

The Moral Importance of Politeness in Kant's Anthropology

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1784), Kant explains that ethics, like physics, 'will have its empirical part, but it will also have a rational part, . . . though here [in ethics] the empirical part might be given the special name *practical anthropology*' (4:388).¹ In the *Groundwork*, Kant suggests that anthropology, or the 'power of judgment sharpened by experience', has two roles, 'to distinguish in what cases [moral laws] are applicable' and 'to gain for [moral laws] access to the human will' (4:389). Twelve years later, the first function, of applying the categorical imperative to specifically human situations, is incorporated into Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). For instance, Kant writes, 'brutish excess in the use of food and drink is misuse of the means of nourishment that restricts or exhausts our capacity to use them intelligently' (6:427). But the second function, of 'gaining for moral laws access to the human will', is still reserved for moral anthropology. Kant explains that a metaphysics of morals has a

counterpart, . . . moral anthropology, which . . . would deal only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals. It would deal with the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles. (6:217)

The year after the publication of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant published his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), a discussion of 'what man makes, can, or should make of himself' (7: 119).² Although this *Anthropology* goes beyond merely moral anthropology,³ it includes discussions of just the sorts of subjective helps and hindrances to which Kant refers in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Until recently, the empirical dimension of Kant's moral philosophy was largely neglected. But over the past few years there has been a renewed attention to the importance of what Robert Louden has called 'Kant's Impure Ethics' (Louden 2000, cf. Frierson 2003, Guyer 1993, Munzel 1999, Wood 1999). There is still much work to be done, however, when it comes to exploring the *specific* insights of Kant's anthropology and their implications for the cultivation of moral character. In this respect, Kant's work on the emotions has received the most attention. Nancy Sherman, for example, has made extensive use of anthropological insights in her discussions of the roles that emotions can play in moral life (see especially Sherman 1997a and Sherman 1997b).

In this paper, I focus on one neglected gem of Kant's moral anthropology: his account of the moral importance of politeness.⁴ Kant provides an account of politeness that explains why it is morally important, how it works, and how it can be morally legitimate. What is most important about Kant's discussion of politeness is how explicitly it exemplifies moral anthropology.⁵ Kant insists that because of certain facts about human beings, we are susceptible to influence through politeness, and this influence should be used for the strengthening of moral principles in oneself and others. Thus politeness highlights Kant's attention to the influence of empirical helps and hindrances on subjective conditions of morality, as well as his recognition that anthropology is the proper place for such attention.⁶

I begin with a passage from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. Although this work does not deal with moral anthropology in the strict sense, it does include anthropology in general, including moral anthropology, in its *application* of the

moral law to human contexts. Just as Kant discusses vices such as gluttony using empirical lessons about the susceptibility of human beings to food and drink, he discusses the moral principles that follow from various insights of moral anthropology. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant mentions the importance of politeness for the promotion of morality as an appendix to his ‘elements of ethics’, in which he outlined specific duties that follow from the application of the moral law to the human condition. He says,

It is a duty to oneself as well as to others not to isolate oneself but to use one’s moral perfections in social intercourse. . . . – not exactly in order to promote as the end what is best for the world, but only to cultivate what leads indirectly to this end . . . and so associate the graces with virtue. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue. (6:473)

Kant goes on to clarify the nature of these ‘graces’ [*Grazien*] more specifically. These graces include ‘affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness’, all of which ‘are, indeed, only tokens’ (6:473). It is this set of ‘graces’, which Kant groups together under the heading of the ‘the manners [*Manieren*] one is obliged to show in social intercourse’ (6:474), that I describe with the term ‘politeness’.⁷

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant lays out two fundamental traits that these graces have in common. First, they are mere appearances, ‘only tokens’. As Kant explains, ‘these are, indeed, only *externals* or by-products (*parerga*), which give a beautiful illusion resembling virtue’ (6:473). But second, they are appearances of *virtue*, and moreover appearances that ‘promote the feeling for virtue itself’ (6:473). The *Metaphysics of Morals* thus gives a good statement of the fact that we are obligated to be polite, and some detail about what this politeness consists in. But

although this work mentions *that* this politeness can give rise to genuine virtue, it explains neither *why* it is important nor *how* it helps give rise to virtue. The purpose of the account in *Metaphysics of Morals* is simply to point out the obligations that follow from certain anthropological facts.

In the *Anthropology*, Kant reiterates the general point that ‘when men play [virtuous] roles, virtues are gradually established, whose appearance had up until now only been affected’ (7:151). But anthropology provides the analysis of politeness that is lacking in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Rather than focusing on the duty to be polite, Kant’s anthropology offers an account of the *importance* of polite society in the cultivation of virtue and the specific *means* by which politeness cultivates virtue. In the context of discussing the means of promoting virtue, Kant’s anthropology also deals with the apparent deceitfulness of politeness in order to show that politeness is morally legitimate. In this paper, I discuss Kant’s accounts of the importance, the means, and the legitimacy of politeness.

I. Why is Politeness Important?

Fundamentally, politeness is important for the promotion of virtue because sensuous inclinations often employ deceit in order to distract one from the demands of morality, and politeness combats this deception.

To deceive the deceiver in ourselves, the inclination, is a fresh return to obedience under the law of virtue . . . Force accomplishes nothing in the struggle against sensuality in the inclinations, and, as Swift says, in order to save the ship, we must fling an empty tub to a whale, so that he can play with it. (7:151-52)

Politeness somehow ‘deceives the deceiver in oneself’.⁸ Throughout these passages, Kant suggests that the ‘deceiver’ is sensuous inclination. In the *Anthropology*, he refers to it simply as ‘inclination’ and in the lectures he says, ‘the senses deceive the understanding, thus the understanding to retaliate against the senses must again deceive [through politeness]’ (25:503).

Although Kant generally uses the terms ‘senses’ or ‘inclination’ to refer to the deceiver within, it is best to read these terms to refer to a will perverted by sensuous inclination. As Kant explains in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the ‘enemy [of morality] . . . is not to be sought in the natural inclinations’ but rather in ‘the evil which has already taken up position there [in the will] (as it could not have done . . . if it had not been incorporated by us . . .)’ (6:57-58). The deceiver within is really a *will* that gives in to inclination, and not sensuous inclination itself. Moreover, even a will in the grips of mere animal inclinations would probably not turn to deception, since the demands of these inclinations are so few. In the *Religion* Kant suggests that one’s sensuous inclinations go beyond reasonable bounds primarily under the influence of others: ‘the causes and circumstances that draw him into this danger and keep him there . . . do not come his way from his own raw nature . . . but rather from the human beings to whom he stands in relation’ (6:93).⁹ In the sections of the *Anthropology* dealing with politeness, however, Kant does not make these distinctions between the will and the senses, nor between the senses and the corrupting influence of society. In this paper, I follow his example and use ‘senses’ and ‘sensuous inclination’ to refer to a will corrupted by inclination.¹⁰

Even in his anthropology, Kant is clear that not all sensuous inclination is deceitful merely by virtue of being sensuous. All sensuous inclination is potentially *tempting* in that it can provoke activities that may not be in accord with the moral law. But temptation is not *deceit*. Strong temptations can be opposed by a strong moral feeling; they do not require counter-deception. Politeness becomes an important aid to establishing morality because sensuous inclinations do not fight fairly. Human beings are not only presented with strong desires; we employ self-deceit to heighten desire illegitimately and subvert other influences.¹¹ Against *this* tactic, it is appropriate to use deceit, or at least illusion,¹² in turn.

There are two general ways in which deception works on behalf of sensuous inclination.¹³ These can be illustrated by turning to an example of an inclination that Kant includes in his published *Anthropology* as an illustration of this sort of deception: the ‘inclination toward being at ease’. One way deception heightens this inclination to one’s detriment is that it promotes inactivity by encouraging one to avoid hardship, but this inactivity ultimately leads to boredom and disgust with oneself (7:151). Through the inclination, one represents as ultimately good something that cannot ultimately satisfy since ‘the greatest sensuous pleasure . . . is found . . . in resting *after work*’ (7:276, my emphasis). Through this deceit the inclination towards ease leads one astray in one’s pursuit of happiness. And because one is led astray by a falsehood, this influence constitutes a *deception* on behalf of one’s inclination. A second way deception promotes this inclination is by undermining that *ultimate* self-contentment which comes from satisfying the demands of morality (5:28, 117-18; 6:391). In support of the inclination to ease, one mistakenly suggests that ‘when one does nothing at all . . . he can do nothing evil’

(7:152), when in fact laziness is a violation of one's imperfect duties to oneself and others (4: 423). Thus one is led astray in the pursuit of virtue to the favor of one's inclinations. This two-fold deception is characteristic of sensuous inclinations, in that both happiness and morality are undermined.

It is important to note that through deception, sensuous inclination is not simply *stronger* than one's overall drive for happiness or one's commitment to the moral law. Through self-deceit, sensuous inclination does not directly challenge one's commitments to happiness or the moral law at all. One might be firmly committed to doing one's duty, but as long as one is convinced that one does no wrong by inactivity, the commitment to duty is ineffective. Deceit here functions much like deceit in interpersonal relations. If someone gives me a glass of poison to drink, telling me that it is water, no matter how strong my love of life or my moral commitment to preserve my life, I will not resist the offer because I do not know that it requires resistance. Likewise through self-deceit, one does not even put up a moral or pragmatic resistance to sensuous inclinations.

In his lectures on anthropology, there are other examples of deceiving the deceiver within. Throughout these lectures, Kant reiterates that one must respond to deception on behalf of sensibility with counter-deception.¹⁴ He says,

One cannot use violence against the deception of the senses, since it is a trick of the senses. Against this trick the understanding instead must set another trick, and that the understanding also does, and deceives the senses with a trick. All sensible pleasures and passions deceive the understanding, in which they promise more and give more hope than they later really accomplish, and all the same one trusts the promises of sense So [sensuous inclination] promises

someone that a trip will bring much that is new to see and makes one hope that in foreign lands one will find what is not there in one's own, and thereafter one finds that all lands are the same. (25:503)

Kant's example here of the inclination to travel is *not* of someone who happens to have a particularly strong desire to see foreign lands. This desire could be measured against one's other inclinations and against one's duties. The problem is that the desire to see foreign lands is heightened through false 'promises' made on behalf of the senses. In this example, Kant does not isolate deception that is particularly relevant to *moral* considerations. Insofar as there is anything morally wrong with traveling, the heightened interest in travel should not be enough to override one's moral commitments, although it could lead one to forgo some imperfect duties that would not otherwise be forgone. In that sense, Kant's later work¹⁵ reflects a greater concern with the threat to *morality* of self-deceit. Still, the general problem with deceit on behalf of sensibility is at play throughout his discussions of anthropology. Politeness is important for Kant's *moral* anthropology because it promotes virtue in the face of one's tendency to deceive oneself into satisfying particular inclinations without proper regard for morality.¹⁶

II. How Does Politeness Promote Virtue?

In his lectures as well as the published *Anthropology*, Kant's explanation of the deceptions of sensuous inclination is followed by a call to employ a 'trick' in response, and this trick is connected with good manners.¹⁷ Somehow one must, through polite society, trick the senses into complicity with virtue. Kant does not say much about how human beings are brought into polite society. He usually merely identifies a

general inclination to sociability that leads people to interact with each other. In this ‘Idea for a Universal History’, for example, he explains that ‘man has an inclination to *live in society*, since he feels in this state more like a human being’ (8:20-21). In that essay, Kant focuses on the role of unsociability in the development of society, whereas his accounts of politeness emphasize instead the role that politeness can have in making this social interaction enjoyable. But because one is naturally inclined to engage with others, norms that facilitate more pleasant social interaction will be welcome.¹⁸

But even once one is involved in polite society, how exactly does that polite society promote *virtue*? In the published *Anthropology*, Kant explains,

Signs of well-wishing and respect, though originally empty, gradually lead to genuine dispositions of this sort . . .

Every human virtue in circulation is small change; only a child takes it for real gold. Nevertheless, it is better to circulate pocket pieces than nothing at all. In the end, they can be converted into genuine gold coin, though at a considerable discount. (7:152-53)

This does not yet explain *how* small change – i.e. politeness – is converted into real gold – i.e. virtue. Kant’s greatest detail in this part of the *Anthropology* is his description of the role of politeness in relations between the sexes, where ‘as an illusion it is beneficial, for it creates the necessary distance between the sexes so that we do not degrade the one as a mere instrument of pleasure for the other’ (7:152). Because one who wants simply to use another for the sake of sexual pleasure must conform to standards of good manners to achieve his goal, the sexual passion itself is tempered and one cannot actually treat the other *merely* as a means.¹⁹

In his lectures Kant offers a fuller and more general account of the ways in which politeness effects genuine virtue. In the rest of this section, I discuss two of the most important. One is that the effort to be polite helps to develop and reveal to oneself self-mastery, which is necessary for virtue. Through recognizing a capacity for self-mastery that is exhibited in being polite, one can combat self-deceptive tendencies to excuse oneself through false beliefs that virtue is simply impossible. A second way in which politeness helps is through the presentation of virtue as something lovable. While the first (self-mastery) is a way in which politeness leads to virtue in the one who *is* polite, the second (lovable virtue) promotes virtue in those *to whom* one is polite.

a) Promoting Virtue by Cultivating and Revealing Self-Mastery.

One of the most important ways that politeness leads to virtue is through the cultivation of self-mastery. In his lectures on anthropology, Kant argues that

In society everyone is well-behaved, [but] everything is appearance, the desires of the citizens against each other are there; in acting everyone burns with wickedness . . . , and yet he is as composed and indifferent as if this did not stir him at all. Truly this betrays a self-mastery [*Selbstbeherrschung*] and is the beginning of conquering oneself [*Selbst-bezwingung*]. It is a step towards virtue. (25:930)

Kant recognizes that politeness is far from true virtue. The polite citizens described here are inflamed with wickedness. Politeness is necessary for them to achieve their wicked ends. So they all pretend to be good. But for those who excuse their wickedness by despairing about their incapacity to do good,²⁰ politeness now

‘betrays’ them. Politeness shows that they are capable of self-mastery. And although this self-mastery does not lead directly to virtue and certainly can be used merely to promote one’s own good, it is a capacity, developed and revealed through politeness, for virtue.

Later in the same lecture, Kant makes clear that one of the most important roles that politeness can play in the development of self-mastery is the suppression of passions. He explains,

The passion of love is much moderated through [politeness], when one plays around with the beautiful for the amenities of association and conceals the red-hot inclination, that otherwise would be difficult to suppress; the well-mannered association and the artful joke defeat the otherwise hard to overcome inclination. Nature has thus put in us a propensity to make illusions, through which we can tame the unruly inclinations of our passions. (25: 930)

For Kant, a passion is an inclination that dominates one’s will (7:265, cf. Frierson 2000, 2003, and Sorenson forthcoming). Unlike affects, however, passions admit of reflection and do not sidestep normal deliberative processes. They are calm and persist. Illusions of good manners turn this strength of passions into a means for overcoming them. One’s out-of-control love leads one to pursue association with one’s beloved, but the conditions of association require that one exercise restraint. Through this restraint – along with an ‘artful joke’ – one can come to realize the folly of this passionate love. This is not a guaranteed cure. One can still remain committed to one’s passion. And even if the original passion is overcome, one may replace it with another passion (say, passionate sociability²¹) or with a commitment to one’s happiness as the overriding goal of life. But the overcoming of the passion

at least *enables* one to pursue virtue. In this case, politeness not only reveals self-mastery; it enhances it.

Politeness thus can give rise to virtue in one who is polite both by increasing self-mastery and by making one more aware of that self-mastery. In both cases, one combats illusions made on behalf of the senses, which skew attention towards immoral ends by exaggerating particular desires (in the case of passions) or by overemphasizing the importance of happiness itself. These sensuous deceits actually undermine self-mastery. But even when one *is* capable of mastering oneself, one seeks through self-deception to convince oneself that one is *not* capable, that immoral behavior is ‘out of one’s control’. These delusions undermine proper use of one’s control over oneself. Through combating them with an illusion of its own, politeness helps the development of virtue.

b) Promoting Virtue by Presenting a Beautiful Illusion of Virtue.

Politeness is not only a means to promoting virtue in oneself; it can promote virtue in others. It does this by presenting virtue as something worthy of love and respect. Kant explains that

One who loves the illusion of the good eventually is won over to actually loving the good. One loves those people who are always polite to others, e.g. a good-natured citizen that lies to bring about good (although this is not exactly worthy of love). (25:931)

Kant’s illustration is not the best he could have chosen, since the politeness here does not even have the appearance of true virtue.²² Still, the example helps to clarify Kant’s claim in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that ‘a beautiful illusion resembling

virtue' can serve to 'promote the feeling for virtue itself by a striving to bring this illusion as near as possible to the truth' (6:473). One who is polite inspires love.²³ This is part of the illusion of politeness. When a person appears agreeable,²⁴ one is inclined to love that person. This love for people who bear the appearance of virtue makes it easier to love virtue itself, even if, as Kant's unfortunate illustration shows, this love can often be dangerously misplaced. The agreeableness of the appearance inspires a desire to see the appearance made real. One comes to love true virtue. This love of virtue leads one to seek to realize virtue not only in others (where it first appears lovable), but also in oneself.

In 'The End of All Things', in the context of a partial defense of Christianity, Kant explains the importance of love of virtue in rather dramatic terms. He argues,

If it is a matter not merely of the representation of duty but also of following duty, if one asks about the *subjective* ground of actions from which . . . we may expect . . . what a person *will do* – and not . . . merely . . . *what he ought to do* – then love, as a free reception of another's will under one's maxims, is an essential complement to the imperfections of human nature. (8: 337-38)

Among the 'imperfections of human nature' that love helps to combat are the tendencies to self-deception that we have already seen. In this context, love does not primarily serve to undermine the deceptions themselves. Rather it provides an important competing influence over the will. Moreover, as Kant suggests later in the essay, Christ's worthiness to be loved, though not identical to the worthiness to be loved of the moral law itself, is connected with it in an important way (8:338). By vividly representing the virtuous condition, Christ presents virtue in such a way that

one's sensibly affected will can be won over not only to respect virtue, but also to love it.

Love for Christ can become love of virtue in two ways. People have a natural love of virtue that is only awakened (or reawakened) upon seeing examples of virtue. Christ 'appeals to . . . the way [his followers] would of themselves voluntarily act if they examined themselves properly' (8:338). A latent love of virtue is actualized by another person. This love would be something like respect for the moral law, but more dependent upon sensibility and hence more in need of sensuous stimulation to provoke it. Alternatively, love of a person could arise independent of any love of virtue, perhaps because the person is agreeable. Hence Christ appears as a 'friend of humanity' (8:338). As this love becomes deeper, one comes to love the person for their virtue itself, and not simply for the good feelings to which that virtue gives rise. Then one may come to love not just the person for their virtue, but the virtue itself. Kant does not give many details about specifically *how* love of virtue comes from virtuous examples. For him it is enough to point out that such examples *do* in fact inspire love of virtue.

Unfortunately, the account of politeness in the *Anthropology* cannot be explained this easily. Unlike Christ or any other model of a truly virtuous character,²⁵ those in polite society exhibit only the *illusion* of virtue in their polite interactions. Kant assumes, for the sake of argument, that these others in fact shelter wickedness and only appear polite since doing so is prudent. But then it seems that for one's politeness to make others love virtue, one would have to deceive them into thinking that one is actually virtuous. Otherwise, one might think, they will at best love politeness rather than virtue and at worst hate what they recognize to be a mere

trick. But if one really must deceive others to get them to love virtue, then Kant might seem to endorse deceit as a means to the end of helping others develop good will. And Kant of all people cannot allow the use of immoral means for the promotion of morally good ends.

Instead, he argues that politeness is not deceit, but rather ‘illusion’. Kant’s account of the how politeness motivates thus depends on his account of illusion. In particular, Kant must show that illusion is a legitimate means of motivating action, and he must show that it is possible for illusions to motivate. Kant does not give as much detail in these areas as one might like, but he does address both of them. He gives the most detail with respect to the issue of how illusions can be morally *legitimate* spurs to virtue. Thus I turn first to the issue of how politeness, which seems to deceive, can be morally acceptable for Kant.

III. How Politeness is Legitimate: The Difference between Illusion and Deceit

Whenever he discusses politeness, Kant reiterates that ‘demonstrations of politeness do not deceive’ (7:152; 39; cf. 25: 930). But in the section explicitly devoted to politeness in the *Anthropology* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* he does not explain *in what sense* they do not deceive. Politeness functions, after all, by getting others to see one as virtuous even when one is not. How is this not deception? Kant’s answer does not appear anywhere in the *Metaphysics of Morals* because it is a properly anthropological, not purely moral, question. But in his published *Anthropology*, the answer comes in the section immediately preceding his account of politeness, where Kant distinguishes between deception (*Betrug*) and illusion (*Schein*).²⁶

Illusion is that . . . error which persists although we know at the same time that the supposed object is not real Deception . . . exists when the appearance vanishes as soon as we know the nature of the object. (7:149-50)

The importance of this account for his explanation of politeness is highlighted by the fact that in his lectures on anthropology, Kant consistently and explicitly includes politeness as an example of the distinction between illusion and deception.

Politeness has its own section only in the published *Anthropology*, and even there the section on politeness immediately follows the more general discussion of illusion and deception.

In Kant's treatment of illusion and deceit in his lectures, he explains the difference between illusion and deception in more detail.

All appearance is an illusion when it can stand alongside knowledge of the truth. All appearance is instead deception insofar as it cannot be combined with knowledge of the truth. Thus clothing is an appearance of illusion; we already have more respect for a person that has fine clothing. It gives us an impression of the person, even if we already know him well. Likewise the son pleases his father better in a new uniform Such illusions in clothes still please because the appearance is combined with the knowledge of the truth. Deception does not please, for it is merely a kind of make-up, and when it is wiped off, then a deadly paleness comes into view. (25:502-503)

Deception, which Kant condemns throughout his moral philosophy, is incompatible with knowledge of the truth. Illusion is not. This makes all the difference in how one responds to each kind of delusion. ('Delusion' [*das Blendwerk*] is the general

category that includes both illusion and deceit). One is displeased with and repulsed by deceit because it undermines rational choice. One is pleased by at least some illusions because, although they clothe the truth, they do not exclude it.²⁷ This difference between deceit and illusion also explains why illusion is morally acceptable but deceit is not. Since illusion does not depend on making another believe a falsehood, it is not morally wrong.

It is crucial in all of these accounts that the effect of illusions does not wear off when one knows the truth. Thus we are able to honor governing authorities because

When a parliamentary counselor is so serious, as though he has the most important thing in his head, this effects in us an illusion, *though we know* that at home he pursues the most ridiculous activities. (25:504-505, my emphasis)

If one bases respect for authorities on a *belief* that they are as dignified as they pretend to be, that honor will not be sustained once one knows the truth. Fortunately for public officials, honor in these cases does not depend on the truth of the matter, but on the appearance. Likewise in the more general case,

In all our outer decency, honorableness is always connected with illusion; for people that appear with decent behavior command respect, even when one knows that internally their thoughts are themselves full of wantonness. (25:929)

It is because politeness has its effect despite knowledge of the truth that it is properly called illusion rather than deceit and properly employed in the promotion of true virtue.

IV. How Do Illusions Motivate?

A problem remains, however, when we say that politeness does not deceive. How can an appearance please or motivate one to pursue that of which it is an appearance when one knows that it is not real? A mirage of water in a desert, for example, is an illusion. Even if one has seen hundreds of mirages, understands the physics of a mirage, and has just stood where the water now seems to be, one still ‘perceives’ water. The illusion persists despite knowledge of its falsity. But even if one were not bothered by the illusion, it is hard to imagine that the mirage would give one pleasure, and even harder to imagine that it would motivate one to move toward it in pursuit of real water. So how can illusions of virtue, when one understands that they are mere illusions, encourage one to pursue true virtue?

Kant’s account of the motivational force of illusion is not as rich as it could be. Kant’s examples of the well-dressed son and the parliamentary counselor are presented as observations of fact, without a more basic level of explanation. Generally he considers human susceptibility to illusion to be a fact of nature, a propensity implanted by a wise Nature for promoting virtue in the human species. Thus he says in the *Anthropology*, ‘Nature has wisely implanted in human beings the propensity to be easily susceptible to illusion, to save virtue or at least to lead to it’ (7:152) and in the lectures, ‘Nature has thus put in us a propensity to make illusions, through which we can tame the unruly inclinations of our passions’ (25:930).²⁸ The human response to illusion is a propensity (*Hang*), something innate and non-derivative. Likewise, one finds comments such as ‘when we see an example of respect before us, it awakens us to emulation’ (25:929-30), without any apparent attempt to explain *why* examples have this effect. For the purposes of anthropology,

Kant seems satisfied to point out that illusions work.

There is at least a little more that one can say, however. While some human decisions may be made in the context of fully rational deliberation, many are not. Especially when one's reaction already is not rational, illusions seem to have a powerful motivational force. The standard warning not to look down when in high places is of this sort. Even when one is secure, one might irrationally believe that one is in danger simply by seeing one's height. This fear results from a dangerous illusion of the senses, and it might lead one to make poor decisions. But one can combat this illusion by focusing on things nearby and above oneself. This shift of focus presents the illusion that one is not as high as one really is, and this illusion serves to restore one's confidence. Whether one looks down or not, one has knowledge that one is secure in a high place, but this knowledge does not prevent the illusions' effects on one's feelings.²⁹

We can understand the traveler in the desert in a similar way. Imagine that the traveler has a reliable map on which an oasis is marked. She desires to go to that oasis and sets out. The absence of any visible sign of it, when heat and exertion exhaust her, may lead her to give up hope. The illusion of a lack of water has a real effect. Although she *knows* that just two miles ahead there is an oasis, she *feels* that trying to get there is hopeless, given the endless parched earth that she sees all around her. In this way she is like one looking down from a secure position who feels fear. But perhaps she glances up and 'sees' water ahead. For just a split second, it gives her hope again. She realizes that it is a mirage. Nonetheless, she knows that there *is* water up ahead, and the mirage breaks her irrational despair. She pushes on.

Like the traveler in the desert or the high climber, people often make decisions on the basis of feelings about which they are not particularly reflective. In relations with others, people *should* have respect for the dignity that others have by virtue of their *potential* for goodness. And every person has that potential, regardless of how evil they have been in the past.³⁰ But the wickedness of others can lead one to deny them even the respect that they deserve. One may think of them as devils or animals or worse.³¹ With respect to virtue itself, one may have a deep-seated commitment to morality, but the temptations of feelings and inclinations cry out loudly.³² More importantly, deception works on behalf of these temptations, portraying their benefits in an exaggerated light and discounting the moral issues involved. Even if temptations would not shift one's rational deliberations, they side-step those deliberations. In these cases, one is like the traveler who would continue ahead if fully rational but does not because of sensuous influences that prevent full deliberation. And just as the traveler combats one illusion with another, politeness can serve to undermine distracting influences of the senses. The illusion of politeness can motivate by counteracting subrational hindrances to proper action.

The analogy between politeness and the mirage assumes that the agent actually intends or would intend to pursue virtue but is hindered in a way that illusion can counteract. But Kant's account of politeness suggests that even those who so far have rejected virtue upon deliberation – say, because they prefer their own happiness – may be led through politeness to virtue. How would *this* sort of influence be possible? To return to the analogy of the traveler in the desert, if she knew that there is an oasis but still preferred to die in the desert, how could a mirage

get her to pursue what she would not, even upon fully informed deliberation, choose to pursue? Kant explains that one's own politeness can expose the capacity for self-control that would otherwise lie concealed. This awareness of self-control can lead people to recognize a capacity for virtue that they would otherwise deny, and this can encourage them (though not force them) to choose the good rather than self-interest. But how can the semblance of virtue in others make one seek a virtue that one would otherwise reject or ignore? If we abstract from any influence that one's own polite behavior may have on one's pursuit of virtue, how will the mere presence of others who are polite positively affect someone who does not want to be virtuous?

It is not clear that politeness can be effective in this case.³³ The mirage seen by a suicidal traveler or the courtesy extended to deeply wicked people might not have any effect at all. Perhaps unless one already has at least some propensity to choose water over thirst or morality over wickedness, illusions will not change behavior. Even if this were true, Kant's account would not be worthless. Kant believes that everyone has at least a seed of goodness, and the illusion of politeness may serve to water this seed. But it is possible that illusions can be even more effective. If one considers a group of travelers, for instance, some of whom want to go to the oasis and others of whom do not, the presence of a mirage may be a useful means that some can use to move others. Without actually deceiving, a leader can use sensuous illusions to prod her fellow travelers to move in a certain direction, much as the solitary traveler uses them to prod herself. Even if those others lack a rational commitment to reaching the oasis, they may be tempted by their senses. In the context of politeness, this influence manifests itself in an individual's ability to encourage virtue through the illusion of virtue, even among those who would

otherwise reject it. Perhaps this is impossible. Perhaps no one will be motivated in this way. But perhaps they will. And Kant's anthropological account of politeness as a morally beneficial illusion provides resources for understanding how such motivation would be possible.

Politeness is not the only arena within which Kant's account of illusion has important practical consequences. Even beyond the realm of politeness, one should take care with appearances. This is why, for example, it is important for judges to maintain a veneer of political impartiality. And this is why defense attorneys in the United States have fought hard to ensure that defendants are not forced to appear for trials wearing the orange suits of prisoners. People do not really doubt that judges have ideological convictions, and jury members know that defendants are innocent until proven guilty, but appearances matter.

V. Conclusion

Kant introduces his discussion of politeness in the context of a distinction between illusion and deceit. Politeness shows how this distinction, which one might otherwise see as merely part of a technical discussion of the cognitive faculty, is properly part of a pragmatic anthropology that teaches 'what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being' (7:119). Furthermore, politeness shows how this pragmatic anthropology includes a properly *moral* anthropology, detailing 'subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals' (6:217). Politeness plays an important enabling but non-necessitating role in the pursuit of virtue. And Kant's

discussion of politeness, if correct, has important implications for moral life, giving rise to ‘a duty [albeit an imperfect one] . . . not to isolate oneself’ (5: 474).

Moreover, the account of illusion shows that Kant’s consistent prohibition of deceit in his moral philosophy (e.g. 6:429-431) does not preclude a great deal of subtlety about exactly what deceit is. With the addition of this aspect of his moral anthropology, Kant’s moral theory emerges stronger and more complete.³⁴

¹ References to Kant are based on the Academy Edition pagination. Translations of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Groundwork*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* are from the Cambridge editions of Kant’s works. I have used the Dowdell translation of Kant’s anthropology, making changes where necessary. All translations from the lectures on anthropology are my own.

² The *Anthropology* is largely drawn from Kant’s lectures on anthropology, which he offered every year, starting in 1772. Throughout this paper, I draw from both the published *Anthropology* and the recently published lecture notes from his lectures on anthropology. Where relevant, I point out differences between the two accounts. (The lectures are compiled from student notes, and while there may be some question as to the reliability of specific language in them, their general reliability is confirmed by their consonance with Kant’s published writings. In the context of the present argument, I often use the lecture notes to fill in details of Kant’s account, but what is found in these notes is consistent with if not reiterated in the account in the published *Anthropology*.)

³ ‘Pragmatic’ anthropology includes not only moral anthropology, but anthropology that serves merely technical or prudential purposes as well. As Kant puts it in a letter introducing his lectures on anthropology, ‘I intend to disclose . . . everything that pertains to the practical’ (X: 146). For further discussion of the relationship between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘moral’ anthropology, see Louden 2000: 68-70, Wood 1999: 203-5, and Frierson 2003: 50-6.

⁴ Throughout, I focus on Kant’s account of politeness on its own terms. This account has important connections to other early modern treatments of politeness, especially to those of David Hume (see

especially the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see especially the second *Discourse* and *Emile*). Hume's view of politeness is unambiguously positive – he considers good manners to be one among many virtues. Rousseau's is generally negative – politeness marks a corrupting influence of society (although Rousseau arguably allows that this influence *might* have some beneficial effects in promoting the development of moral virtue). Kant's account, as we will see, involves the claim that polite behavior is not morally praiseworthy *in itself* (contra Hume), but it can *contribute to* the development of virtue and is thus an imperfect duty (contra Rousseau). A full exploration of Kant's connections to other early modern accounts of politeness would be beyond the scope of this paper. For some discussion of Kant's view on politeness in a more general context, see Brender 1997. For a pertinent account of Kant's relation to Rousseau, see Velkley 1978 and 1989.

⁵ Kant's discussion of politeness is not the most *central* part of his moral anthropology, appearing in the midst of his discussion of the human cognitive faculty in the *Anthropology*, and as simply an illustration of his distinction between illusion and deceit in the lectures on anthropology. But it is one of the *clearest* examples of moral anthropology, and it is philosophically important in its own right.

⁶ The notion that anything can 'help or hinder' morality might seem to raise intractable problems for Kant's account of moral freedom. Politeness is less susceptible to this charge than other apparent helps and hindrances that might seem to be *necessary* helps. Politeness is a help, and perhaps even an important one, but Kant never suggests that it is either necessary or sufficient for moral development. Still, the suggestion that moral development can be helped in any way by empirical influences seems contrary to Kant's account of moral freedom. A full discussion of this problem goes beyond the scope of this essay. For some different ways of dealing with the problem, see Loudon 2000, Munzel 1999, and Frierson 2003. Frierson 2003 (chapter 4) includes a survey of four general approaches to reconciling moral anthropology with Kant's account of freedom.

⁷ Kant's description of these graces, as including affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness fits well with the characteristics associated in English with the term 'politeness', and his general description even fits well with Hume's own account of 'Good Manners, or Politeness' from the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (see Hume 1975: 261). There is one main difficulty

with identifying Kant's account of the 'graces' or 'manners' with 'politeness'. In the *Anthropology*, Kant specifically identifies *Höflichkeit* – translated as 'courtesy' in Gregor's translation of the *Metaphysics of Morals* – with the French term *politesse* (7:152). (See too Kant's lectures, where he describes politeness [*Politesse*] as 'the illusion of courtesy [*Höflichkeit*] and friendship [*Freundschaft*]' (25: 1254). Both *politesse* and *Höflichkeit* translate naturally into English as politeness, but both are narrower than the graces or good manners to which I apply the term. In the *Anthropology*, Kant seems to limit *Höflichkeit* to 'bowing and scraping and all courtly gallantry' (7:152). While this could be interpreted to refer to politeness quite broadly, especially given the identification with 'gallantry', Kant seems to have in mind mere mannerisms of speech and gesture, rather than good manners more broadly. 'Politeness', as I use it in this paper, includes gallantry as well as a host of other social graces.

⁸ We will see in section three that Kant is being a bit careless with his language here. Eventually Kant will go to great pains to show that politeness does not 'deceive' but only effects an 'illusion'. For now, however, I will use the term 'deceit' to refer to Kant's more general category of 'delusion', which includes both deceit and illusion.

⁹ For more on the social nature of radical evil, see Wood 1999 (pp. 283-90) and Anderson-Gold 2001 (pp. 33-52).

¹⁰ Kant may not have completely developed the view expressed in the *Religion* at the time of some of his early lectures on anthropology, but he certainly had clearly identified a corrupt will (*Willkühr*) as the source of self-deception by the time he wrote his published *Anthropology*. In that work, at least, he very likely used the term 'inclination' as a shorthand for a will corrupted by inclination.

¹¹ As many have noted (see, e.g., Allison 1991: 129-61, Wood 1999: 283-90, and Frierson 2003: 108-13), Kant describes radical evil in human nature as involving self-deception. A full discussion of self-deception is beyond the scope of this paper, but Kant's accounts of politeness do show some of the ways that Kant sought to deal with practical problems raised by self-deception.

¹² See footnote 8 and section three for more on the difference between illusion and deceit.

¹³ One way that I do not discuss in detail is the cultivation of misanthropy as a justification for vice. For more on this topic in particular, see Brender 1997 and 1998.

¹⁴ Kant will qualify this, explaining that these counter-measures are actually ‘illusions’ rather than deceptions strictly speaking. Often, however, he calls the counter-measures ‘deception’, using ‘deception’ in those cases to refer to the general category that he later calls ‘delusion’. See section three for more.

¹⁵ The passage is from a lecture in 1775/76, whereas the *Anthropology* was probably composed in 1796-97.

¹⁶ This tendency to deceive is connected with one’s ‘radical evil’ (see *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*) and footnote 11.

¹⁷ In the early lectures on anthropology, Kant gives a helpful example of understanding deceiving sense that provides an analogy for how politeness can effectively undermine the deceit of sense. Immediately after pointing out that sense effects actions through false promises, Kant says,

But on the other side, the understanding deceives sense in return, and this artful trick lies in human nature, e.g., in sexual inclination lies something of a ground that is in all animals, but the understanding here deceives the senses, which proceed from the bestial. It describes to them quite enthusiastically the beauty of the person, it forms in them an ideal through which it deceives them. They nevertheless stop thereby and forget the other [desire], hence the association with women deceives the senses, they are distracted through this association, into which they wanted to go [for other reasons]. Just as one seeks through a game to prevent a child from doing something else, so too the understanding deceives the senses. (25:503)

In the case of lust, understanding transforms one’s sexual desire into an appreciation of beauty in the ideal. This appreciation leads men to associate with women socially, which in turn distracts these men from the raw pleasures of sex. Elsewhere Kant refers to this as the ‘gallantry’ which, through ‘contact with the fair sex . . . is a means of diverting animal inclinations’ (25: 1455). Kant even suggests that women can use this sublimated sexual desire to control (and thereby refine) men.

Since nature also wanted to instill the finer sensations, such as sociability and propriety, which belong to culture, she made this sex the ruler of men through modesty and eloquence in speech and expression. Nature made women mature early and had them demand gentle and polite

treatment from men, so that they would find themselves imperceptibly fettered by a child due to their own magnanimity; and they would find themselves brought, if not quite to morality itself, then at least to that which cloaks it, moral behavior, which is the preparation and introduction to morality. (7: 306)

There are throughout these accounts of the relationship between men and women misunderstandings and deeply sexist comments that many have rightly found offensive. It is worth pointing out, though, that despite many of the disparaging remarks that Kant makes about women, he nonetheless sees them as an invaluable part of the establishment of moral community, in that they, being naturally more refined, are able to refine and correct the faults of men. This does not vindicate what he says elsewhere, and even this discussion is riddled with unfair generalizations, but it is worth pointing out that Kant's accounts of the 'weaker sex' are not always as negative as they have been made out to be. (For more on feminist responses to Kant, see Schott 1997. For detailed accounts of the civilizing role of women that attend to more negative aspects of this relationship, see Shell 1996, pp. 97-105 and Kneller 1993.)

¹⁸ In the *Anthropology*, Kant gives a more complicated account, which involves tricking the senses into polite society. As we have already seen, he argues there that the inclination to ease gives rise to boredom and disgust with oneself. This deception can be redirected, however, through further deception.

To again deceive this [inclination towards ease] (which can be achieved through play with fine arts or at best through social activities) is called passing the time . . . Precisely through an empty game of peaceful struggle that is pointless in itself, at least the culture of the soul is effected. (7:152)

Social activity (along with fine arts) appeals to our inclinations for ease and pleasure by offering apparently easy ways to enjoy ourselves. In social intercourse, the senses are kept busy without being burdened. Pleasant conversation is not strenuous, but at the same time it sustains enough interest to avoid boredom. (In his published *Anthropology* and many of his lectures, Kant even offers extended discussions of how to arrange dinner parties to promote just this sort of social interaction. See 7:278-

82; 25: 1150-54, 1482-83, 1528-29.) Hence society, and especially polite society, satisfies the senses. By offering a bribe that the senses will not refuse, the understanding tricks them into an activity that promotes virtue.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, it is still all too easy to treat another as a means and simply make various concessions while still maintaining an abusive sexual relationship.

²⁰ Needless to say, they may not excuse their wickedness in this way. This strategy is only one of the deceits that may come into play in someone's wickedness. Insofar as one's wickedness does not involve this kind of self-deceit, politeness may be ineffective against it. But at least in some cases, and these are the ones Kant has in mind here, people are wicked in part because they justify it to themselves with moral despair.

²¹ In the *Anthropology*, Kant points out that 'the inclination to be sociable often becomes a passion' (7: 277).

²² These were, after all, just lecture notes!

²³ Kant also says that politeness fosters respect (e.g. 25:504, 929, 1455). However, love is the primary means by which politeness helps others seek virtue when they otherwise would not.

²⁴ What Kant has in mind here by saying that politeness is 'beautiful' (*schönen*) does not fit his claim in the *Critique of Judgment* that when one judges that something is beautiful, one is not 'in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it' (5:205). By contrast, the beautiful illusion resembling virtue makes one want to see virtue itself realized in the world. Thus politeness is more properly understood as something agreeable (see 5:206) that develops from and in turn cultivates a liking for the good.

²⁵ This importance of moral examples is less theologically loaded, but also less focused on love, in Kant's accounts of moral cultivation in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (see especially 5:152f.).

²⁶ As Ralph Meerbote points out in his notes to Kant's short piece 'Concerning Sensory Illusion and Poetic Fiction', Kant changes his terminology between his early Latin writing on illusion and deception and his later *Anthropology*. The lectures, even early lectures, follow the example of the *Anthropology*. For more, see Meerbote 1986, p. 214. Kant's early Latin piece, while very

interesting, focuses on the role of illusion in poetry. While this is an important aspect of Kant's account of illusion, especially for its connections with Kant's aesthetics, it goes beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁷ Not *all* illusions are pleasant or good. In his anthropology, where Kant insists on the importance of illusions for combating passions, he admits that 'ordinarily illusions bring forth passions' (25:929), precisely because they can motivate independent of fully rational deliberation. And in the first *Critique*, Kant discusses at length the danger of dogmatic transcendental illusions in metaphysics (see A62/B86, A297/B353ff., and the 'Transcendental Dialectic'). For a detailed account of illusion in the first *Critique*, see Grier 2001.

²⁸ In an early Latin essay, in different terminology (see footnote 26), Kant makes a similar point much more strongly: 'The preference of the human mind for deceitful play and shammed semblances is remarkable, indeed incredible' (Meerbote 1986: 202).

²⁹ For Kant's account of a similar phenomenon, see 7: 170n.

³⁰ See *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*.

³¹ Natalie Brender has explored this in detail in Brender 1997.

³² One might think that any rational deliberation would favor the moral law, but for Kant it is possible to be prudentially rational, in the sense that one's understanding is fully involved in choice, without being morally reasonable, in the sense that one's practical *reason* controls one's choice. (See Rawls 1993 and Rawls 2000. Rawl's distinction between rational and reasonable is similar to the Kantian distinction I have in mind here.)

³³ Compare, for example, Anderson-Gold 2001, Frierson 2003, and Louden 2000 on the extent to which Kant is committed to one agent being able to affect the moral status of another.

³⁴ I thank Karl Ameriks, Katheryn Frierson, David Solomon, G. Felicitas Munzel, and the Ethics Workshop at the University of Notre Dame for extensive comments on this paper. I especially thank Natalie Brender, who first introduced to me the importance of politeness in Kant's moral theory, gave me a copy of her paper 'Precarious Positions' (Brender 1999), and commented on an early draft of

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