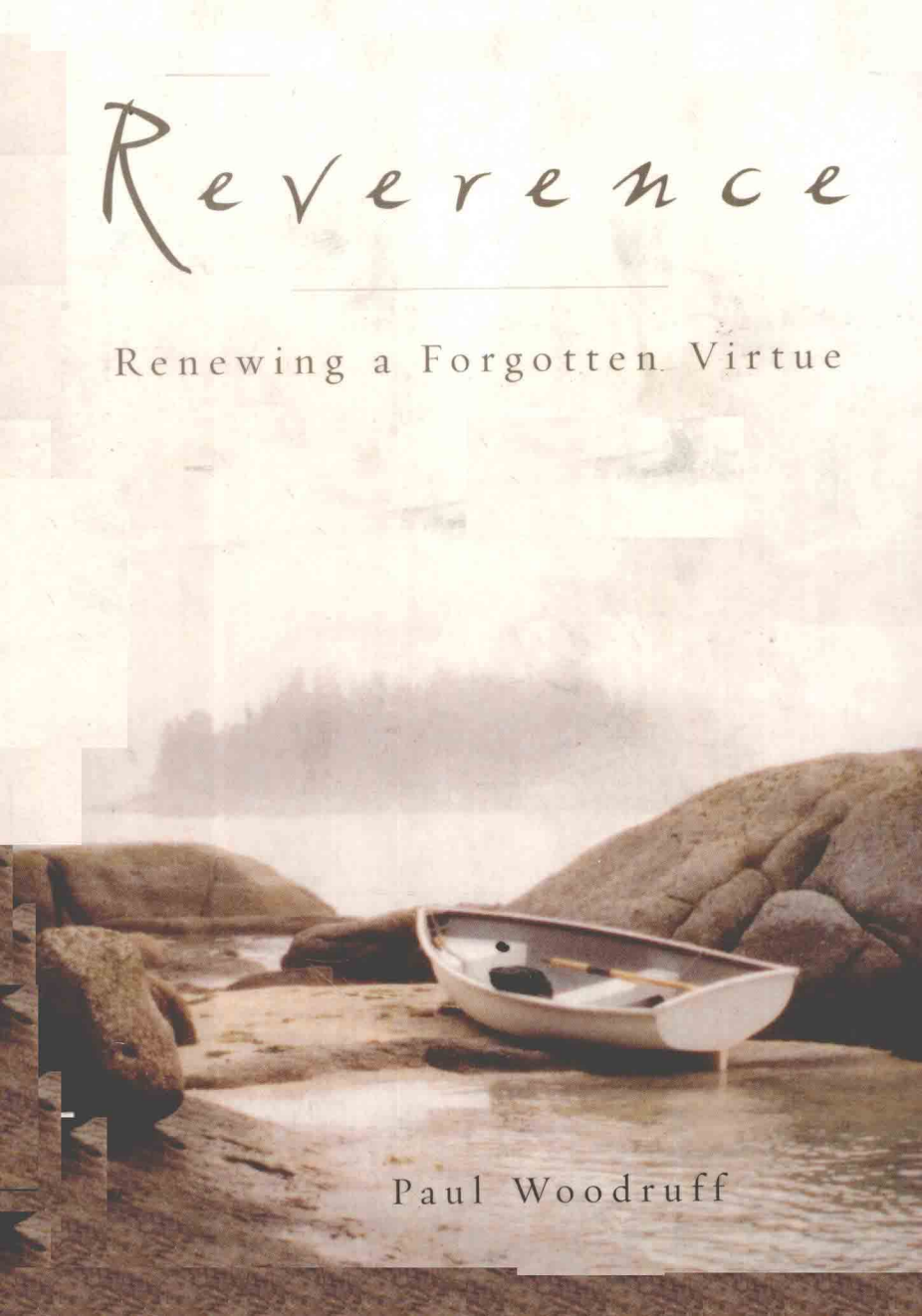


Reverence

Renewing a Forgotten Virtue

A photograph of a small white rowing boat on a rocky shore. The boat is positioned in the lower right foreground, partially on land and partially in shallow water. The shore is composed of large, dark, wet rocks. In the background, a dense forest of evergreen trees is visible, shrouded in a thick mist or fog. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

Paul Woodruff



Reverence

Renewing a Forgotten Virtue

PAUL WOODRUFF

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto

with an associated company in Berlin

Copyright © 2001 by Paul Woodruff

First published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001
First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2002

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Woodruff, Paul, 1943–

Reverence / Paul Woodruff.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-19-514778-2 (cloth) ISBN 0-19-515795-8 (pbk)

1. Honor. 2. Respect. I. Title.

BJ1533.H8 W66 2002

170—dc21

2001036135

Book design by Adam B. Bohannon

3 5 7 9 8 6 4

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*For Lucia,
with whom I am learning these things
and many more*

Remember this, when you
Lay waste the land of Troy: Be reverent to the gods.
Nothing matters more, as Zeus the father knows.
Reverence is not subject to the deaths of men;
They live, they die, but reverence shall not perish.

—Heracles, speaking to leaders of the Greeks,
in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (lines 1439–44)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Text Credits x

1	Introducing Reverence	3
2	Without Reverence	17
3	Music and a Funeral: Finding Reverence	45
4	Bare Reverence	57
5	Ancient Greece: The Way of Being Human	81
6	Ancient China: The Way of Power	103
7	Reverence Without a Creed	117
8	Reverence Across Religions	135
9	Relativism	149
10	The Reverent Leader	163
11	The Silent Teacher	187
12	Home	205
	Notes	221
	Works Cited	240
	Index and Glossary of Proper Names	244

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe thanks to many: to audiences at the U.S. Air Force Academy and at Boston University who heard drafts in which I developed these ideas and pushed me to carry them further with their questions; to Peter Ohlin and various anonymous readers for Oxford University Press; to T. K. Seung for many conversations on Greek and Chinese philosophy; to John Silber for pointed and friendly criticism and to David Roochnik at Boston University for an e-mail discussion of the moral range of reverence as a virtue; to Betty Sue Flowers for much editing and for suggesting that I quote Yeats; to Xiusheng Liu, for teaching me Chinese philosophy, which he gave me as a gift; to Roshan Ouseph and Paul Domjan, who asked the right questions; to my colleague Reuben McDaniel, who understood much of this book better than I did; to David Reeve, Harvey Hix, William Gibson, and Charlotte Rhodes for helpful comments, to Katherine Woodruff and James Collins for editorial help, and to the late A. E. Raubitschek, who taught me Greek in an unforgettable example of a reverent classroom at Princeton University in 1961. And to Lucia Norton Woodruff, for questions and encouragement, and for more than I can say.

TEXT CREDITS

Credit: Su Tung-p'o, "The Statue of Vimalakirti, a Clay Figure by Yang Hui-chih of the T'ang in the Temple of the Pillar of Heaven (1061)" (excerpt), translated by Burton Watson, from *Selected Poems of Su Tung-p'o*. Copyright © 1994 by Burton Watson. Reprinted with permission of Copper Canyon Press, P.O. Box 271, Port Townsend, WA 98368-0271, USA.

Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, LLC: "High Windows" from *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin. Copyright © 1988. 1989 by the Estate by Philip Larkin. Excerpt from Canto XXVI from *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation* by Robert Pinsky. Translation copyright © 1994 by Robert Pinsky.

Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd, with non-exclusive English Language permission, excluding the USA: "High Windows" from *High Windows*. Copyright © 1974 by Philip Larkin.

Reprinted by permission of Orion Publishing Group, Ltd, for the United Kingdom and British Commonwealth: Excerpt from Canto XXVI from *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation* by Robert Pinsky. Translation copyright © 1994 by Robert Pinsky.

From *The Analects Of Confucius*, translated by Simon Leys. Copyright © 1997 by Pierre Ryckmans. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Reprinted by permission of the Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., P.O. Box 44937, Indianapolis, IN 46244-0937, USA.: Homer, *Iliad* (excerpts), translated by Stanley Lombardo. Copyright © 1997 by Stanley Lombardo. Homer, *Odyssey* (excerpt), translated by Stanley Lombardo, Copyright © 2000 by Stanley Lombardo. Excerpts from the following translations by Paul Woodruff: Sophocles, *Antigone* © Copyright 2001, Hackett Publishing Co., Euripides, *Bacchae* © Copyright 1998, Hackett Publishing Co., *Thucydides on Justice, Power and Human Nature* © Copyright 1993, Hackett Publishing Co. Excerpts from Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, translated by Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff © Copyright 2000, Hackett Publishing Co.

Introducing Reverence

Reverence is an ancient virtue that survives among us in half forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures. We have the word “reverence” in our language, but we scarcely know how to use it. Right now it has no place in secular discussions of ethics or political theory. Even more surprisingly, reverence is missing from modern discussions of the ancient cultures that prized it.

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought

much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.

To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god—this is the opposite of reverence. Ancient Greeks thought that tyranny was the height of irreverence, and they gave the famous name of *hubris* to the crimes of tyrants. An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself—ordinary people, prisoners, children. The two failures go together, in both Greek and Chinese traditions. If an emperor has a sense of awe, this will remind him that Heaven is his superior—that he is, as they said in ancient China, the Son of Heaven. And any of us is better for remembering that there is someone, or Someone, to whom we are children; in this frame of mind we are more likely to treat all children with respect. And vice versa: If you cannot bring yourself to respect children, you are probably deficient in the ability to feel that anyone or anything is higher than you.

Reverence has more to do with politics than with religion. We can easily imagine religion without reverence; we see it, for example, wherever religion leads people into aggressive war or violence. But power without reverence—that is a catastrophe for all concerned. Power without reverence is aflame with arrogance, while service without reverence is smoldering toward rebellion. Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless. And life with-

out reverence? Entirely without reverence? That would be brutish and selfish, and it had best be lived alone.

It is a natural mistake to think that reverence belongs to religion. It belongs, rather, to community. Wherever people try to act together, they hedge themselves around with some form of ceremony or good manners, and the observance of this can be an act of reverence. Reverence lies behind civility and all of the graces that make life in society bearable and pleasant. But in our time we hear more praise of *irreverence* than we do of reverence, especially in the media. That is because we naturally delight in mockery and we love making fun of solemn things. It is not because, in our heart of hearts, we despise reverence. In my view, the media are using the word “irreverent” for qualities that are not irreverent at all. A better way to say what they have in mind would be “bold, boisterous, unrefined, unimpressed by pretension”—all good things. Reverence is compatible with these and with almost every form of mockery. The one great western philosopher who praises reverence is Nietzsche, who is also the most given to mockery. Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies: both keep people from being pompous or stuck up. So don't think that this book is an attack on laughter. Far from it.

Another easy mistake to make about reverence is to confuse it with respect. Respect is sometimes good and sometimes bad, sometimes wise and sometimes silly. It is silly to respect the pratings of a pompous fool; it is wise to respect the intelligence of any student. Reverence calls for respect only when respect is really the right attitude. To pay respect to a tyrant would not be reverent; it would be weak and cowardly. The most reverent response to a tyrant is to mock him. All of this is because rever-

ence is a kind of virtue. A virtue is a capacity to do what is right, and what is right in a given case—say, respect or mockery for an authority figure—depends on many things.

Reverence is one of the strengths in any good person's character. Such strengths are called "virtues," and the study of virtues forms an important branch of ethics. Virtue ethics makes a strong assumption: that some people are better than others because they have greater strengths of character—stronger virtues, in other words. Virtues are sources of good behavior. Moral rules and laws set standards for doing right, but there is nothing about a rule that makes you feel like following it. In fact, there is something about many rules that makes most people feel like breaking them. According to virtue ethics, a good person is one who feels like doing what is right. People who do good are aware of moral rules, but so are people who do bad. The difference is virtue. Virtue is the source of the feelings that prompt us to behave well. Virtue ethics takes feelings seriously because feelings affect our lives more deeply than beliefs do.

Virtue ethics holds that you learn a virtue as your capacity for feelings is attuned over years of experience. You may learn rules intellectually, and therefore you may learn or forget them very quickly. But virtues are habits of feeling, and these are much harder to learn or to forget. A fine violin that has not been played for many years will not stay in tune, and when it is first played it will have an ugly sound. A superior instrument must be played well, year after year, for it to sound beautiful. So it is with moral character. You may have as good equipment as anyone, but if your feelings have not been well played upon over the years, you will not stay in tune, and you will not respond well to life's challenges.

Virtues grow in us through being used, and they are used

mainly by people living or working together. A family develops common virtues by the way its members live together, a team by the way its members play together, and so on. If you are surrounded by vice, you will find it hard to stay in tune with virtue. By the same token, a team or family will find it hard to cultivate virtues unless every member helps. Virtue ethics, then, deals with strengths that people develop in communities. Communities, in turn, depend on the strengths of their members.

I am interested in the virtues we should be cultivating today, as I write. But I begin my work from two classic models, one ancient Greek, and the other ancient Chinese, because of their clarity, their beauty, and their apparent difference from each other. These two ancient civilizations were set too far apart to have had any communication (unlike India, which had early communication with both). If we find a common thread in Greek and Chinese ideals, we should take it seriously. It may well turn out to be a kind of thread that any society needs if it is to sew itself into an enduring shape. If so, reverence is a cardinal virtue, like justice or courage, and not the particular property of this culture or that. I don't think we should imitate ancient Greek or Chinese culture, but I believe we are better off for studying them. Both peoples cared deeply and thought long about the meaning of ceremonies in the texture of their religious and political lives, and in this meaning they saw the deeper value of reverence.

We have ceremonies in our own time too, but we try not to think about what they mean. In fact, I believe reverence gives meaning to much that we do, yet the word has almost passed out of our vocabulary. Because we do not understand reverence, we don't really know what we are doing in much of our lives,

and therefore we are in no position to think about how to do it better.

Defining Reverence

Reverence compels me to confess that I do not know exactly what reverence is. I can't do any better for justice or courage or wisdom, though I have a pretty good idea in each case. Take courage. I would say that courage is a well-developed capacity for feeling confidence and fear in the right places, at the right times, and in the right degrees of intensity; that is, courage lies somewhere between fearlessness (which often looks like courage) and timidity (which no one would mistake for courage). This account of courage has a grand history—it comes from Aristotle—but is hardly a complete definition. I would call it a definition-schema—something like a form full of blanks that we need to fill in as best we can, after life experience and critical reflection. The schema for courage tells us that we can't go wrong by being courageous, but it does not tell us how to be courageous. It points to a distinction between courage and fearlessness, but it does not spell out the difference between them—aside from the obvious point that one is always good while the other can go too far. Before filling in the blanks in the schema we would need to know the difference between right and wrong. That looks easy enough in some cases, but it seems to call for divine wisdom in others.

I cannot claim divine wisdom, and so I cannot offer a full account of any of the virtues, least of all reverence. My schema for reverence looks like this: Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have. This says that reverence is a

good thing, but not much more, except by pointing to further questions. Sometimes it is right to be respectful and sometimes wrong; that's obvious. Sometimes our feelings should rise to the level of awe, but not always. So when should we be respectful, and how deep should our respect be in each case? Of what should we be in awe? No capsule definition will tell you. Nor can any human wisdom give you a complete and final answer. The best answer I can give is this book.

Some writers use the words "reverence" and "respect" as synonyms, but these words are not synonyms in this book. I need one word for an ideal, "reverence," and other words for the feelings—respect, awe, and shame—that may or may not serve that ideal. You can never follow an ideal too closely, but you can have too much—or too little—of the feelings to which it gives rise. You are too lavish with awe, for example, if you are in awe of your own wisdom and treat it as sacred. That's arrogant, and it's not much better if you feel that way about the accumulated wisdom of your own tradition, for both are human products. On the other hand, you are too niggardly with awe if you never feel awe for a great whale, a majestic redwood, or a range of tall mountains. You need not enjoy these things—awe can be frightening, after all—and you need not be moved by them every time you encounter them. But if you do not have the capacity to be awestruck at the sight of the majesties of nature you are missing part of the usual human endowment.

Why This Book

The topic surprised me. I never expected to write a book about reverence, but I came to this as I explored material for a footnote to a chapter I was writing in a still unfinished tome on ancient

Greek humanism. But I soon came to think that this abandoned topic deserves to have a new life.

My footnote was on Thucydides, the most thoughtful of the ancient Greek historians. Writing in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Thucydides adopted the humanist position that gods do not intervene in human affairs. He believed that purely human currents in history would bring about most of the results that traditional thinkers expected from the gods: If a tyrant rises too far and too fast, or if he exercises his power with too much arrogance, other people will fear him and hate him, and they—not the gods—will unite to bring him down. But if the gods never punish human beings, why bother with reverence? I used to think that it was only fear of the gods that made the ancient Greeks reverent. Thucydides does not seem to fear the gods, but he fears human arrogance, and therefore he cares a great deal about reverence, which he treats as a cardinal virtue. Some scholars argue, in spite of appearances, that he does believe the gods punish human beings when they violate reverence. But then why doesn't he say so? That was the puzzle I took on in my footnote.

The footnote exploded as I went deeper and deeper into the concept of reverence. I had been content in former years to accept Plato's view that reverence is not a primary virtue at all. Plato taught that all you need do for reverence is to practice the other virtues that the gods favor, principally justice. Plato was afraid that the Greeks of his day were trying to use reverence to win over the gods, in the hope that the gods would forgive any kind of wickedness on the part of people who gave abundant sacrifices. That is why Plato treated reverence as a part of justice, so that no one would think you could be rever-

ent without also being just. But if reverence is part of justice, then you will have it all if you cultivate justice as a whole—as you should—and you need not spend another moment's thought on reverence.

After Plato, I turned to the ancient poets and became disenchanted with Plato's simple theory. From Homer through Euripides, the poets treat reverence as a substantial virtue, and I began to see their point. More surprising, I began to suspect that reverence has more to do with power than with religion. I was struck by the fact that Thucydides prizes reverence while condemning credulity in people who persist in seeing a divine plan behind the natural consequences of their own mistakes. If Thucydides believes that reverence is good but that credulity is foolish, he is plainly thinking of reverence as a moral virtue that is detachable from traditional beliefs about the gods. Could this be possible? Could reverence be detached from belief? The answer turned out to be complicated. Reverence depends to some extent on belief, but not at all on formal creeds. And so I realized with shock and delight that reverence could—in theory, at least—be shared across religions. In fact, what religious people today admire in other religions cannot be faith (since they reject most of the content of other faiths), but reverence. So they know about reverence, though they don't know to call it by that name.

I began to feel that something has been lost in modern times. This virtue, so important to the ancients, has fallen beneath the horizons of our intellectual vision. And yet reverence is all around us, even in the most ordinary ceremonies of our lives. It is as if we have forgotten one of the cylinders that has been chugging along in the vehicle of human society since its begin-