adequate respect in ways that Confucian theory is particularly well positioned to explain.

Focus first on the question of whether the supervisor adequately respects you. We think not, because we think that his lack of civility constitutes wrongful disrespect. Later we offer a Confucian analysis of this wrong. Now we wish to review some limits facing traditional moral theory in analyzing the wrong.

One might suppose that Kantian moral theory must be capable of addressing the wrong in the Retail Bank Case. We have suggested that the wrong involves a failure of respect; respect is a core idea in normative Kantian theory. Kant's mere means principle, a version of his Categorical Imperative, provides that morality requires treating a person as an end-in-himself, never as a mere means; and treating a person as an end-in-himself constitutes respecting him, a Kantian may maintain. It may appear, then, that the mere means principle gives the Kantian resources to say that our supervisor disrespects you even though he satisfies the substantive moral measures we identify above. The Kantian may say that because of the attitude he displays, the supervisor treats you as a mere means, and does not respect you as a person.

There are two reasons, empirical and normative, that we are skeptical that a Kantian approach to respect adequately reflects a concern for civility. Consider, first, the empirical reason, which we admit is comparatively weak, but which we nonetheless find suggestive. Two of the most prominent Kantian ethics scholars writing about workplace ethics do not discuss civility. Denis Arnold and Norman Bowie (2003) explain how the Kantian notion of respect may have implications for the workplace:

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it requires one to refrain from coercion, to meet minimum safety standards, and to provide a living wage for employees (see, also Bowie 1999). The concerns Arnold and Bowie raise are all substantive concerns, albeit significant substantive concerns. They never even mention civility. Of course, Arnold and Bowie do not purport to give a comprehensive account of Kantian respect as it applies to the workplace. They merely explain some of the implications of Kantian respect for the narrow set of business ethics problems that form their target. Perhaps it is just an accident that Arnold and Bowie do not discuss civility. Perhaps not. If they perceived civility as an important issue on a Kantian view of workplace ethics, one would expect them to discuss it. We will argue that there is good reason for Arnold and Bowie's omission. It arises from the nature of the Kantian idea of respect.

For the Kantian, respecting a person means respecting him as an autonomous decision-maker: not interfering with a person's reasonable choices, sometimes even enabling a person to make reasonable choices that would otherwise be outside his reach.[4] We recognize the importance of the value the Kantian identifies, but deny that it gets to the heart of the matter in the Retail Bank Case. Treating a person uncivilly insults and demeans him, but need not inhibit his choice or autonomy. The presence of coercion, the threat of unsafe working conditions, and exceedingly low wages all arguably inhibit one's exercise of reasonable choice. So it makes great sense for Arnold and Bowie to focus, as they do, on these issues as concerns for the Kantian. Incivility, we maintain, lacks the clear connection to choice and autonomy to make it an appropriate target of Kantian concern. One needs a different theory to understand civility.

Although we remain skeptical that Kantian theory contains the resources to adequately address issues of civility, our skepticism is restrained. We realize that the Kantian idea of autonomy is fertile, and may admit of interpretations according to which civility matters. Interestingly, Kant himself acknowledges the importance of civility, though he did not, as far as we know, address its theoretical underpinnings.[5] One of Kant's most prominent contemporary interpreters, Christine Korsgaard (e.g., 1996, 2009), explains respect in a way that seems promising for understanding the significance of civility in the Retail Bank Case. As she sees it, moral reasoning reflects respect through a process of "co-deliberation," reasoning together with a person to identify mutually acceptable ends. It is wrong to exclude a person from reasoning about some matter that involves him. This wrong of exclusion, of failing to engage in co-deliberation, may seem to fit well the supervisor in the Retail Bank Case. He refuses to engage you when discussing a decision that involves you, a paradigm wrong on Korsgaard's Kantian account. Problems arise for Korsgaard's account, however, when one varies some of the facts of the Retail Bank Case. Suppose that the supervisor comes to you with a decision handed down to him by superiors. He knows no changes can be made, and any attempt to make changes by either you or him would prove futile. Co-deliberation, then, would also be futile. In that case, we believe that Korsgaard's Kantian analysis can provide no reason for the supervisor to be open to hearing your point of view, or to be otherwise civil. Your point of view is simply irrelevant, and he has no moral reason not to show the indifference to you described in our hypothetical.

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Yet another strain in Kantian theory suggests another possibility for understanding civility. In our discussion of the Retail Bank Case, we have been complaining that the wrong committed by the supervisor cannot be understood substantively, and so should be understood as a matter of civility, something not much discussed in traditional Western moral theory. We must recognize, however, that Rawls (e.g., 1971, 1993, 2001) devotes great attention to a non-substantive area in ethics, procedural justice. Moreover, Joel Brockner and others in the last few decades have made procedural justice a rich area of business research (e.g., Brockner, 2002; Brockner, Chen, Mannix, Leung & Skarlicki, 2000). Will the notion of procedural justice serve as a basis for analyzing the issues of civility that concern us? We think not. Procedural justice is a quasi-legal notion. It provides people with formal organizational mechanisms for pressing grievances and for assuring that their rights are respected. We see the role of civility as far less formal than procedural justice. It concerns humane routines for personal interaction, not an organizational process for respecting rights.[6]

Beyond Kantian theory, but emerging from it, is a range of deontological moral theories that identify right actions not simply in terms of the goodness of their consequences but in terms of their conforming to specific moral duties. A deontological theorist can posit the existence of a duty to be well mannered, as Robert Audi (2004) very plausibly does in his recent work inspired by Kantian themes; if Audi can posit a duty to be well-mannered, he can just as easily posit a duty to be civil. We agree with Audi about the existence of the duty to be well-mannered, and believe that Confucian theory offers a sound theoretical rationale for the duty.[7] Audi's suggestion the one can find Kantian grounds for the duty seems less convincing, however. Consider his example of audience members who rudely talk between themselves during a formal presentation. Audi instructively observes that their behavior does not seem to violate Kant's mere means principle, because it does not treat the speaker or anyone else as a mere means, or otherwise use the speaker; in our terms, the rude behavior does not impinge on the speaker's autonomy. Still, Audi insists that the behavior is disrespectful in ways that Kantian theory would condemn. He never makes plain the basis for his insistence, however. In short, we do not believe that Audi provides a Kantian account of the wrong in ill-mannered acts. Instead he plausibly asserts that it is typically wrong to be ill-mannered, and he develops a Kantian account of moral reasoning or justification that possibly, if developed, could be used to derive duties of manners.

What other resources does moral theory provide for explaining the wrong in the supervisor's action in the Retail Bank Case? One obvious alternative is a leading rival of Kantian theory, consequentialism. Consequentialism identifies the rightness of an action in terms of its balance of good over bad consequences, as these consequences occur in society as a whole (e.g., Smart, 1973). Surely many bad consequences attach to the supervisor's incivility. Social science research suggests that workplace incivility creates significant costs.[8] Even without social science evidence, it seems plain enough that incivility tends to create hurt feelings in the short term, and that when it becomes entrenched in organizational practice it can create harmful morale problems that undermine productivity. Often incivility involves gratuitously creating

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displeasure, which consequentialism will not tolerate. We recognize, then, that in many cases, the consequentialist analysis will get the correct result when assessing incivility, identifying it as unacceptable. We also agree with the consequentialist that these costs can have moral significance, that human welfare matters. A problem for consequentialism nonetheless arises when incivility has sufficient beneficial consequences. Suppose that, in a particular instance, a manager finds himself in an office where employees are fed up with what they believe is the unacceptable conduct of their colleague, Richard. They want to see him humiliated because they, somewhat maliciously, think that he deserves the comeuppance. Moreover, there is an urgent task for the group to achieve, fixing a product flaw so that it can reach market at the publicly announced time, something crucial for the company's health (for added drama, one can imagine instead that the product is crucial for the nation's effort at winning a just war). To boost office morale and get the product out, all the manager need do is openly treat Richard in an uncivil manner. On a consequentialist account, the right action seems plain: openly treat Richard in an uncivil manner. Some costs may attach to this uncivil action, but the benefits dwarf these costs. The problem we find in the consequentialist approach to civility mirrors a problem more generally found in consequentialism—it is too ready to sacrifice the good of an individual for the sake of the good of others. There is something wrong with treating Richard uncivilly, and the wrong necessarily eludes the consequentialist.

In our brief discussion of the potential relevance of traditional moral theory to problems of workplace civility, we have so far discussed only two approaches to ethical theory: 1) Kantian and related deontological theories, and 2) consequentialism. Many fine surveys of contemporary ethical theory are more expansive, adding a third approach, virtue ethics (the "third party candidate," as Alastair Norcross [2006, n. 3] cutely calls it). In many ways, virtue ethics shows the greatest natural affinity for Confucian ideas. Confucius and his heirs devoted great attention to the cultivation of virtue; there is a lively and, we think, important contemporary philosophical literature exploring connections between Confucian thought and virtue ethics (e.g., Yearley, 1990; Van Norden, 2007). Moreover, much of the value that we see in ritual lies in its capacity to foster the expression of appropriately respectful sentiment.[9] So our position is consonant with the focus of virtue ethics on the role of virtue in a good life. We see limits, however, in the helpfulness of virtue ethics theory on the topic of workplace civility. Although virtue ethics concerns feelings or sentiments, civility involves action, and there is no straightforward connection between sentiment and action. More generally, the relation between virtue and action is controversial in the scholarly community. There are two sides to the controversy, and even virtue ethicists may belong to either side. Many scholars believe, as we do, that analysis of the virtues cannot serve as a basis for assessing action, but other scholars disagree. So Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), for example, says that right actions are simply those that flow appropriately from virtue, while other scholars, for example, virtue theorist Robert Merihew Adams (1999, 2006), find the connection between virtue and right action too tenuous to allow the kinds of inference that Hursthouse makes. Moreover, as Michael Slote (2009) shows, scholars may reasonably disagree about the role of virtue in Confucian ethics. Although we side with Adams on the limits

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of virtue ethics, it would be a digression to attempt to defend our view here, and we would refer the interested reader to Adams's discussion. As things stand, virtue ethics theorists have not developed a candidate account of civility.[10] We do not rule out the possibility that they will some day develop such an account. We would not be surprised if that account were consistent with the Confucian account we explore here. But we remain agnostic. For now, then, we set virtue ethics aside. We hope in the next two sections of this essay nonetheless to achieve something consistent with virtue ethics: exploring connections between 1) civil and respectful sentiment and 2) ritual. To do this, we return to Confucius.

2. RITUAL AND CIVILITY IN CONFUCIUS

Why does Confucius think that ritual is so important? The short answer is that through participation in ritual people become sacred and worthy of respect. Properly exercised ritual better enables people to be civil to each other. Spelling out our "short answer" requires an excursion into Confucian writing, beginning with the *Analects*. It also requires us to explicitly define "ritual," "respect," and "civility," which we do in this section, after reviewing some relevant Confucian discussion.

The *Analects* express the core of Confucianism. The book consists of about 500 short sayings attributed to Confucius and Confucians. It is widely accepted that Confucius's thought and his followers' development of his ideas in the *Analects* are centrally concerned with questions about *li* (ritual) and its peculiar relation to *ren* (humaneness or goodness).

Etymologically, *li* (禮) symbolizes the act of displaying or showing a vessel of sacrifice. Shi (示) symbolizes an altar that displays or shows a sacrificial offering to spirits, and its meaning is to display or to show. Feng (豊) symbolizes a vessel full of food and its meaning is abundance or richness. So together, the original meaning of li is "to arrange ritual vessels" (Yao, 2000: 191). In fact, the character *li* in many passages of the *Analects* denotes proper customs, acts, or established social norms, the purposes of which are to govern religious sacrificial acts or sacred ceremonies appropriately (e.g., 3.4, 3.15, 3.17, 9.3, and 17.11). For instance, there is a *li* about how to mourn during a sacrificial ceremony:

> Lin Fang asked about the root of ritual.
>
> The Master said: "An Important question indeed! In ritual [*li*] it is better to be frugal rather than lavish, but in mourning it is better to be sorrowful rather than unmoved." (3.4)[11]

Confucius used *li* to signify ritual beyond traditional religious ceremony (See Shun, 1993; Tu, 1972). Examples include codes of conduct prescribing ways of governing, filial attitudes, friendship, gift giving, types of dress, and forms of speech. One of the five Confucian classics, the *Book of Rites*, which purportedly contains Confucius's commentaries on various *li* that he discovered in his time, demonstrates the diversity in *li*:

> The distribution of them [*li*] extends to all the business (of life). . . . They are practiced by means of offering, acts of strength, words, and postures of courtesy, in eating and drinking,

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in the observances of capping, marriage, mourning, sacrificing, archery, chariot-driving, audiences, and friendly missions. (Legge, 1885: 388)

There is a *li* on how to speak in 10.1. Confucius, "when speaking with lower grandees," was "affable, and when speaking with higher grandees he was forthright." There is a *li* on how to eat in 10.6. "If the food is not properly cut up, he [Confucius] does not eat; and if he cannot get the sauce for it, he does not eat."

Why bother with *li*, which on the surface may seem no more than burdensome ceremony? Why not just do whatever one wants, so long as it is well-intentioned, and forget these ceremonies? Strong textual evidence in *Mencius*, a classic Confucian text, supports the idea that *li* is perceived as connected to respect: "[T]hose who have propriety (*li*) respect others" (*Mencius* 4B:28).[12] *Li*, it seems, is a pattern of behavior, whereas respect is an attitude that one may take when engaging in ritual with a person worthy of respect. One may show respect for a person by engaging in appropriate ritual behavior, and one may deserve respect by engaging in appropriate ritual behavior. Respect thus emerges from a relationship of people acting together; both the respector and respectee must collaborate in ritual for meaningful respect to occur, on our reading of Confucius. Nothing in Confucius, however, denies that individual action outside of ritual may sometimes be morally admirable. So if in an emergency you leap into a pond to save a drowning baby, your action may be admirable, both courageous and altruistic, even if it is about compassion rather than ritual. Despite the merits of your action, its value should not be understood in terms of respect, at least on the Confucian model we explore. Confucian respect does not purport to exhaust the morally desirable, though we will argue that it has much normative power for understanding workplace morality.

The ties that the Confucian sees between ritual and respect confirms an interesting difference between Kant and Confucius. Confucian respect for persons, unlike Kantian respect for persons, has its roots in ritual. For Confucius, unlike Kant, inherent features of a person, such as his autonomy or rationality, are not the compelling reasons for treating the person with respect (See Koehn & Leung, 2004). The contrast between Kant and Confucius on respect seems to be roughly that between on the one hand, deferring to a person's will, and on the other hand, showing reverence for a person by virtue of his role acting out a set of rituals. In stark form, the contrast is this:

Kantian respect: Jones respects Smith if Jones defers to Smith's reasonable choices, and when appropriate, better enables Smith to realize his choices.

Confucian respect: Jones respects Smith if Jones acts in ways that show he sees Smith as sacred by virtue of his role in acting out proper ritual.

A person deserves Kantian respect by virtue of his possession of normal faculties of rationality and choice; a person deserves Confucian respect by virtue of his participation in appropriate ritual. These seem to be two very different ideas of respect.[13]

The Confucian idea of respect grows from *li*; hence gaining relevant clarity requires a fuller analysis of *li*. There are many interpretations of the role of *li* in

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Confucius's thought. As we explain earlier, in this essay we explore the interpretation that seems most plausible to us, Fingarette's (1972, 1983, 2008) interpretation. For Fingarette, the rituals that concern Confucius are nothing exotic. They are routines that occur in everyday life, and that function to express the sanctity of the individuals involved in human relationships. Here is a simple example, made accessible by the fact that it is taken not from Eastern practice, but from Western practice:

> I see you on the street; I smile, walk toward you, put out my hand to shake yours. And behold-without any command, stratagem, force, special tricks or tools, without any effort on my part to make you do so, you spontaneously turn toward me, return my smile, raise your hand toward mine. We shake hands not by my pulling your hand up and down or your pulling mine but by spontaneous and perfect cooperative action. Normally we do not notice the subtlety and amazing complexity of this coordination ritual act. (Fingarette, 1972: 9)

We propose the following definition of "ritual," which we think fits naturally with Fingarette's handshake example:

> *Ritual (li)*: a sequence of related acts, involving two or more persons, and together having symbolic significance, through which the actors recognizes the importance of an event and takes a stance regarding the event.

According to our definition, the handshake is a ritual because it involves a series of acts—perhaps a smile, holding out one's hand, grasping the other person's hand and then quickly elevating and lowering it a few times, while making eye contact and exchanging pleasantries—through which people involved confirm their bond. Ritual, as we have characterized it, is morally neutral: it can be either good or bad, right or wrong, depending on how and why it is exercised. So there may be a morally lousy ritual, for example, a ritual murder; and there may be morally good ritual, for example, the handshake interaction we describe above would typically be a morally fine ritual, particularly if it occurs between two persons acting otherwise benignly. Even though not all ritual is good, good ritual may be necessary in particular circumstances for morally decent relations, we will argue. Later we say more about the relevance of the distinction between morally good and bad ritual.

Confucius holds, on Fingarette's account, that ritual is a powerful phenomenon, allowing a group of people who share a ritual to lift themselves into the status of the sacred: as otherwise simple vessels become sacred when they are properly shaped and placed in the observance of religious ceremonies in the observance of religious *li*, people become morally sacred when they participate in human relationships in the observance of secular *li*. Thus, the normative authority of *li* lies not in rituals themselves, but in the fact that ritualistic actions which otherwise would be mere chaotic behavior become communal, coordinated, and meaningful, allowing people to realize their most excellent human qualities. Fingarette suggests that one considers this passage from the *Analects* (Fingarette, 1972: 73):

> Zigong asked: "What sort of person am I?"
> The Master said: "You are a vessel."
> He said: "What sort of vessel?"

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The reply was "A jade sacrificial vessel." (5:4)

The sacredness that belongs to a religious vessel is not derived from its usefulness or mere appearance, but from its constitutive role in the ritual ceremony. "In isolation from its role in the ceremony," Fingarette says, "the vessel is merely an expensive pot filled with grain" (Fingarette, 1972: 75). For a religious vessel to play properly a constitutive role in a scarified ceremony, the shape of the vessel, the material of which it is made, its place in the ceremony altar, etc., should be appropriately governed by the given rules for the very performance, i.e., religious *li*. Persons cultivate themselves to be truly *ren* (good or humane) through participating in social intercourse governed by proper social conventions. Thus, members of a group are truly *ren*, through their action in carry out *li*, thereby genuinely cultivating themselves, people becoming "players in the harmony" (Neville, 2000: 34), by committing to a "beautiful and graceful coordinated interaction with others according to conventionally established forms that express mutual respect" (Wong, 2008: 9). As the aesthetic value of a ballet dance may emerge when people perform their part in the sequence of movements (Ihara, 2004), the moral value of a person may emerge as he participates in *li*.[14] People elevate themselves, as participation in the right sort of cooperative enterprise renders its members sacred. Indeed, the sacred is nothing but such a very elevated status.

The emergence of the sacred that we find in Fingarette's writings may trouble some as mysterious, both because of the nature of the process itself and because of the very idea of secular sacredness at which the process aims. Consider, first, the idea of something that is both secular and sacred. It may seem to conflict with the most common Western use of the idea of the sacred, which comes from religion, where the sacred is a status conferred by a divine or transcendent being. Once divinity drops out of the picture, how can something be sacred?

In asserting that something can be both sacred and secular, we blaze no new trails. Mainstream nontheistic philosophers, including Simon Blackburn (2004) and Ronald Dworkin (1993), make the same assertion. Relying on his thesaurus, Blackburn says that the word "sacred" can have both religious and non-religious meanings: "It can mean holy and blessed, or worthy of awe and respect." And Confucian scholar Bryan Van Norden (2007) similarly asserts that "to regard something as sacred is to think that the proper attitude toward it is awe or reverence." Borrowing from these definitions, we will say:

The *sacred* is anything worthy of awe, reverence, or respect.

Dworkin offers several examples of the secularly sacred in Western tradition: human life, great art, and certain parts of nature, including important animal species. For this conception of the sacred, divinity does not matter: even an atheist can feel awe when he sees the Grand Canyon,

How does something acquire sacred status? Although Dworkin does not contemplate our concern with ritual processes, he sees process as important in the emergence of the sacred; he thinks that the processes by which art, life, or nature

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are produced are key to their status as sacred (Dworkin, 1993). Still, the idea that properly executed ritual can form a process through which something like sacred status emerges is recognized outside Confucian tradition. Paul Woodruff, a philosopher who writes mainly about ancient Greek thought, posits much the same process in his book, *Reverence*, in which he tracks the idea of reverence in both ancient Greek and ancient Confucian culture. As an example of this process, he discusses the family meal, which he suggests may be a meaningful family event, or a bare digestive activity, depending on whether certain family traditions are observed. Properly executed, a meal can be an occasion of awe, on Woodruff's view, and hence an occasion for feeling reverence, in which family members acknowledge one another's importance; it is conformity to family ritual that makes the difference, on his account (e.g., Woodruff, 2001: 19). A contemporary American may feel perplexed about the idea of feeling awe about dinner; it may seem grandiose. Awe may seem more suitably felt when contemplating something larger, like the magnificence of the skies or the depths of the seas. Woodruff would disagree about when awe may be suitably felt, and we think that we see his point. One's family can have infinite significance, which is exceeded neither by the skies nor the seas. Perception of this significance is worth cultivating, and participating in well done family ritual can put one in the right frame of mind to feel it. Similarities between Woodruff's and Fingarette's accounts are striking. Both writers, moreover, identify Confucian text as a source of insight about the phenomena that concern them, and both claim that the phenomena are not unique to ancient times, even if moderns, particularly in the West, have somehow become alienated from the vocabulary for describing these phenomena.

If people who engage in proper ritual can bring themselves sacred status, what is the point of talking about civility? Isn't talk of ritual enough? We think that answers to these questions are found through focus on the communicative or expressive function of civility: civil acts communicate sacred status. Cheshire Calhoun (2000) develops an account of the communicative function of civility. She maintains that no matter what the importance of respecting a person, it is a different matter communicating to a person that one respects him.[15] On her account one might even respect a person secretly, without communicating the fact of one's respect to him, she maintains. Now secret respect seems much easier to conceive if one understands respect in Kantian terms, as involving deference to a person's will, which one can presumably do without informing the person, than if one conceives of it in Confucian terms, as involving ritual, which tend to be open, not secret. Still, we agree with Calhoun that it makes sense to distinguish between respectful acts, such as asking a friend how he feels when one runs into him on the street, and the communicative function of those acts, which might be signaling the idea that the friend's well-being matters. Being civil, on Calhoun's account, includes signaling to a person that one respects him. Her account squares perfectly with Fingarette's interpretation of Confucius, according to which through ritual one may engage in respectful action and thereby signal respect to him.

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With the aid of Calhoun, we are down to our last definition for this section, a definition of “civility,” which makes it easy to answer a question that we found problematic in Kantian theory:

Civility: the communicative aspect of proper ritual.

Why bother with civility? Because, we maintain, ritual, and the respect it involves, rely on civility. Ritual is a collaborative endeavor; each person involved in a ritual plays a role that accommodates others who are involved, and depends on their participation. Collaboration of such complexity requires communication, acknowledgment from all participants about the nature and value of the roles of others. Such communicative acts comprise civility. Members of a group cannot execute an elaborately choreographed dance unless there is mutual understanding of the nature and importance of each dancer’s role. To secure that kind of understanding, however, dancers must communicate their appreciation of each other. They must respect each other. Ritual, too, is a kind of dance, requiring mutual respect among the dancers.[16]

Consider the function of civility more concretely, as it seems relevant to assessing the Retail Bank Case. The concept of civility, as we have developed it, helps explain what the supervisor should have done. There are modest rituals of civility that are entrenched in morally decent workplaces, with which the supervisor did not act consistently. These include greeting one’s colleague in ways that demonstrate openness to communicating with him, devoting full attention to the conversation, and acknowledging the colleague in one’s conversation. The supervisor in our case ignored these rituals, thereby behaving uncivilly, not recognizing the sacredness of his employee, and hence treating him wrongly, we maintain.[17]

3. RITUAL AND CIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

In the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, Brian Cohen, the protagonist, flees a mob whose members are desperate to make him their messiah, and stumbles into a hole, where he accidentally lands on the foot of a man living there. The man screams in pain, and then berates Brian for ruining things. It turns out that the man in the hole is an ascetic, now upset because Brian’s surprise visit caused him to break a solemn vow of solitary silence taken long ago. Of course, the ascetic is really just another Monty Python joke, but his character raises questions for our discussion of the importance of ritual and civility. We seem to have argued that ritual, which involves interaction with others, is necessary for respect, civility, and status as sacred. Doesn’t Monty Python’s ascetic, who aspires to have ritual interaction with nobody, show that we exaggerate the importance of ritual? Doesn’t he show that acts can have moral worth and that the people who engage in these acts can be worthy of respect, even be sacred, outside ritual? Why attach importance to ritual as we do? In this section, we explore problems in interpreting the role of ritual in the workplace: the possibility of ritual that does not lead to the sacred, the possibility of sacred acts that do not conform to ritual in any simple way, and the possibility of morally excellent action outside the realm of the sacred.

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The case of Monty Python's ascetic is not so hard. He may have been silent and still, seeming to cultivate sacred status by doing nothing and interacting with no one. Yet he was up to something. In fact his silence signaled a studied commitment, invisible to everybody in the world, but not to its intended audience, God. Even though the ascetic's ritual bears little resemblance to the workplace rituals that concern us, it confirms that ritual function may take profoundly diverse forms, a fact relevant to understanding workplace ritual.

Step away, then, from *Life of Brian*, and consider some perplexities about ritual in the workplace. We have argued that ritual is required for a morally decent workplace, but one might object that we misconceive the importance of ritual. One might argue that decent behavior and hence respectful behavior, even for the Confucian who connects respect to the sacred, is possible without ritual, and sometimes even requires the rejection of ritual. Consider a case purporting to show that decency sometimes requires the rejection of ritual:

> THE MORTGAGE COMPANY CASE
> An employee of a mortgage company, you have recently been assigned to the division that makes subprime loans to people in financial straits. As part of your training for the new position, you watch other employees discuss loan terms with clients. These employees strive to create the appearance that they take their subprime clients very seriously during this process, providing lengthy explanations of the financial documents used in transactions. You discover that the clients rarely seem to understand relevant financial terms, in part because company employees use only obscure financial jargon in explaining them. Your supervisor confirms that it is the company practice not to waste time and company resources trying to clarify mortgage terms to subprime clients, and tells you that it would be unacceptable for you to depart from established company practice.

Arguably this company has a ritual for dealing with subprime clients: the mortgage sales event includes "a sequence of related acts, involving one or more persons, and together having symbolic significance, through which the actor recognizes the importance of an event and takes a stance regarding the event." If so, however, it is morally lousy ritual, and morally lousy ritual, we maintain, confers no respect.[18] Imagine the contrary. Consider the possibility of psychotically cruel thugs who think they affirm a person's sacredness by making him the victim of torture rituals. These thugs would be mistaken, as we see it. Torture is wrong, and wronging a person does not recognize his sacredness, but denies it. Although people acting through their cultures have some freedom in choosing the conventions by which respect is expressed, there are limits on this freedom. Wrongful ritual is tainted in a way that makes it inapt for recognizing the sacred. Only by acting in accordance with appropriate ritual, or morally acceptable ritual, can a person recognize the sacred.

The conclusion of our last paragraph may trouble some readers; it may seem to render our account circular. Here is the seeming circularity—using an idea (morally decent rituals) to define or clarify a given idea (morally decent workplace). This charge of circularity is misplaced, we contend. Consider an analogy. Suppose that you

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say that an even number is a number that can be divided by two without remainder. Then you use the same term, "number," in both the definiendum ("even number"), and the definiens ("a number that can be divided by two without remainder"). Even though the term "number" thus appears twice, the definition is not in any significant way circular, because there is something important in the definiens beyond the term, "number." Similarly, when we define (or explain or clarify the idea of) the morally decent workplace in terms of morally decent ritual, the definiens and definiendum differ importantly—"ritual" occurs in one but not the other. Characterizing the morally decent workplace in terms of morally decent ritual involves no problematic circularity (see Walton, 1985).

The distinction between decent and lousy ritual matters. Lousy ritual is not rare, and one must know how to respond to it. Ritual can even be spectacularly lousy, for example, ritual murder. Obviously, when confronted with morally lousy ritual, when pressured to conform to such ritual, the right thing to do is to reject the relevant ritual, to be a nonconformist. This fact may seem to present a problem for our account. If rejecting ritual rather than conforming to ritual is sometimes the right thing to do, our attempt to understand workplace ethics in terms of ritual and related civility may seem warped. Moral decency in the workplace need involve no ritual after all, the objection concludes.

We agree with the some of the objection. Moral decency need involve no ritual. Still, we do not believe that the objection damages our account. We maintain that a practice of ritual is needed for a decent workplace, but not that every morally decent act need conform to practice. Two considerations ground our view. First, as we have already acknowledged, some morally decent acts are not about the expression of respect, at least in the Confucian sense: for example, a spontaneous act of compassion in saving a baby in distress need be in no way ritualistic. Second, and more important, the objection against "conformity" to ritual practice suggests an unrealistic rigidity in how people express respect through ritual, and how people may reasonably respond when ritual runs out. We maintain that respect in the workplace requires the existence of a substantial practice of ritual, but that not each respectful act will simply instantiate established ritual practice, and that some decent acts will depart from ritual fundamentally. How is that possible? In answering that question, we borrow an idea from Donald Davidson (1986), who suggests that there is the loosest connection between conventional meaning of a term and what one may mean in any particular instance by using that term. While Davidson's concern was linguistic meaning, ours is ritual meaning. What a person means in using a ritual may depend on the ritual or convention but at the same depart from it. Consider this idea more concretely.

One can do good in a way that expresses appropriate moral sentiment to one's beneficiary on an ad hoc basis, or one can do good in a way that mirrors institutional practice. Sometimes the existence of the institutionalized practice makes one's good act easier to appreciate, and so if one gratuitously ignores the practice, the meaning of one's act becomes obscure, or worse, it dissolves. Suppose that Jones encounters Smith in their Minneapolis neighborhood, and that Smith warmly says hello. Jones attempts to respond by raising his hand in the air and sternly saying "How," as he saw

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someone do while portraying a Native American in an esoteric Hollywood Western. Jones's greeting will not be as readily appreciated as would be a warm smile and offer of a handshake. Jones can perhaps succeed at providing an interpretation of his unusual greeting to Smith, but unless Smith has a particularly capacious imagination and Jones is a particularly good explainer, Jones may not be able to persuade Smith that he was offering a friendly greeting. Even so, if Smith does come to understand, reflection on the ordinary conventions for conveying greetings, on the normal way for saying hello, and Jones's permutations and play on the normal, will surely figure in Smith's reasoning. Imagine a very different world, in which most people, when greeting others, choose to do so in terms of their own uniquely chosen symbolism, rather than in terms that reflect or play on broadly shared conventions. It would cut down drastically on the successful communication of greeting. Sentiments are sometimes easiest expressed through entrenched conventions, particularly when they are expressed in a complex institutional setting, such as a firm, in which people lack time to parse esoterica; to have credibility, one who departs from convention needs a reason. Recall the Retail Bank Case. Suppose that the supervisor genuinely feels that he has no alternative but to give you the particular assignments that he makes, and that he feels that given his constraints, an icy cold exchange is the most dignified way to show his respect for you. No matter what he thinks, his actions fail to convey the respect that he intends. Asking you to surmise his good thoughts is asking too much. Robust conventions may be needed to convey proper sentiment. Your supervisor should have stuck to accepted ritual. More generally, ritual is needed to navigate these difficult situations. It is therefore the job of the good manager to assure the existence of appropriate conventions. Practices for conveying proper sentiment—rituals—are necessary for civil interaction, and for expressing respect, even if in individual cases, one should depart from ritual.

We have argued that a practice of ritual grounding civility is needed in a morally decent workplace, even if not every respectful or civil act will instantiate the ritual. Our final aim is to establish the importance of civility and ritual in the workplace, and one might concede all that we have said so far, but deny we have attained that aim. One might complain that we attach unjustified importance to civility. People can reasonably choose to reject civility entirely, one might think. Consider a possibility that comes from Michael Lewis, who depicts the colorful life on the Salomon Brothers trading floor, where people buy and sell financial instruments:

THE TRADING FLOOR CASE

> More different types of people succeeded on the trading floor than I initially supposed. Some of the men who spoke to us were truly awful human beings. They sacked others to promote themselves. They harassed women. They humiliated trainees. They flourished (though whether they succeeded because they were bad people, whether there was something about the business that naturally favored them over the virtuous are separate questions.) Goodness was not taken into account on the trading floor. It was neither rewarded nor punished. It just was. Or it wasn't. (Lewis, 1989: 69)

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Salomon traders were uncivil. But does that matter morally? One might think that these people agreed to abandon civility, that they acquired the right to be uncivil. Each trader granted to the others the right to be rude to him, and traders then generally exercised their rights to be rude. Perhaps, then, despite their incivility, none of them did anything wrong. On the surface this description makes sense. The Salomon culture was well known in the financial world. Prospective traders knew about the incivility at Salomon, they had other job opportunities, and they chose to work at Salomon anyway. Thus traders all accepted the Salomon culture and its lack of civility as part of a package deal; they could act uncivilly while doing nothing wrong, one might conclude.

We deny that Salomon traders can acceptably opt out of rules of civility, even in exchange for the lofty incomes they receive. Treating a person uncivilly humiliates him, clashes with his status as sacred, which is ordinarily wrong, just as defacing anything sacred is ordinarily wrong. Now one might think that if the person one treats uncivilly himself chooses to opt out of rules of civility, as Salomon traders seemingly did, then one does not err by denying his sacredness, at least on the Confucian conception that we have been pursuing; perhaps by opting out of rules of civility, each Salomon trader extinguishes his own sacred status. Nonetheless, we maintain that the humiliating and uncivil acts of Salomon traders were clear wrongs. An analogy with art will help explain why. Imagine that Picasso had been on the verge of creating *Guernica* as we know it, a work that inspires awe, a sacred painting; but someone offered him much money to instead complete it as a tritely ornamental piece, and he did so. In our imagined case, Picasso did not destroy the sacred, because *Guernica* did not yet exist, but he failed to realize the sacred when doing so was within his grasp. One could call this a betrayal of the sacred, or a betrayal of the potentially sacred, but in either case, it marks moral failure. We maintain that similarly, Salomon traders who as a group renounce civility demonstrate moral failure; they accept less when the sacredness of civility is within their grasp. The success of their interactions, the fact that they could work together so productively, shows that in a very robust sense Salomon traders could have engaged in morally decent ritual.

Our claims about the moral destructiveness of Salomon humiliation may seem excessive because sometimes humiliation does not seem as bad as we make it out to be. At a Friar's Roast, famous comedians and other celebrities take turns mocking and apparently humiliating another celebrity, the target of the Roast. Many leading American celebrities eagerly agree to become a target. It seems puritanical seeing anything wrong with the Roast, which occurs in good fun. Celebrities insult the guest, yet all involved recognize it as an honor to be so insulted. The insults are a tribute, recognizing a person's lofty stature; only stars get roasted, and the greater the star, the better the insults. We believe that Friars' insults differ fundamentally from Salomon trading floor insults. The latter, but not the former, are designed to show that a person occupies a low place within the organization. Salomon traders lose something for which the Confucian has keen concern—they lose the possibility of the sacredness that comes with elevating the status of those with whom one interacts. Just as Woodruff suggests that, depending on whether proper ritual is

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observed, a family meal can be either a mere digestive event, or a confirmation of reverence for the family, we suggest that the Salomon work environment can be elevated if proper ritual is observed. The family that chooses to treat its meal as a mere digestive event loses something important, as do the Salomon traders. Ritual creates the possibility of civility that protects against this loss.

Can managers in a firm in fact foster ritual that sustains civility? This is a difficult question, because it involves a hard empirical issue about the authenticity of the moral sentiments that people seemingly express. One may always wonder what really motivates another person, whether he is a manager prescribing ritual or an employee acting on ritual; very commonly there are rival cynical and honorable explanations for a person's expression of moral sentiment, and the behavioral evidence underdetermines the choice between explanations, even outside the business realm. Still some very successful managers seem earnest in their aspiration to create a work environment in which people use rituals to sustain civility. Consider a statement from Colleen Barrett, the former CEO of Southwest Airlines:

> [W]e've talked to our employees from day one about being one big family. If you stop and think about it for even 20 seconds, the things we do are things you would do with your own families. We try to acknowledge and react to any significant event in our brothers' or sisters' lives, whether it's work-related or personal. We do the traditional things, like sending birthday cards and cards on the anniversary of their date of hire. But if employees have a child who's sick or a death in the family, we do our best to acknowledge it. We celebrate with our employees when good things happen, and we grieve with them when they experience something devastating. (Shinn, 2003: 18)

Barrett identifies what we conceive as workplace rituals which, if properly done, will foster civility, but if perfunctorily done, will not. In our often cynical times, it may seem hard to take seriously the ideas that workplace rituals can lead to civility and even sacredness. Using the vocabulary of ceremony and reverence rather than ritual and sacredness, Woodruff observes the problem.

> We have ceremonies in our own time too, but we try not to think about what they mean. In fact, I believe reverence gives meaning to much that we do, yet the word has almost passed out of our vocabulary. Because we do not understand reverence, we don't really know what we are doing in much of our lives, and therefore we are in no position to think about how to do it better. (Woodruff, 2001: 7–8)

Perhaps Woodruff is correct. Ritual is widespread. It adds sacredness to life. But in modern times, people neglect it and denigrate it. And people should do the opposite. They should think about it and cultivate it. Perhaps this is what Colleen Barrett tried to do at Southwest Airlines. As we have argued, managers more generally have an obligation to do the same.

4. CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have considered the moral significance of civility in business organizations. Traditional business ethics theory neglects discussion of the ritual-

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istic dimension in personal interactions on the job, and its importance for civility. Confucian theory suggests that one's moral interactions with others are shaped by small details of manners and comportment. We have argued that Confucian theory offers an insight that much business ethics theory lacks: ritual matters, even in the workplace, and managers have a moral obligation to cultivate a work environment in which rules of manners are properly honored, so the workplace may become more civil. Our argument, we note, is general in scope. It concerns the contribution of proper ritual generally to a morally decent workplace, and is nowhere restricted to ritual as it occurs in any single part of the world. Although ritual may take different forms in different cultures, if our argument is correct, it is important in all cultures.

NOTES

1. We presented earlier versions of this article at the Society for Business Ethics Annual Meeting in Montreal and at the East-West Philosophers' Conference at University of Hawai'i, Manoa. We are indebted to our colleagues at Wharton, especially Tom Donaldson, Nien-hê Hsieh, Waheed Hussain, Diana Robertson, Amy Sepinwall, Gaston de los Reyes, and Rosemarie Monge-West. Edward Romar and Dave Wasserman also commented helpfully. Several anonymous reviewers, along with *BEQ* editor Denis Arnold, provided excellent guidance. Thanks to all for comments and advice, including those who think that we are absolutely wrong.

2. We acknowledge the controversial character of Fingarette's interpretation of Confucius (Schwartz, 1985: chap. 3; Ivanhoe, 2008). Even though reasonable people disagree about the correctness of his account, for the sake of simplicity and because it is one widely accepted account, we assume its correctness.

3. This is a modified story based on an "interactive case study" of *Business Week*, "Issue: A Boorish Boss Makes Work Unbearable," August 12, 2008. Available at http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/aug2008/ca20080812_484092.htm.

4. Recently some Kant scholars, e.g., Onora O'Neill (2002), suggest that the conception of autonomy we employ, which involves deference to an agent's self-determination, should not be attributed to Kant. We do not wish to challenge O'Neill on Kant. The language of autonomy makes our exposition easier, but in deference to O'Neill, we observe that it is inessential. Instead of talking about respecting a person's autonomy, we could equivalently talk about respecting a person as an end-in-himself, which uncontroversially must be analyzed in terms of respecting a person's reasonable choices, etc.

5. See *The Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 458–68) and *Collins's Lecture notes* (27: 456–57).

6. Kantian political theorists, including John Rawls, Denis Thompson, and Amy Gutmann, all defend, on Kantian grounds, the importance of civility in political debate, though they do not extend the discussion outside politics. See Rawls, 1971, 1993; Gutmann & Thompson, 1990.

7. Although Audi endorses the idea that a Kantian should find moral problems with ill-mannered conduct, we share Thomas Hurka's (2007) doubt that the normative theory upon which Audi relies here is truly Kantian.

8. Management scholars provide empirical studies of the causal etiology of workplace incivility, and the nature of the harm that stems from such incivility. Sandy Lim and Lilia Cortina (2005) survey more than 2,000 female court employees and attorneys, and determine that incivility is significantly correlated with gender harassment (e.g., offensive remarks about women) and sexual harassment (e.g., touching women in an uncomfortable way). Lim, Cortina, and Magley (2008) survey 1,158 workers of some of the federal courts and report that experiences of incivility are significantly correlated to supervisor satisfaction, co-worker satisfaction, work satisfaction, mental health, physical health, and turnover intentions. Christine Porath and Amir Erez (2007) conduct three experiments to test how incivility affects task performance and helpfulness, the results of which showed that incivility reduces workers' helpfulness, objective cognitive functioning, creativity, and flexibility. Lynne Anderson and Christine Pearson (1999) show that incivility often leads to coercive behavior through a spiraling effect. For instance, at the starting point, A perceives incivility from B; A is negatively affected and desires to reciprocate; A and B reach a tipping point, at which they perceive damaged social identity, experience anger and a desire for revenge, and retaliate with coercive behavior.

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Despite their explanatory power, none of these empirical studies purport to address that normative problem that interests us in this article: the nature of the wrong that occurs in workplace incivility.

9. An anonymous reviewer correctly reminds us that if we regard Confucian ethics as concerned with the expression of sentiment, then using Fingarette, as we do, to interpret Confucius may be problematic, because many scholars regard Fingarette as a behaviorist (Schwartz, 1985: chap. 3; Ivanhoe, 2008); if he is really a behaviorist, then he will argue that mental life, including sentiment, does not really exist, and hence that there is no sentiment to express. We concede the reviewer's point, but choose nonetheless to rely on Fingarette, because we do not read Fingarette as a behaviorist, because many scholars do not read him as a behaviorist, and because Fingarette himself apparently denies that he is a behaviorist (Fingarette, 1978; Rosement, 2008: n. 27; Shun, 1993: 475). Unfortunately, a reasoned defense of this position on Fingarette exegesis would be a distraction in this paper.

10. John Kekes (1984) offers a contribution, perhaps in the realm of virtue theory, that we find hard to assess. We think of his contribution as a Nietzschean geneology of civility, instructive and intriguing, but without clear normative implications.

11. For the *Analects*, we follow Raymond Dawson's translation (1993).

12. Quote from Van Norden's translation (2008).

13. For discussion of a much broader range of notions of respect, see Feinberg (1973). We later suggest that the Confucian notion of respect could well be understood as reverence. Feinberg suggests that reverence may well be the core idea in Kantian respect, too.

14. We contend that the moral value of a person may emerge as he participates in ritual, not that it always does.

15. Her account of civility as communication isn't limited to communicating respect. It also includes, for example, communicating concern. In some sense, Calhoun is an important exception to our generalization that Western moral theory is flawed in its failure to accommodate the moral importance of civility. But the sense is very limited. Despite the importance of her contribution, it has limits. Her contribution is an analysis of the civility, rather than an assessment of its moral significance. Her contribution is constructed at such a high level of abstraction that it seems indepenent of any normative theory, whether Kantian, utilitarian or something else entirely. By contract, the Confucian account of civility we seek aims at showing the connection of civility with a particular normative theory, Confucian theory; and it aims at showing the normative implications of recognizing the importance of civility.

16. As we define matters, ritual, or at least good ritual, and civility are intimately tied; it may seem that one cannot exist without the other, even that there is no difference between the two. Still, we think that there is a difference. Civility and ritual are two distinct aspects of the same phenomenon. Consider an analogy with promising. I might promise you that I will do X, even though you have not fully understood what I have promised. Hence what I promise and what I communicate in promising differ, even though promising and communication about promising share the roots of their respective symbolic significance. We maintain that there are parallel truths about ritual and civility; the former is a symbolic act and the latter is communicating about that act, distinguishable but essentially related phenomena.

17. Our use of "civility" may seem problematic because strangely generalizable. On our account, civility involves ritualistic recognition of the sacred, which may seem to transgress paradigmatically religious boundaries. If civil behavior is how we should recognize the sacred, then perhaps religious people very generally should aspire to no more than behaving civilly toward God. That sounds odd; it seems to diminish religiosity. Although we agree that the word "civility" seems to sell short religious devotion, a semantically similar word, "liturgy," seems a good fit. Indeed, resistance to using "civility" in the religious context may be a peculiarity of the English language. In Korean, the words for civility and liturgy are the same, "ye." We maintain that even in English "civility" and "liturgy" express substantially similar concepts of ritualistic behavior that recognize the sacred, even if one term is reserved for recognizing the sacred in God and the other is reserved for different instances of the sacred.

18. We acknowledge that we provide no criterion for distinguishing between morally good and bad ritual. We offer no test that identifies when adherence to ritual leads to the sacred, though we regard it as plain that not all adherence to ritual does lead to the sacred. We believe that it would be valuable to develop and defend a relevant criterion; success in doing so would be an extraordinary accomplishment. Fortunately, we believe, the value of our paper does not depends on producing such a criterion. Our aim is to show how a Confucian perspective illuminates the value of ritual in the workplace; for that purpose, we assume the existence of morally good ritual, and explore its significance.

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Our dismissal of morally bad ritual may seem to raise puzzles. Suppose that a whistleblower refuses to conform to the lousy ritual of his firm; does the thereby lose his status as sacred? We think not. First, it seems hard to imagine a firm so bad that all its ritual is lousy, and so none of its ritual can confer sacred status. But we can try. Suppose, then, that a criminal mob constitutes such a firm. Whatever sacredness our whistleblower employee possesses arises not from his participation in the mob's rituals, but from his relationships outside the firm (or mob), including relations he develops with law enforcement.

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