MANNERS, MORALS, AND PRACTICAL WISDOM
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“There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.”

(Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice)1

So says Elizabeth Bennet upon her realization that the charming Mr. Wickham is a cad underneath, and that Mr. Darcy, for all his haughtiness and unpleasant social manners, has a fundamentally good moral character. It is not surprising that she should be so deceived; what is surprising, at least to modern readers, is that Elizabeth apparently expects manners and morals to track one another. In the world of Jane Austen’s fiction, it is not simply a happy accident that good manners and good morals are ordinarily found together; rather, a person’s manners are the outward expression of her moral character.

In this paper, I want to explore that claim, which is implicit in Austen’s novels and, I will suggest, resonates especially well with Aristotelian virtue ethics. I shall argue that the capacity to behave appropriately in social settings is properly understood as a virtue. Genuinely good manners contribute to and are expressive of morally important ends, the ends to which someone with full Aristotelian virtue is committed. They thus form an essential component of virtuous conduct.

The standard contemporary view of manners is that they are a façade, a matter of mere surface appearances. According to this view, manners can tell us little, if anything, about a

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1 The version in use is from the Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen series, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p. 225. All references to Austen’s novels in this paper are from this series.
person’s underlying character, which is what really matters. At best, good manners are a pleasing garnish; at worst, they can deceive us into believing that a person’s character is better than it is, as in the case of George Wickham, whose agreeable manners conceal malevolent aims. I shall argue here that while good manners are indeed pleasing, they have a moral significance that goes considerably beyond that. Good manners are central to moral life because they serve as the vehicle through which moral commitments are expressed and moral ends are accomplished. Thus, good manners in this sense are tied directly to an agent’s grasp of moral concepts.

In this paper, I will defend two claims about the relationship between manners and morals. The first claim is that there is an important sense of “good manners” in which having them is possible only in conjunction with the right moral commitments. Good manners play an important moral function, and this function can be discharged effectively only by someone whose manners express those commitments. This moralized conception of manners is what Austen in fact defends in her novels, and I shall follow her in defending it here. The claim implies that a vicious person like Wickham cannot have truly good manners in this sense, however charming he may be. This may seem counterintuitive in the face of Wickham’s considerable social skills. An advantage of my account of the relationship between manners and morals is that it will enable me to explain how it is that Wickham can possess such skills while nevertheless lacking good manners in the moralized sense.

The second claim is that the capacity to behave in a well-mannered way is a proper part of virtue and that insofar as a person lacks this capacity, she falls short of full virtue. It is possible to have the right moral commitments without also having the skill of acting in ways that manifest those commitments in social life. Such is the plight of Mrs. Jennings
from Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. The inner workings of Mrs. Jennings’s kind heart are often obscured by her brash behavior and impertinent remarks. Moral principles need a vehicle for expression in social life, and good manners are a crucial part of that vehicle. The cultivation of good manners is thus an essential element of becoming virtuous.

These two claims, I shall argue, find a comfortable home in Aristotle’s account of virtue, particularly the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. I will show how good manners in the moralized sense can be understood as an element of Aristotelian practical wisdom. The knowledge of what constitutes well-mannered behavior in a given situation and the skill associated with acting accordingly are part of the virtue.

The moral knowledge associated with the virtue of practical wisdom is not unitary. Rather, the exercise of practical wisdom in any given situation requires a host of concepts, skills, and dispositions. It is possible to possess some of the concepts, skills, and dispositions associated with practical wisdom without possessing others and hence, without possessing the virtue in full. This is the case with both Mr. Wickham and Mrs. Jennings. Wickham is vicious indeed, but this does not preclude him from having something in common with the virtuous, and my account will explain what that is. Likewise, my account will explain what has gone wrong from a moral standpoint with someone like Mrs. Jennings, whose heart is good but whose manners offend.

In the first section of the paper, I will give an account of what I mean by good manners and argue for their moral significance. I will defend the two claims I described above: first, that good manners in the sense that interests me are possible only in conjunction with the right moral commitments, and second, that the capacity for good manners is an element of virtue. In the second section, I will give an account of Aristotelian practical
wisdom that can accommodate these two claims. This account of practical wisdom has considerable explanatory power when it comes to flaws in both manners and morals of the sort that Austen describes so masterfully in her characters.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AMIABLE: WHY MANNERS MATTER

Trivial? Compared to what? World hunger? Yes, the little customs of society are less important than that. So is just about anything else. It is only once people are able to manage physical survival that manners become crucial. Then tradition is what gives a society meaning and the rules by which it lives are what make it work. We call that civilization.²

—Miss Manners

It is customary to think of the rules of etiquette as more or less window dressing on social behavior. The practice of manners is often thought to be something in which one may permissibly be interested, but not a subject for serious moral inquiry. After all, etiquette concerns itself with matters like table settings and wedding invitations, and it is hard to see the proper placement of an oyster fork as a moral issue. Moreover, the rules governing etiquette are highly conventional. The only justification that can be offered as to why an oyster fork should be placed in the soup spoon rather than with the other forks is that this is how it’s “supposed” to be done. Understandably, people are skeptical of assigning moral import to a system that cannot defend its rules more robustly than that.

Even worse, rules of etiquette can be, and indeed, sometimes are, used in the service of immoral aims, such as when they are used to humiliate or embarrass people. There are

some circumstances in which knowledge of proper etiquette is understood to be an indication of social class and hence, of social worth. Those who aren’t in the know are occasionally treated dismissively or even contemptuously by those with “proper” manners, who seem smug or unappealingly self-righteous as a consequence. When etiquette is used as a tool of snobbery or humiliation, it is worse than trivial; it becomes downright inimical to moral aims.

All this shows, however, is that etiquette is capable of being misused and hence, not good without qualification in Kant’s sense. It does not follow that etiquette should be dismissed as generally pernicious. Moreover, one might take the view, as American etiquette writer Judith Martin (a.k.a. Miss Manners) does, that genuinely good manners preclude the use of etiquette in the service of immoral ends. On this view, using the rules of etiquette to express scorn, disdain, or disapproval toward innocent parties itself constitutes a violation of etiquette.\(^3\) Whether one’s behavior counts as polite thus depends in part on what one is trying to accomplish. So the person who sets out to embarrass a dinner guest by deliberately serving a meal requiring unusual forks and spoons that she knows her guest cannot identify is in fact behaving rudely.\(^4\) On Martin’s view, the rules of etiquette are not simply morally neutral social customs; they are linked to an agent’s moral aims and commitments.

What about the concern that etiquette is trivial? The importance one assigns to the rules of etiquette will be influenced by what one takes the boundaries of etiquette to be. If the realm of etiquette extends no further than table settings and invitations, then of course it is not particularly important. But in practice, etiquette columnists are often asked questions

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\(^3\) It matters that the person is innocent. Martin thinks that known scoundrels may be met with polite scorn. I will have more to say about this below.

\(^4\) Of course, a dinner guest can feel humiliated by his ineptness with forks even when there is no intention on anyone’s part to make him feel inept. But if, as Martin’s conception of manners implies, it is rude to even notice whether someone else is using the wrong fork, a person who accidentally uses his dinner fork to eat his salad in company should no more feel humiliated than if he did so while dining alone. Sarah Buss has more to say on this in her discussion of codes of bad manners and the misuses of codes of good manners. See “ Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 795-826.
with clear moral import, such as how to respond when someone tells a racist joke or how to express sympathy to a bereaved friend. Good answers to such questions show careful attention to moral nuance. Whether one should feel, say, moral disapproval in a given circumstance might be a question for moral theory, but moral theories generally have little to say about the best methods for conveying moral disapproval. Knowing that one should respond indignantly to a racist joke is not the same as knowing how to respond to a racist joke—with what words, with what facial expressions, with what actions. This is where the rules of etiquette step in, because what they provide us with is precisely a way of communicating these essential moral attitudes to others.

Martin draws a useful distinction between the rules of etiquette, which are subject to conventions of time and place, and the principles of manners that ground those conventions, which are not. She gives as an example of a principle of manners the principle that guests must show respect for their hosts. There are, of course, different rules of etiquette that govern how this is done in different cultures. In some cultures, one takes off one’s shoes before entering a house to show respect for one’s host; in other cultures, the same action might be seen as presumptuous or even insolent. The rules vary, and perhaps even conflict, but the underlying principle of manners is the same in both cases. We might put it this way: the rules of etiquette are the particular forms of expression that principles of manners take in social life. The rules have meaning insofar as they are instantiations of the principles of

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5 Etiquette writers vary considerably in their ability to notice and capture this sort of moral nuance. Among American writers, Martin is clearly one of the best. At least some of what she does in her books and columns is, I would say, properly considered applied moral philosophy.


7 “Miss Manners Rescues Civilization,” pp. 29-30.
manners, and the meaning will vary along with the social norms and customs of a given culture.

It is through the principles of manners that rules of etiquette get their moral implications, because the principles of manners, as Martin understands them, clearly carry moral import. The claim that we should show respect to other people is, of course, a moral claim, as are the claims that we should offer sympathy, show kindness, be loyal, give aid to those in need, and express indignation where appropriate. What the rules of etiquette do is to provide us with conventionally meaningful vehicles for showing respect or kindness, offering sympathy or aid, making loyalty or moral indignation evident. They give us concrete tools with which we can communicate our underlying moral attitudes effectively.

In American culture, addressing a stranger by her title and last name rather than by her first name, shaking her hand upon introduction, and meeting her eyes when speaking to her are all ways of expressing respect for her. In using these forms, I convey a moral attitude about someone in a way that will be understood by her and by others who witness the exchange. Likewise, by deliberately refraining from using the standard forms of greeting, I can express moral disapproval or indignation. Suppose the person to whom I am being introduced is a known leader of white supremacist group, or a former corporate executive who deliberately and unapologetically plundered employee pensions to fund his personal extravagances. If I respond to his introduction with a curt nod, rather than an extended hand and a smile, I make clear to him and others that I think his behavior bad enough to warrant a certain level of social exclusion.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) See “Miss Manners’ Guide for the Turn of the Millennium” (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 70. I can imagine people disagreeing on this point, arguing that cutting someone off from social notice this way is a violation of basic human respect. It may be true that even evildoers always deserve at least minimal social acknowledgment, although I’m not sure Martin agrees with this. Regardless, we are surely not required to smile
This is not to say that rules of etiquette are always used to express morally significant attitudes. Some rules of etiquette serve the goals of expedience more than the goals of morality. For instance, social custom in the United States dictate that when walking on a crowded sidewalk, one should stay to the right, rather than the left. The point, of course, is to permit efficient foot travel, but that is not an important moral good. In keeping right on the sidewalk, I do not necessarily communicate a moral attitude. Moreover, some rules of etiquette can be altered at whim, such as when family members decide that when they set the table in their own house, they will always place the knives on the left. The exact placement of the knives has no expressive point. It merely facilitates pleasant dining by ensuring that everyone can find needed utensils.

But when the rules of etiquette do have an expressive function, we have moral reason to make sure that our behavior expresses what we want to express, and that others understand what we are communicating through our actions. What we intend to express through our actions and what others understand by those same actions can, of course, come apart. I may, for instance, intend to express respect by using American conventions for introductions when I am in Japan or Iran, but what I communicate through my behavior may not be respect at all. In order to express respect effectively, I must know which social conventions are appropriate to the situation and what meaning they convey.
Martin points out that when it comes to the rules of etiquette, originality is not usually a virtue. When people decide to abandon standard forms and locutions for expressing moral attitudes in favor of something more creative or sincere, they sometimes come up with appalling substitutes. We thus get people attempting to offer sympathy by telling the bereaved that the death of a seriously ill spouse is a blessing, or reminding them that they can have another child to replace the one they have just lost. Parents welcoming a second or third child of the same sex are consoled rather than congratulated; couples planning to marry are warned about rising divorce rates. Such comments, Martin points out, may be more original than saying simply “I’m so sorry” and “Congratulations” but they are hardly an improvement, and indeed, can serve as an impediment to the expressive function of manners. The point of having standard locutions at all is to enable us to convey the meaning that one is supposed to convey on the occasion. It is through saying, “I’m so terribly sorry” that one expresses sympathy in a way that will be understood by the one to whom it is offered. The person who says instead, “you’re better off this way” may indeed be feeling very sympathetic, but if her goal is to offer comfort, she will very likely miss her target. Not all remarks or actions offered with sympathy manage to convey sympathy to the other party.

For instance, etiquette requires that sympathy letters or cards be handwritten in blue or black ink. The rules may seem trivial, particularly to those who firmly believe that “it’s the thought that counts,” but consider what else is conveyed when one expresses one’s sympathetic thoughts via fax or jotted down in purple ink on a sticky note. Writing a message by hand and putting it in the mail (or hand-delivering it) is more time-consuming than faxing or emailing one, but that is precisely the point. Death is, after all, the kind of

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event that warrants extra trouble. Efficiency—however appealing in other circumstances—should not normally be a goal when one is attempting to express sympathy. And since death is also a solemn occasion, avoiding the appearance of lightheartedness in one’s choice of paper or ink is also required. If I fail to take this into account, my attempts at expressing sympathy will very likely go awry, because they will convey something other than what I intend (or at least, what I ought to intend). This does not mean that the rules must be followed to the point of rigidity; a close friend of a bereaved person, or an inspired eulogist, can often say things beyond “I’m so terribly sorry” that offer great comfort. But the conventions are the starting point and for many of us, much of the time, the ending point as well. The thought may be what counts, but the vehicle for expressing it is itself part of the thought. By following the standard conventions for conveying sympathy, it is usually possible to express the sentiments that good people want to express on such occasions and to avoid saying or doing things that will cause additional pain.

Of course, some conventions are not worth following. The meaning expressed by rules of etiquette is, after all, not always a meaning that we should endorse. Consider, the longstanding rules of etiquette that regulate certain social behaviors by men toward women. According to custom, men are supposed to open doors for women, give up their seats to them, avoid using vulgar language in the presence, and so forth. All of these have traditionally been understood as ways of showing respect for women. Showing respect for women is still, of course, a principle of manners. Yet most people now recognize that many of these behaviors do not really show respect for women, because they are governed by unsustainable assumptions about women as especially weak or fragile, or creatures whose purity must be preserved. The reformation of the principle of manners “show respect for women” requires a
parallel reformation of the rules of etiquette that are supposed to express that respect. As we improve our grasp on the underlying principles of manners through more careful moral consideration, we see that rules of etiquette often require updating and transformation. Rules of etiquette need not be, and indeed are not static. They are (and should be) responsive to refinements in the underlying principles of manners. Over time, an action that expressed one attitude in the past can come to express something else entirely.\footnote{Of course, not everyone gets the message right away, but it is possible to be culpable for one’s ignorance of changing etiquette rules. Calhoun makes the important point that treating someone with respect is not always compatible with displaying or communicating respect (p. 264). It’s possible that opening the door for a woman might communicate respect while still falling short of treating her with respect.}

Thus far, I have argued that the rules of etiquette are based in principles of manners, which reflect underlying moral commitments. In acting in accordance with the rules, we express those commitments. And yet, it is possible for someone, such as George Wickham, to behave according to prevailing etiquette rules without being committed to the underlying principles of manners. This might seem to imply that good manners need not always play the expressive role I have assigned to them.

Consider a salesman who takes off his shoes when visiting his Japanese host not to show respect, but because he wants the host to give him a lucrative contract. He certainly has the appearance of good manners, and perhaps there is a sense in which it is natural to say that he has good manners, especially if all it means to have good manners is to follow the rules of etiquette. But the salesman cannot have good manners in the sense that I have described, because he is not using manners in a way that allows them to carry out their central expressive function.

The salesman’s observance of the rules of etiquette is detached from any sort of commitment to the principles of manners or acknowledgment of their moral force.
Borrowing from Kant, we might look at it this way: his reasons for behaving according to the rules of etiquette are tied to his business goals, not to any real appreciation for the moral aims of treating others with respect. The connection between his goals and his good behavior is an accidental one.\(^{13}\) If one day it turns out that he can increase his sales volume by offending a particular host (perhaps because it would amuse another guest who is an even better customer), then we would imagine that he will be all too happy to flout the rules of etiquette. His commitment to the rules ends where those rules cease to correspond with his non-moral aims. As such, his respectful behavior is a kind of pretense; it does not reflect or express his true attitudes.

Although the salesman is engaging in behavior that is ordinarily respectful, notice how odd it is to say that he is expressing or showing respect through it, given his motivational structure. What he aims at is the appearance of respectful behavior; this is all he needs in order to accomplish his aims. There is a sense in which one can “be respectful” simply by behaving in a certain way, and certainly, the salesman is not being disrespectful by removing his shoes. Yet his behavior falls short of actually expressing respect. It has to, since there is no underlying respectful attitude to be expressed.\(^{14}\)

So while there is some sense in which we can say that the salesman is behaving respectfully, insofar as his external behavior mimics the behavior of someone genuinely respectful, there is another sense in which he is not. He is not showing respect; he is not

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\(^{13}\) My argument here parallels Barbara Herman’s argument about why, in Kant’s thought, duty is required as a motive in order for an action to have moral worth. The problem is not that that acting from sympathy is likely to produce inconsistent results, although it might; rather, the problem is that sympathetic motives generate right actions accidentally, not necessarily. The link between the two is not of the right sort. See “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.5.

\(^{14}\) Calhoun draws a useful distinction between treating people with respect and displaying or communicating respect, the latter of which she associates with civility. On her view, however, the salesman would likely count as treating his host with respect. I would disagree, but the disagreement may be nothing more than a semantic one.
expressing respect through his actions. He wishes not to offend, but this is not the same thing. True, if the salesman is a good enough actor, he may fool others into thinking that he is showing respect, but what he is in fact doing differs in a morally significant way from the behavior of someone who is really expressing respect for his host.

The reasons the salesman has for following the rules have nothing to do with manners themselves; his reasons are entirely external to the essential point of manners. As such, what he is doing when he takes off his shoes is not the same thing as what someone who is genuinely trying to show respect is doing. The truly respectful person expresses respect through taking off his shoes; the salesman does not, and indeed, cannot, given his actual lack of respect. What he is doing, therefore, is not practicing good manners themselves, but feigning good manners in my sense.

In Austen’s world, those who merely feign good manners usually slip up at some point, revealing their true aims in the process. Once Wickham’s real character becomes known to Elizabeth, she comes to realize that she has not seen his behavior properly before. In retrospect, she notices indiscretions and lapses in his manners that her own vanity and prejudices had caused her to overlook. From that point on, she no longer finds his manners charming. Her perception of his social behavior has been permanently altered by her new understanding of the moral concerns, or lack thereof, that underlie that behavior.

In real life, we cannot always count on being able to distinguish those who are really expressing moral commitments through their good manners from those for whom the manners are nothing more than a façade for immoral aims. It is reasonable to expect some

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15 The newly enlightened Elizabeth reflects on Wickham’s behavior thus: “She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before. She saw the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had done, and the inconsistence of his professions with his conduct…How differently did every thing now appear in which he was concerned!” (p. 207).
inconsistency from those who fall into the latter group. After all, it isn’t likely that good manners will always be conducive to their immoral aims; they are undoubtedly more likely to behave badly at some point, to someone, than those whose manners express their true moral commitments. The problem, however, is not simply that people who lack the commitment to the underlying principles are more likely to be inconsistent in their well-mannered behavior. Rather, the problem is that when they are behaving well, that behavior is not expressing what it ought to express. Good manners ought to express respect, sympathy, loyalty, and so forth. What Elizabeth comes to understand about Wickham is that his seemingly well-mannered actions never did express these things, and she was mistaken in thinking that they did. When she finally sees Wickham in the proper light, his apparently respectful actions come to look sycophantic. The sense in which he continues to have good manners in her eyes is a very thin sense indeed, since she no longer sees his good manners as expressive of anything morally admirable in his character.

Recall that my first claim was that there is an important sense of good manners according to which having good manners require the right kinds of moral commitments. This is, I have argued, because good manners in this sense play an expressive function in social life. Following the rules of etiquette is one way in which we carry out the task of conveying respect, sympathy, and so forth. In the case of someone who follows the rules while lacking the commitments, such as the salesman or George Wickham, an essential element of good manners is absent. Although the external behavior is there, the behavior cannot express the underlying moral aims of manners. The forms of social life are for Wickham, only that—something to be manipulated according to his own desires without any regard for their essential moral function.
This is not to say that rules of etiquette never have value when they are not expressive of the underlying moral aims. True, the community of Hertfordshire would have benefited had Wickham’s manners been worse, insofar as his good manners fooled people into thinking he had the moral character to match. I will return to this point at the end of the paper. But even less-than-fully sincere polite behavior can have a moral point when it serves as an acknowledgment of something with moral significance. If I know that someone is capable of offering only polite remarks and not genuine sympathy in response to my loss, I might still want her to offer those polite remarks. This is because in going through with the social forms, she acknowledges the loss as something that calls for a response, even if she cannot marshal the full expressive force of sympathy in that response. We do not, after all, always feel as sympathetic or respectful as our moral commitments direct us to feel.

One advantage of the conventions of etiquette is that they give us a way of interacting with the world in the way we judge that we ought to interact with it, rather than in the way we feel like interacting with it. Sincerity and candor, while certainly virtues, are sometimes overrated. Etiquette does sometimes demand that we say what we do not mean or do things that imply that we feel what we do not feel, but this is not because etiquette values insincerity. Rather, it is because etiquette recognizes that morally speaking, we are not always up to par and its aim is to prevent us from letting our behavior slide down to the level of our moods. In behaving in accordance with the rules of etiquette, it is possible to acknowledge the moral import of the principles that underlie them, even when we are incapable of expressing our

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16 Then again, I might not if I think that her polite remarks conceal a kind of malicious pleasure at my loss. But recall that on Martin’s view of etiquette, using standard forms of etiquette to wound or humiliate is itself rude. So being polite in order to cause pain would not in fact count as being polite.

17 In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood dismisses her sister Elinor’s concerns about her imprudent behavior by insisting that her feelings are a reliable guide to moral propriety: “…if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong…” (p. 68). The novel shows Marianne to be quite wrong about this.
commitment to those principles as fully we should. Treating a coworker with the forms of respect when one is thoroughly exasperated with him because he has created hours of extra work is the right thing to do, because morally speaking, he still warrants respectful treatment. My treating him respectfully when I don’t feel particularly respectful toward him may seem insincere, but this is a case where insincerity has a moral point.¹⁸ My polite behavior expresses what I believe I should feel, if not what I do feel, and this is itself a way of expressing respect. Appearances can sometimes matter from a moral standpoint.¹⁹

My second claim, recall, was that failures of manners are rightly seen as failures of virtue. I said above that the rules of etiquette are the vehicle through which important moral commitments, such as respect and sympathy, are expressed in daily life. It is not that rules of etiquette are the only possible vehicles for this expression, but they serve as a crucial way of making our commitments and attitudes understood by others. As we have seen, sympathy can go badly awry when it is not expressed properly, having the effect of making the bereaved person feel worse than before. The presence of good intentions usually makes such lapses forgivable, but the mere fact that we see the lapses as requiring forgiveness tells us something about their importance. Virtuous people aim to behave in a way that reflects their moral commitments. Since social conventions serve as a primary vehicle through which those

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¹⁸ There is a world of difference between insincerity of this sort and insincerity of the kind that Wickham practices. In treating my coworker with the forms of respect, I am treating him in accordance with what are in fact my underlying moral commitments. It just that I am having trouble living up to them. By contrast, the forms of respect with which Wickham treats people bear no relationship to his underlying moral attitudes toward them.

¹⁹ For more on the relationship between the appearance of morality and morality itself, see Julia Driver, “Caesar’s Wife: On the Moral Significance of Appearing Good” The Journal of Philosophy 89 (1992): 331-43. Moreover, the Aristotelian account of habituation into moral virtue implies that performing right actions when we don’t feel like it can be the first step toward moral improvement or even redemption. Nancy Sherman draws on contemporary psychology to show that deliberately putting on certain facial expression can have effects on one’s emotions. (p. 49-50)
commitments are expressed, a virtuous person—if she is to act in a fully virtuous way—needs to be skilled at employing those conventions appropriately.

Austen’s portrayal of Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility* illustrates what can happen when the goodness of a person’s manners fails to match the goodness of her heart. Mrs. Jennings is warm, generous, loyal, and certainly morally superior to most of the characters in the novel. Yet she is also meddlesome, tiresome, and prone to seriously embarrassing people, particularly young people whom she fancies to be in love with each other. She regularly violates established rules of etiquette by asking impertinent questions, revealing information that she should not, and teasing people well beyond the point where they stop finding it amusing.20 Despite her deep moral sympathies, she leaves quite a lot of minor suffering in her wake. Her considerable base of moral knowledge does not extend to the ability to see how her behavior is affecting those around her. What she lacks—at least in part—is the proper understanding of and appreciation for the rules of etiquette that govern the social world of the novel and how they relate to the correct moral concepts that she already has.

It has become a standard tenet in virtue ethics that the kind of knowledge characteristic of the virtuous person is not a kind of book knowledge.21 This is true, and indeed, I shall argue below that truly good manners require a kind of adeptness at adjusting rules to particular circumstances that is impossible without a correct grasp of moral concepts. But we shouldn’t underestimate the importance of familiarity with social conventions as described in good etiquette manuals. For knowledge of etiquette is indeed at least partly a

20 To be fair, she adheres strictly to other rules of etiquette, including rules against eavesdropping.
21 For a discussion of this issue, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), especially Chapters 1 and 6.
kind of book knowledge. This is made evident by the fact that considerate people visiting foreign countries often read up on the social conventions of the relevant cultures so as to avoid causing offense by violating them. The fact that one can read up on such things at all is evidence that book learning plays an important role in acquiring the knowledge necessary to employ the skill. Before one can use the rules of etiquette to express moral attitudes, one must, after all, know what they are. The starting point for learning the rules is through an account of the customs and conventions of a given society—just the kind of thing that one reads about in etiquette books and columns.

Of course, the knowledge that is characteristic of someone with good manners is not entirely a form of book knowledge. This is in part because no book can ever capture every conceivable situation in which an etiquette judgment is required, but it is also because the application of even well-established etiquette rules often requires considerable sensitivity to immediate context. Navigating the social world well—both in real life and in Austen’s novels—does not consist in a kind of blind obedience to intractable social rules. Austen’s heroes and heroines are cognizant of social rules and customs and take them very seriously, but they are also deeply sensitive to how those rules function in social interactions and the moral significance they carry in different contexts.

Consider, for instance, Elizabeth Bennet’s decision to walk from her home at Longbourn to the fine house at Netherfield (occupied by Mr. Bingley, his sisters, and Mr. Darcy) in order to see her sister Jane, who has taken ill during her visit there. Elizabeth knows perfectly well that it is considered unseemly for a gentlewoman to undertake a solo

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22 I do not mean to imply, of course, that reading etiquette books is the only way to acquire this knowledge.

23 I am indebted to Jane Nardin’s work for pointing out the significance of this scene in the overall interpretation of Austen on manners, as well as for general reflections on Austen’s novels. See Those Elegant Decorums: the Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen’s Novels (Albany: SUNY Press, 1973).
three-mile country walk and moreover, that by the time she arrives, her clothes will be dirtier than is appropriate for visiting, especially when those to be visited are relative strangers of high social status like those at Netherfield. Yet she goes anyway. It is not that she is deliberately flaunting the rules of etiquette—she does ask her father for the carriage first, and settles upon walking only when it becomes clear that there is no other way to see Jane. But she believes that the unseemliness of her walk and subsequent physical appearance matters a good deal less than the well-being of her sister, whom she rightly judges will be helped by such a visit. In this case, Elizabeth’s recognition of what has moral significance shapes her view of whether and how she ought to follow the principles of decorum that apply to her situation.

In the novel, we are supposed to admire Elizabeth’s choice. This is not just because we are supposed to admire Elizabeth; she makes some rather bad choices elsewhere in the novel that we needn’t admire. But in this scene, it is the reactions of other characters that show us what we are supposed to think. The genuinely amiable Mr. Bingley either doesn’t notice, or (more likely) pretends not to have noticed Elizabeth’s disheveled appearance upon her arrival, and will say only that her walk indicates “an affection for her sister that is very pleasing.”

He thus acknowledges the moral significance of Elizabeth’s aim and the relative unimportance of the rules of etiquette in this context. Darcy, whose manners at this point in the novel still leave something to be desired, notices her appearance, admits that it violates principles of decorum, but refuses to accede to the idea that violating decorum here is evidence of a character flaw in Elizabeth. Only Mr. Bingley’s shallow and snobbish sisters are prepared to criticize Elizabeth’s behavior, and this is because they, unlike Bingley and Darcy, have no appreciation for the moral soundness of her judgment. They do not have the

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24 *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 36.
right grasp on the principles of manners underlying the rules of etiquette they take so seriously.

The Bingley sisters misunderstand the aims of the principles of manners that drive and dictate both what the rules of etiquette should be and when those rules should be altered or suspended. Their concept of respect is heavily tied to social standing and wealth, and because of this, they do not see the relatively poor Bennet sisters as particularly worthy of respect in the first place. In their eyes, Elizabeth’s disregard for the social conventions of appearance is proof of that unworthiness. The Bingley sisters thus show themselves to be ignorant of a central point to good manners, and their ignorance is what prevents them from seeing why Elizabeth’s choice was a reasonable one in the circumstances.

In order to employ social conventions in a way that properly reflects the underlying principles of manners, one must know what matters and what does not. And in order to live in a way that expresses one’s commitment to what matters, one must be able to employ social conventions in a way that make those commitments evident. In the next section, I shall argue that the Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom captures both these elements of the relationship between manners and moral commitments.

**PART II: PRACTICAL WISDOM, MANNERS, AND MORAL IMAGINATION**

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is the lynchpin that holds Aristotle’s theory of virtue together. On his view, every virtuous action is an exercise of practical wisdom. In explaining what it is to act virtuously, we are committed to explaining what it is to act in a practically wise way. The difficulty is that practical wisdom is a notoriously difficult virtue to pin down. What Aristotle himself says about it is brief and often frustratingly opaque.
Perhaps the most dominant model of practical wisdom in contemporary virtue ethics literature is a kind of “bare perception” model, according to which acting virtuously is a matter of seeing things aright and being motivated to act accordingly. There is something compelling about this model, since it draws attention to the fact that what makes an action virtuous is not the kind of thing that could ever be fully codified or specified apart from a virtuous agent’s perception of the situation.

Yet for all its appeal, the bare perception model has its limitations. For one thing, it has the unfortunate effect of making virtuous perception seem like a single, unitary skill. But acting well in a given situation is usually a very complicated enterprise, and as Aristotle reminds us, there are many ways to get it wrong. Virtue ethics frequently works with a surprisingly impoverished catalog of types of moral failure—very often only vice, incontinence, and continence. But not all moral failures can be understood, or fully understood in those terms, as Austen’s characters show.

Mrs. Jennings, for instance, acts badly enough that we cannot call her actions perfectly virtuous, but she is neither vicious nor incontinent. Quite the contrary, she is a woman with sound moral principles and considerable self-control, who unwittingly hurts people’s feelings and invades their privacy on a regular basis. And while Wickham is certainly vicious and lacks proper moral concepts, he nevertheless shares certain kinds of skills and dispositions with those who really are virtuous. Their respective failures are rightly understood as failures of practical wisdom, although of quite different sorts. An adequate theory of that virtue

26 It is unlikely that McDowell intends us to think of virtuous perception this way, but he says so little about what goes into virtuous perception that it is hard to think of it as anything but “just seeing” what is to be done.
should be able to explain both how Mrs. Jennings gets things wrong and what Wickham manages to get right.

The closest that Aristotle himself comes to a definition of practical wisdom is probably in Book VI, Chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he says that it is a “state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being.”<sup>27</sup> There is more to the story of practical wisdom in Aristotle than this definition indicates, but it is a good place to start. He has already told us back in Book I that practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue, meaning that it is an excellence of the rational part of the soul. Practical wisdom is thus a form of excellent reasoning. But about what? His answer is clear enough: about actions that pertain to the good life for human beings, or human flourishing. Aristotle, of course, is committed to the view that there *is* such a thing as the good life for a human being and that moreover, the components of this life are more or less the same for any human being. To grasp the truth about which things are good or bad for human beings is thus to understand something about human life that is both objectively true and universal.

The person with practical wisdom knows which ends are worth pursuing in human life, a knowledge which is fundamentally dependent on the moral virtues. It is impossible to have such knowledge without the moral virtues, and moreover, the exercise of the moral virtues requires this kind of knowledge. This is the essence of the reciprocity thesis, which Aristotle makes explicit when he says: “What we have said, then, makes it clear that we

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<sup>27</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999) 1140b5-10. All references hereafter are to this translation.
cannot be fully good without [practical wisdom] or [practically wise] without virtue of character.”

It is important to see that Aristotle’s view of the relationship among the virtues is quite different from the Socratic view, which is more properly called a unity thesis. Socrates thought that all virtues were forms of a single virtue, wisdom. By definition, it is impossible to have one virtue without having the others. Aristotle’s thesis, however, is a weaker one, since he does not claim that the virtues are identical to one another, but rather that they cannot occur independently. Importantly, the position is not that moral virtues like courage and generosity are somehow dependent on each other. Rather, the dependency relationship is between each of the virtues and practical wisdom.

The reciprocity thesis is really two theses: (a) the moral virtues cannot be exercised without practical wisdom and (b) it is impossible to acquire practical wisdom in the absence of the moral virtues. What is the reason for thinking that either of these is true? The first thesis, that the moral virtues require practical wisdom for their exercise, is probably the more straightforward of the two. They require practical wisdom because on Aristotle’s view, the exercise of any given moral virtue is an exercise of rationality. Although Aristotle says that the moral virtues are acquired through habituation, they are not exactly habits, at least not habits like twisting one’s hair or biting one’s nails. Aristotle believes that virtuous

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28 NE 1144b31
29 This matters, because some people object to the reciprocity thesis on the grounds that the dispositions needed to exercise courage are quite different from the dispositions needed to exercise generosity. But this is why Aristotle categorized courage and generosity as separate moral virtues, rather than reverting to the Socratic unity thesis. Aristotelian virtues are not simply different sides of the same coin. Each of the moral virtues has its own set of dispositions and affective responses that are characteristic of that virtue. While it is true that on Aristotle’s view, it is impossible to be courageous without also being generous, it is not because the skills and dispositions needed for courage are identical to the ones needed for generosity. Rather, it is because neither is possible without a third virtue—practical wisdom. The overlap among the virtues is only partial; what unites them is their dependence on practical wisdom for their exercise.
action is an expression of rational choice—the outcome of good deliberation.\(^\text{30}\) No matter how well a person has been habituated into, say, generous feelings and responses, she will always have to make judgments about exactly what kind of response is required in the situation that calls for generosity. Even if she is inclined to give to charity, she still has to decide how much to give, which causes are most worthy of her support, and which charities use the money best. And such judgments cannot be made well in the absence of at least some grasp on the relative importance of various things to human life, which is the province of practical wisdom. The moral virtues make it possible for an agent to respond in the right way in these circumstances, but it is practical wisdom that identifies what the right way is.

This is why children who perform virtuous actions under the direction of their parents are not acting in a fully virtuous way. In such cases, the source of the judgment that this action should be done here and now is external to the agent. The capacity to make such a judgment is not part of her character, at least not yet. Habituation into the moral virtues in childhood is centrally a matter of getting children to take pleasure and pain in the right things, to acquire and maintain control over emotional responses so that those responses can be directed properly when required. The child is taught to find generous actions pleasant (and stingy ones unpleasant) and further, to be able to produce and constrain natural emotional responses as the situation requires. She must learn to hand over the present to the birthday child happily and moreover, to constrain her envy—or at least its expression—when a desirable toy is unwrapped. These habits of emotional expressions and restraints, we hope, will carry over into adulthood when she is faced with having to act well in more pressing circumstances. Children develop the powers of judgment that are characteristic of practical

\(^{30}\) I leave open the question about whether it is true that it is impossible to act virtuously in the absence of prior deliberation. I doubt it myself, but will not contest Aristotle’s thesis here.
wisdom only gradually and over time. And it is only once those powers of judgment have been acquired for oneself that one is capable of acting in a fully virtuous way.

The reasons for second thesis, that the moral virtues are required for practical wisdom, are somewhat more opaque. Broadly speaking, the reason is that the habituation into the feelings and emotions characteristic of the moral virtue is essential for a correct grasp of human flourishing. Aristotle puts it this way: “for virtue makes the goal correct, and [practical wisdom] makes the things promoting the goal correct.”31 The moral virtues make the goal correct because properly directed feelings are necessary in order to understand that the goal really is the goal. A full appreciation of the value of central human ends is impossible in the absence of attachment to those ends, and it is only through the moral virtues that we come to develop the right attachments.

Consider generosity again. It is characteristic of the stingy person that he sees material goods, or money, as having considerable value. Too much value, in fact, since he is unwilling to part with them when other considerations indicate that he should. He is overly attached to things that do not warrant that kind of attachment, at least not in those circumstances. It could be that he values the wrong things entirely, or it could be that he values the right things too much and in the wrong circumstances. Either way, his failure to have the right kinds of attachment to ends causes a kind of mismatch between his feelings and desires and the objects of those feelings and desires, insofar as his feelings about the objects do not reflect their genuine value. Lack of moral virtue thus prevents a person from properly appreciating what truly matters to a good human life, and this capacity for appreciation is part of practical wisdom.

31 NE 1144a9
Thus, the reciprocity thesis insists that practical wisdom is required for the exercise of the moral virtues because every virtuous act is an act of rational choice. It is a reflection of a correct judgment about the value of various human ends, as they are implicated in the particular situation. And the moral virtues are required for practical wisdom because a correct grasp of those valuable human ends is impossible unless one’s attachments are in proper order.

But practical wisdom is not simply wisdom about which human ends are valuable. It is also the capacity to discern which actions and responses are conducive to those ends. Aristotle takes pains to distinguish virtue from a state he calls cleverness—the ability to engage in means-end reasoning. It will, however, turn out that the skill associated with cleverness is actually a component of practical wisdom and hence, of virtue:

There is a capacity, called cleverness, which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to attain them. If, then, the goal is fine, cleverness is praiseworthy, and if the goal is base, cleverness is unscrupulousness. That is why both [practically wise] and unscrupulous people are called clever.

[Practical wisdom] is not cleverness, though it requires this capacity.\textsuperscript{32} It is possible to be clever without being practically wise, since one might well be good at determining the best means to an end without having any knowledge of the real value of that end. But crucially, it is impossible to be practically wise in the fullest sense without also being clever.

The popularity of the bare perception model can sometimes make us forget how much there is to say about the skills involved in knowing what is needed to act well in a given situation. Consider, for instance, the following remark made by Richard Sorabji:

\textsuperscript{32} NE 1144a25-30
Whatever other roles practical wisdom may or may not play, I suggest that one role is this. It enables a man, in the light of his conception of the good life in general, to perceive what generosity requires of him, or more generally what virtue and *to kalon* require of him, in the particular case, and it instructs him to act accordingly. 33 This is true so far as it goes, but how do we learn what is required in order “act accordingly”? Having correctly perceived that something is required of me is, as I have said, no guarantee of success in acting on that requirement appropriately. The knowledge that morally speaking, I ought to do something to defuse an embarrassing situation or comfort someone in pain does not immediately or automatically produce knowledge of *how* to defuse embarrassment or offer comfort. The exercise of practical wisdom requires both “knowing that” and “knowing how,” and cleverness is concerned primarily with the latter. Knowing how is a skill, and manners are an essential part of that skill.

There are people who, while genuinely committed to the ends of offering comfort and saving others from embarrassment, are not very good at identifying the situations in which others require comfort or rescue from embarrassment. Others, equally committed to the ends, are able to identify such situations, but yet find themselves at a loss for what to say or do in order to bring about comfort or rescue. Although both engage in a kind of cognitive failure, the cognitive failures are not exactly the same. A wide range of skills and capacities are required in order to succeed at fully virtuous action, and it is possible to possess some of these skills and capacities while lacking others.

One of the central elements of the “knowing how” aspect of practical wisdom is the ability to make certain kinds of inferences about other people and their circumstances.

Suppose I have it as my aim to protect my sensitive friend from social embarrassment.

Succeeding in such an endeavor requires a number of cognitive skills. I must become aware of which kinds of situations produce embarrassment for him, be able to recognize a given situation as one of that sort, and be able to tell whether my friend is in fact becoming embarrassed by what passes. In each case, I need a kind of adeptness at interpreting the expressions, language, tone of voice, and postures of other people, both my friend and those with whom he is interacting. I also need to know how to defuse or deflect his embarrassment—for instance, how to redirect the conversation, or insert an appropriate bit of humor, or remove him from the scene without seeming obvious. Some people may indeed be more talented at this sort of thing by nature, but we cannot underestimate the degree of skill involved. Such things take experience, and indeed, even practice.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth chastises Darcy for his behavior at a ball in Hertfordshire, during which he violated rules of gentlemanly behavior by failing to do his share of dancing with women who would otherwise have to sit out.\(^\text{34}\) He defends himself by saying that he knew none of the women and that he is “ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers.” Elizabeth finds this to be an inadequate reply for “a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world,” since such a man should be expected to have greater social skill than Darcy displayed at the ball. Darcy answers by saying, “I certainly have not the talent which some people possess…of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.” Elizabeth is not appeased, suggesting instead that Darcy’s social inadequacies, such

\(^{34}\) *Pride and Prejudice*, 175. There is an interesting contrast here with *Emma’s* Mr. Knightley, who perfectly embodies Austen’s ideal of a gentleman. Although he hates to dance, he nevertheless asks Harriet Smith to dance for the sole purpose of sparing her serious social humiliation.
as they are, result from his failure to practice perfecting them. Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, adds that Darcy is unwilling to take the trouble to learn to do better.

Elizabeth’s critique is based in her expectation that the wealthy and powerful Darcy had a gentleman’s upbringing, and certainly the education of a gentleman at the time would have included training in the social graces. The idea of a gentleman’s education is, of course, largely an anachronism, but the suggestion that Darcy’s social failures are attributable to his unwillingness to practice them is interesting.

In the novel, Darcy is much more charming when he feels in his element, such as when he is home at Pemberley, but the abilities he shows at Pemberley often fail him when he has to move much outside his intimate social circle. Where Darcy falls short is in his capacity to engage in imaginative identification with other people. He pays attention to his surroundings, but not always in a way that enables him to appreciate the situation from the perspective of someone else. Darcy manages to offend Elizabeth in the course of proposing marriage to her because he proposes to her in a way that she rightly views as insulting. Darcy doesn’t initially see it as insulting because he thinks he is simply speaking the truth, which he is. But what Darcy fails to see is that speaking the truth so bluntly in these circumstances is both unnecessary and hurtful. Darcy is stunned by Elizabeth’s refusal of his proposal. Although she says she would have refused him even if he had proposed “in a more gentleman-like manner,” his manners anger her in ways that he cannot appreciate because he is, that point in the novel, incapable of hearing his remarks from her point of view.35

35 *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 192.
Mrs. Jennings is subject to a similar difficulty. Virtually incapable of feeling embarrassed herself, she is a poor judge of when others are embarrassed, and has trouble imagining how her vulgar attempts at humor could wound or offend. She cannot appreciate the point of view of someone like Marianne Dashwood because she cannot imagine what it is like to see the world through Marianne’s romantic eyes. Where her powers of imaginative identification are more effective, such as when she imagines Mrs. Dashwood’s grief over her gravely ill daughter, her manners improve greatly.

Both Darcy and Mrs. Jennings have a good grasp of moral concepts. They are attached to the right ends, and they know what is and what is not worth preserving in human life. But their ability to preserve what they rightly see as important is hindered by their inability to take on the perspective of other people and understand what matters to them. Mrs. Jennings is clearly very fond of the Dashwood sisters, yet her intrusive behavior is sometimes at odds with their flourishing, such as when she tells everyone that Marianne and Willoughby are engaged when she has neither confirmation of her claim nor permission to make it. Had Mrs. Jennings been more discreet, Marianne would have suffered less public embarrassment when Willoughby becomes engaged to someone else. Mrs. Jennings, however, never realizes this. And Darcy, while correctly judging the value of having Elizabeth as his wife, nearly loses her through his own arrogance and lack of sympathy with her perspective. He overestimates her desire to be married to someone wealthy and powerful and underestimates her loyalty to her sister.

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36 For a more extensive discussion of Mrs. Jennings and her imaginative failures, see my “Practical Wisdom and Moral Imagination in Sense and Sensibility,” forthcoming in Philosophy and Literature.
37 It is, of course, one of Darcy’s major redeeming features that he is in love with Elizabeth, rather than Caroline Bingley. And Mrs. Jennings is willing to make unpopular public stands to uphold what is right.
38 Sense and Sensibility, p. 182.
Neither Darcy nor Mrs. Jennings is able to live in ways that fully reflect their correct grasp on what is genuinely important. Mrs. Jennings is unable to see herself and her actions from the perspective of others, but if she were, she could not endorse her own behavior, incompatible as it is with her own moral commitments. She is a kind woman who unwittingly does things that cause pain and even harm, and she lacks the moral imagination to realize what she is doing. For her, the world exists only as it she sees it. Her interpretative powers are sharply limited by her deficiency of imagination. Darcy is luckier than Mrs. Jennings in the sense that he has both greater imaginative powers than she does and the corrective influence of Elizabeth. But it is not until he takes on Elizabeth’s point of view that he can appreciate the mismatch between his own moral commitments and his actual behavior.\(^{39}\)

The capacity for moral imagination may be a natural skill, but it can certainly be developed and honed. Aristotle reminds us that practical wisdom is acquired primarily through experience of the world, and this is in part because experience of the world is essential to expanding one’s imaginative capacities. The more actions I perform, the better able I am to see the effect those actions have in the world and on other people, assuming that I am appropriately reflective. One of the central tasks raising children is teaching them how to broaden their own moral horizons. Several of Austen’s novels contain a subtext about the proper place of novels in moral education.\(^{40}\) Austen is rightly critical of those who dismiss

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\(^{39}\) During Darcy’s second proposal to Elizabeth, he engages in considerable self-recrimination, saying to Elizabeth, “What did you say of me, that I did not deserve?” This might seem exaggerated, particularly in the face of Elizabeth’s own biases against Darcy earlier in the novel, but I don’t think Austen intends it to be so. Darcy really has undergone a moral transformation, and although Elizabeth does not deserve the full credit, it likely would not have happened without her.

\(^{40}\) This is most apparent in *Northanger Abbey*, but the theme runs throughout her work.
novels as either mere frivolity or worse, dangerous to the developing mind. After all, learning to identify with fictional characters and coming to see their worlds from their point of view is a way of exercising and extending the moral imagination.

It is because he has considerable powers of moral imagination that Wickham succeeds so well in his charade. He has just the kind of sensitivity to nuance and social context that Mrs. Jennings so badly needs. In this respect, he resembles someone with full practical wisdom, since the kind of cleverness that Wickham exhibits is part of the virtue. Austen and Aristotle share many assumptions about the role of moral education in the development of virtue, and in Austen’s novels, a character’s upbringing is often identified as a crucial explanation of her present behavior. Given Wickham’s upbringing, his social aptitude is not surprising, particularly when we reflect on his natural intellectual and imaginative talents.

He is very good at judging how things seem to others; indeed, this is how he succeeds in fooling the sharp-eyed Elizabeth. He sees that she finds him attractive and uses this to his advantage in constructing an account of himself that she will find plausible and appealing.

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41 It cannot be accidental that Mr. Collins, who ranks among the least imaginative creatures in England, refuses to read novels (Pride and Prejudice, p. 68).
43 I’m grateful to an anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press for helping me see the importance of this.
44 Wickham, like Darcy, had a gentleman’s education; indeed, they had more or less the same education, thanks to the generosity of Darcy’s father. If Elizabeth expects that good social graces are the natural outcome of such an education, then it is not surprising that Wickham has them. One difficulty with Pride and Prejudice is that we have a hard time accounting for how Jane and Elizabeth Bennet turned out as well as they did. Mrs. Bennet cannot possibly have taught them the rules of propriety so effectively, and it is hard to see the laissez-faire Mr. Bennet taking on that role himself. Darcy takes for granted that Elizabeth spent time away from Longbourn (p. 179), but that is not confirmed.
45 It is worth noting that Wickham, like Darcy, had a gentleman’s education; indeed, they had more or less the same education, thanks to the generosity of Darcy’s father. If Elizabeth expects that good social graces are the natural outcome of such an education, then it is not surprising that Wickham has them. One difficulty with Pride and Prejudice is that we have a hard time accounting for how Jane and Elizabeth Bennet turned out as well as they did. Mrs. Bennet cannot possibly have taught them the rules of propriety so effectively, and it is hard to
Of course, Wickham lacks the part of practical wisdom that orients him toward what is genuinely worthwhile in life—the “knowing that” component of practical wisdom. Indeed, this is why he is vicious. His attachments are not what they ought to be; he is greedy, intemperate, and disloyal. Insofar as he lacks crucial moral virtues, he necessarily lacks practical wisdom. But it is possible to lack the attachments necessary for moral wisdom while still possessing some of the skills that would enable a better disposed person to express those attachments in social life. Just as one can be clever at discerning the best means to an end without knowing what the end is worth, so one can exercise some of the skills of a virtue without having the virtue itself. Wickham’s powers of discernment are considerable. Were he to employ his skills in the service of better ends, he would be quite effective at virtuous action, more so than many better-disposed characters in the novels. We might wonder whether we should consider this to be a redeeming feature in him; I am inclined to think that it is, despite the fact that he would not be so treacherous but for these skills. But I shall not argue this point.

Moral imagination is necessary to appreciate the link between moral commitments and their expression in social life. A commitment to sympathy takes me only so far; without the ability to appreciate how another person’s situation appears to her, I will be unable to exercise sympathy properly. The reciprocity thesis implies that one needs the moral virtues in order

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see the laissez-faire Mr. Bennet taking on that role himself. Darcy takes for granted that Elizabeth spent time away from Longbourn (p. 179), but that is not confirmed.

46 It is, after all, one thing to say that the world would be a better place had someone not been so courageous, intelligent, etc. It is another thing to say that he is a worse human being for that. Probably, Neville Chamberlain’s decision to appease Hitler resulted from features of his character that are in fact virtues, although clearly the consequences of that decision were devastating. The mere fact that a trait causes bad consequences does not mean that it is not a virtue. This is the same concern that motivates Philippa Foot to speculate about whether courage can be a virtue in a bad man. See “Virtues and Vices” in Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) p. 18. (Her answer is that while courage is a virtue, and while it is a virtue in this man, it does not operate as a virtue in him when he acts badly.) See also Martin, “Miss Manners Rescues Civilization,” pp. 131-132.
to have practical wisdom. This is, as I have said, because through habituation into moral virtue, one becomes attached to the right ends and aims at what is genuinely good. But it is not enough to aim at what is good; one must also be proficient with the bow in order to be virtuous. Mrs. Jennings knows where to aim, but she is seriously deficient with the bow. Wickham has the proficiency with the bow, but lacks the knowledge of where to aim. Both get something right with respect to practical wisdom, but both get something wrong as well. Certainly what Mrs. Jennings has right is the more important of the two, but full virtue requires both.

If, as I have argued, the rules of etiquette serve as a primary vehicle for expressing moral commitments in social life, virtue will require skill with respect to those rules. It follows from my view that anyone who aims at being virtuous in Aristotle’s sense ought to be reading good etiquette books. Practical wisdom is incomplete when it cannot be exercised effectively and effective exercise requires knowledge of how to employ the rules of etiquette to express and reflect the aims of virtue. Likewise, the practice of etiquette is empty unless it is accompanied by an appreciation for the expressive role that manners play in our lives.47

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47 I am especially indebted to Maggie Little for help in thinking through the argument of this paper, as well as to Tim Chappell and an anonymous referee for OUP. I would also like to thank Jim Nelson, Rebecca Kukla, Gaby Sakaomot, and the members of an audience at the University of Dundee for useful conversations about related work. Finally, I drew general inspiration from an article by David Gallop (“Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic” Philosophy and Literature 23 (1999): 96-109).