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In August of 1937, at the Sixth International Montessori Congress in Copenhagen, Maria Montessori expressed concern about the “principles of nationalism [that] make it necessary to prevent people from leaving their country, to put restrictions on the exchange of money, [and] to promote in men an artificial, exaggerated attachment to their fatherlands” (EP 10:58-9). Just over two years later, Hitler invaded Poland, and the world was at war, fighting (in part) against attempts at radical nationalism and racial purification that sought to impose universal values through force. By the end of that war, the United States had unleashed onto Hiroshima and Nagasaki a weapon that could destroy all human life on earth. The world desperately needed what Montessori had proposed at that Congress in 1937, a “kind of morality necessary to defend humankind as a whole” (EP 10:56).

Montessori’s moral philosophy was crafted during the first half of the twentieth century, a period when both nationalist and internationalist ideologies were growing in strength, a period that saw the rise of immense technological and economic power, a period of intense and increasingly global war. Her moral philosophy was explicitly crafted with these greater social realities in view (see EP, *passim*). At the same time, the core emphases of her moral philosophy emerged from a more intimate arena, the individual lives of children provided with environments conducive to their development and with freedom to conduct themselves autonomously within those environments. Montessori repeatedly exhorts her readers to turn to children as models and guides. As we seek a morality that can cope with our greatest social problems, “only the child can guide us” (EP 10:96).ⁱⁱ The child serves as guide by showing humans’ most basic needs and the possibilities for satisfying those needs in community with others. But children only reveal these potentials when given the freedom to spontaneously order their inner lives and external relations in an environment that provides for their needs, both physically and developmentally. Children in the right conditions reveal something essential about human nature, something that should provide the basis for a morality that can lead human beings towards what Montessori calls a “positive” peace, not merely the end to inter-communal violence but a “constructive social reform” in which human beings can reach their full potentials without conflict (EP 10:xi).

As Montessori worked with young children, she found “character traits quite different from those [the child] was long believed to possess,” traits that not only provided the basis for her approach to morality but that she found to be *universal* virtues, consistently present over “a quarter of a century of constant work [as of 1937], not only in almost every nation that shares our Western heritage, but also among many other widely divergent ethnic groups: American Indians, Africans, Siamese, Javanese, [and] Laplanders” (EP 10:15). As I have argued elsewhere (see Frierson 2016), Montessori developed a moral epistemology grounded in moral sense, but she insisted that *adults’* moral sense must be corrected and

refined in the light of what children reveal when placed in conditions conducive to their development. The details of this moral epistemology are beyond the scope of this paper; for thinking about the problem of universal virtues and local norms, I focus on two core moral virtues one which Montessori's experience with children brought her to focus.

The three core elements of Montessori's moral philosophy are *character*, mutual *respect*, and social *solidarity*; I will focus on character and respect for the purpose of this paper.ⁱⁱⁱ Character essentially consists in a capacity for persistent, attentive, self-directed pursuit of perfection through attentive work on norm-governed tasks that one chooses for oneself. Mutual respect naturally grows out of character and consists in the recognition of others' right to express their own characters. Respectful people allow others to pursue their self-chosen tasks, helping where necessary (but only where necessary), and creating a context within which self-governed work can flourish. Social solidarity, which emerges from and helps fulfill individual character, consists in the pursuit of work *together*, as a social body, sharing a single purpose and a single sense of agency. We can see these three components – character, respect, and solidarity – as the three fundamental virtues of Montessori's ethics. And because she grounds her moral philosophy in essential features of human psychology, each of these virtues is universal: "The 'human personality' belongs to all human beings. Europeans, Indians, and Chinese, etc. are all men.^{iv} If therefore certain vital conditions are found to be a help to the human personality, these concern and affect the inhabitants of all nations" (Formation 3:6). Nonetheless, Montessorian virtues are also intrinsically vague in ways that require specification. To some degree, this specification can take place at the level of individuals' choices or the shared projects of small groups, but often – and always to some degree – they require specification in terms of local norms.

The first two sections of this paper briefly lay out the universal human Montessorian virtues of character and mutual respect. For the sake of time, I do not discuss social solidarity in this paper. Section three then turns to culturally local norms, showing how Montessorian character and respect are necessarily instantiated in local ways.

1. Character

In a lecture to the International School of Philosophy in Amersfoort (Netherlands), Montessori claims that the most evident characteristic of children given an intellectually stimulating environment and freedom to choose activities within that environment is "a surprising fundamental instinct – he wants to *work*" (EP 10:83). This work is not what is meant by work "in the ordinary sense of the word," where work is a hardship endured in order to "earn a livelihood"; rather, children work as a form of authentic engagement with the world whereby "he can break through [to] a genuinely spiritual life" and "be cured of ... all his shortcomings" (EP 10:83-4). The recognition that children in healthy conditions seek to *exercise their agency* in order to accomplish goals they set for themselves was *the* fundamental principle of Montessori's pedagogy (e.g. EP 10:99) and became central to the core virtue of her moral theory: character.

For Montessori, "character" consists of the capacity for sustained concentration of attention in focused work that arises from an inner impulse to activity, and character in this sense is not only her core pedagogical focus but also the central feature of ethical life. In character "lies the source of those moral and intellectual values which could bring the whole world on to a higher plane" (AbsMind 239).

Old time pedagogy has always given a prominent place to character training, though it failed to say what was meant by character or to indicate how it should be trained. All it stated was that the intellectual and practical sides of education were not enough, but that this unknown factor, this

“X,” which the word character denoted, must also be included. Nonetheless, this showed a certain insight because it meant that educators were trying to bring out the important elements of human personality. Certain virtues have always been highly valued: courage, perseverance, the sense of duty, good moral relationships with others, and a high place has always been given to moral education. But this notwithstanding, ideas remain vague in all parts of the world as to what character really is. (AbsMind 193)

Montessori’s moral philosophy articulates and explains the virtue of “character” in detail. Previous approaches at moral education fail not only because their central concepts are vague, but also because, even insofar as they seek to define what character is, “all of them start with grownups, with adult man” and “generally overlook the little child” (AbsMind 193). By contrast, Montessori claims, “our own studies ... allow us to visualize the development of character as a natural sequence of events resulting from the child’s own individual efforts” (AbsMind 193).

Character involves several related components. “The first essential for the child’s development is concentration” (AbsMind 222), so character consists, first and foremost, in “the power” “to concentrate” (AbsMind 209). Partly implicit in concentration and partly following from it, character involves a capacity “to do [one’s] work carefully and patiently” (AbsMind 209). Crucially, character in these senses involves a kind of persistence, though one quite unlike both habitual dispositions (as in Aristotle) and principled, reflective commitments (as in Kant). Instead, character is a capacity for attentive work, an ability to set oneself tasks and follow through on those tasks: “A person of character is able to finish the work he begins. Some people begin a dozen different things and do not finish any of them. They are incapable of making a decision” (1946:236). The impossibility of “making a decision” is reflected, for Montessori, in the lack of perseverance in chosen work. In describing how she cultivates character, she explains that “we give these children the opportunity to exercise their patience, to make choices and persevere – every day of their life. They must have the opportunity to exercise all these virtues that, together, form character” (1946:236). Character, in that sense, is the trait by which one is able to really *be* an agent, through choosing work of one’s own and then constraining oneself to carry out that work. But character is not the capacity for concentration on just *anything*. Attentive work is normatively-loaded in that it requires internal – and, particularly as one grows older, external – standards of perfection to which one aspires (see AbsMind 210-13).^v

Not only is the importance of character itself universal, but character has several specific features that should be universally valued amongst all human beings. These features include independence, precision, and the striving for perfection.

First, those with character seek to be *independent*. Based on her own direct work with children and the reports of other Montessori teachers throughout the world, Montessori claims that across all cultures,

the child has shown us the basic principle ... ‘Teach me to do things by myself!’ The child resists letting adults help him if they try to substitute their own activity for his ... Individual freedom is the basis ... and the first step comes when the individual is capable of acting without help from others and becomes aware of himself as an autonomous being. (EP 10:97)

One with character is “independent in his powers and character, able to work and assert his mastery over all that depends on him” (AbsMind 170). Early childhood is fundamentally a “conquest of independence” (see AbsMind 83-96). Montessori traces how even such basic biological facts as teething involve an increased independence of the infant, and as children learn to walk and talk and grasp things, they take control of their own efforts towards becoming more autonomously capable. The young child’s

“attraction towards ... manipulative tasks has an unconscious aim. The child has an instinct to co-ordinate his movements and to bring them under his control” (AbsMind 180). Children – and all human beings with character – seek more and more to bring themselves and their environment under their agential control.

Importantly, “independence” here does not a *radical* independence by which one seeks complete self-sufficiency, but rather an independent *adaptation* to the world. No one is *wholly* independent of their physical and social environment. Independence increases control over “all that depends on him” (AbsMind 1:151). Human beings live in a constructed world that facilitates our agency, and we live in a social world within which expressions of agency depend upon properly interacting with other people. Thus Montessori emphasizes how, for example, adolescent “independence” involves “earn[ing] a livelihood through work” (EP 10:105), a “road to achieving economic independence” whereby young adults can gradually “feel capable of succeeding in life by [one’s] own efforts” (Adol 12:61). Economic independence, of course, is not true independence; if I buy my food, I am dependent on the farmer and the baker and the shop-keeper (cf. EP 10:109-12fn). But one is “independent” in the sense that it is through one’s own effort – albeit in the context of a constructed environment and mechanisms of exchange – that one comes to have one’s food. It isn’t *simply* provided for one. Likewise, Admiral Byrd, one of Montessori’s paradigms of character (see below), had to raise money for his polar expedition; in that sense, he was dependent upon the philanthropy of wealthy donors. But, like the young child, he raised money in the spirit of asking others to “help me to do it by myself” (Secret 22:175). He needed resources from others, and even the support of his crew and teammates, in order to do the hard work that he aimed to do “independently.”^{vi}

Beyond independence, character consistently aims towards *precision*, exactness, or more broadly towards activities with clear normative standards: “In thousands of cases we have seen that the child not only needs something interesting to do but also likes to be shown exactly how to do it. Precision is found to attract him deeply ... [T]his precision itself seemed to hold their interest” (AbsMind 180, 186; cf. 210, 212). Whether one eats food or writes letters or composes poetry, one with character aims to engage in the activity with exactness. To some extent, “this precision itself seemed to hold their interest” (AbsMind 186), so that the requirement of precision is both necessary and even sufficient for the exercise of attentive concentration. Precision, here, can more broadly be seen as the need for *internal normative standards*. Whatever one with character does, she aims to do it *well*, which means that there need to be exact – and demanding – standards of excellence in order for the work to constitute a character. In this way, the virtue of character involves participating in something like what Alistair MacIntyre calls a practice: “a practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules” (MacIntyre 1981:187).

Finally, character involves effort to seek *perfection*, not only in the sense of trying to do one’s specific task well but more broadly as an effort to raise oneself (and eventually others) to a higher level of excellence. Character requires “a natural attraction ... toward perfection” (AbsMind 210), “a tendency, however vague and unconscious, to raise [oneself] up” (AbsMind 209). Montessori closely identifies this pursuit of perfection with the “drive ... to make progress”:

[L]et us consider a purely human center of perfection, the progress of mankind. Someone makes a discovery and society progresses along that line. The same thing happens in the spiritual field, a person reaches a high level and gives society a push forwards ... If we consider what is known of geography and history, we see this constant progress, because in every age some man has added a point to the circle of perfection which fascinated him and drove him to action ... Admiral Byrd

undertook the humiliating task of collecting money in order to explore the South Pole. Then he exposed himself to all the torments of a polar expedition. But all he felt was the attraction of doing something never before done, and so he planted his banner among the others in the zone of perfection. (AbsMind 213)

Beyond “perfections” internal to particular activities and the general perfections of precision and independence; there is a general striving for improvement *as such*. This ideal is necessarily indeterminate, and it will vary from one person to another. But it provides a constant impetus to move on to new tasks and challenges, with their concomitant new particular standards. Again, MacIntyre’s practices provide a helpful example of the sort of work Montessori has in mind here; MacIntyre rightly highlights that every practice is situated within a tradition, the “achievements” of whose members “extended the reach of the practice to its present point” (1981:194). He primarily looks backwards, focusing on the role of “those who have preceded us” (1981:194), and Montessori also often emphasizes the importance of highlighting how our achievements depend upon those who have come before us (see EHPxxx; Formation xxx). When emphasizing the virtue of character, however, she focuses on looking forward. Character involves not simply engaging in practices with norms of perfection and performing those practices well; it also aims for *increasing* perfection, both of oneself as a practitioner and of the practices – and ultimately, of the human species – itself. We seek to “*add* a point to the circle of perfection.”

The central virtue of Montessori’s moral philosophy is character understood as a kind of self-governance, a capacity for sustained attention to self-chosen work that involves and promotes independence through engagement in activities with clear normative standards. Those with character aim to do work, and do it well, and through such work they aim for ever increasing self-perfection. *All* human beings can and should develop character in this sense. It arises naturally in children in healthy conditions, can be clearly recognized as a virtue in the contexts in which it arises, and it provides a universal first step towards the cultivation of all other virtues. Conversely, failure to develop character afflicts children – and the adults they become – with whole hosts of vices, from envy to slavishness, cowardice to a love of power, possessiveness to violence. The route to a “true peace,” for Montessori, goes through the development of a “strong character” (EP 10:5, 17).

2. Respect

Character is the most *fundamental* aspect of moral life and provides for that “sense of personal dignity” that is one of two “noble characteristics that would prepare a man to be social” (Adol 63). But ethics does not end with self-perfectionment through character. One of the most interesting phenomena Montessori observed in her classrooms was how focused work in response to a child’s *own* inner impulses leads that child to a new kind of relationship with others, a relationship of genuine respect:

Another thing that comes as a result of the phenomenon of concentration is an easy adaptation to the social environment. The school is a society. When men are together, they are in a society ... These new children adapt easily to everything, to work *and to contact with others*. (1946:233, emphasis shifted)

From these social interactions, in the context of that sense of dignity that comes with character, children develop the other “noble characteristic” of social life: “a sense of justice” (Adol 63). As she explains, It is after these manifestations [of character] that a true discipline is established, the most obvious results of which are closely related to what we will call “respect for the work of others and

consideration for the rights of others.” Henceforward a child no longer attempts to take away another’s work; even if he covet it, he waits patiently until the object is free; and very often a child becomes interested in watching a companion at work on some object he would like to use himself. Afterwards, when discipline has been established by these internal processes ... there is a mutual respect ... between the children ... and hence is born that complex discipline which ... must accompany the order of a community. (SA 73)

Striving towards perfection in work quickens one’s sensibility to the needs of others. The “normalization” of a person that occurs when she is able to engage in sustained and self-chosen work includes the development of “normal” social awareness, and central to that social awareness is respect for others.

Montessori often discusses the respect that comes with character as just one irreducible and empirically-observed facet of that “extraordinary manifestation” wherein the child showed extraordinary spiritual qualities, recalling the phenomena of ... conversion ... as if in a saturated solution, a point of crystallization had formed, round which the whole chaotic and fluctuating mass united, producing a crystal of wonderful forms. Thus, when the phenomenon of the polarisation of attention [i.e., character] had taken place, all that was disorderly and fluctuating in the consciousness of the child seemed to be organizing itself into a spiritual creation, the surprising characteristics of which are reproduced in every individual. (SA 53-4)

Respect is one of many observed spiritual qualities that emerge along with character. In that sense, Montessori’s claim that respect is observed to emerge along with character is a mere empirical fact.^{vii} But there are also elements of character that make respect for others a particularly natural emergent quality.

For one thing, character involves a pursuit of *perfection*, which largely eliminates the *possessiveness* and *envy* that Montessori rightly sees as fundamental threats to mutual respect. Given scarcity of goods, possessiveness threatens mutual respect as each seeks to take and hold as many goods as possible. But insofar as one seeks materials only as a means towards self-perfecting activity, one has little incentive to hold onto materials one is no longer using or to waste energies by taking materials from another child already working on them. For one with character, “his freedom to take an interest in all kinds of things leads to his focusing attention not on the things themselves, but the knowledge he derives from them. Hence his longing to possess undergoes a transformation” (1:199).^{viii} A child who hoards diverts his energy from perfection-conducive activity and fails to work well even with the material he hoards. For the child with character, “He works, and greed disappears” (EP 10:103). Children with character left “free to choose their occupations ... did not show any sign of envy or competition, but ... help[ed] each other” (Formation 3:27). The perfection towards which each strives is an internal attainment, a *self-perfection*, so the mere accumulation of external goods is largely incidental. Simply *taking* from another child is coarse, crude, weak, and disruptive. One with character requires time, space, and psychological peace to work diligently on the material, and violent seizure of another’s goods precludes these necessities. Insofar as one with character is “selfish” at all, this selfishness does not consist in a desire for “possessions and power” but rather is “that of a man who seeks to withdraw ... and dwell apart ... in order to ... cultivate his own soul” (EP 10:103). For one with character, protecting or taking property is pointless and boring. What is more, in a community of normalized kids, each child can wait because she knows that the wait will not be too long, and in the right environment, he also knows there are other things he can do.^{ix}

Envy also vanishes in the context of character because one's goal is perfecting oneself rather than proving one's merits to others. Envy often leads to disrespect and social conflict, as people see esteem or even perfection itself as something that one can have only at the expense of another. But those with character seek *progress* in perfection, rather than *superiority* of it. That is, one compares one's present perfection to one's past performance and the standards implicit in that practice, not to the performance of others. Others' superiority to oneself becomes reassurance that progress is possible, rather than a threat to one's sense of self (see AbsMind 231-2).^x Finally, precisely because it involves an ability to focus on *work*, character prevents the sort of competitive or hostile attention to others that often leads to interference with their exercises of agency.

Moreover, as the pursuit of excellence or perfection, character requires and fosters a conception of what is genuinely admirable. In order to have character, one must come to appreciate the value of norm-governed work towards ideals of perfection, and while character is specifically oriented towards one's *own* pursuit of perfection, those who aspire for perfection themselves come naturally to admire and thereby respect others' similar pursuits. Montessori offers neither a conceptual argument like the Kantian-Gewirthian insistence that "a claim on the part of the agent that he has a right to perform his action" is both "an essential feature of [one's] action" and a claim by which "he is logically committed to the generalization of this right-claim to all prospective agents" (Gewirth 1974:62-3) nor even a Kantian-Korsgaardian claim about what is constitutive of human reasoning as such (see e.g. Korsgaard 1996, 2009). Her essentially psychological claim lays out the dictates of the moral sense as it develops in children in the conditions most conducive to its exercise. She thereby highlights how the structure of striving towards perfection pushes beyond each given individual. We naturally see others' pursuit of perfection as equal in value to our own, and this gives rise to a commitment to respect (and even admire) it. This vision is a *moral* vision, a sense of what is good and right in the world. It is a recognition that respect is morally excellent and morally required.^{xi}

Even in children, respect originates from participation in society and an essential characteristic of and justification for respect is that it secures harmony amongst free individuals. Montessori explains that "Our [children] live always in an active community" (AbsMind 225), and they are thus forced to learn the virtues needed for such a life:

Many people object that my method does not educate the social sense. They argue that if children instruct themselves individually, later on they will never be at ease in society, for they must live in society, not in solitude ... These are unfounded objections, for what do the children do in our schools? Do they not live together; do they grow up in solitude? ... The children come to our schools and together grow up well equipped for social life. If social virtues need to develop, they will do so at that moment which children must of themselves adapt themselves to these virtues. Rather, I would make this objection: How can you wish to prepare children for social life by leaving them seated in benches and forcing them to do what you command? What will these children do when they go away free? (1913:265)

The environment is specifically set up to encourage the sorts of "conflicts" that prompt awareness of the need to respect others, and in those contexts, one can largely trust children to develop their own moral sense. Montessori explains the effects of scarcity of materials, for example, in a well-ordered classroom:

There is only one specimen of each object, and if a piece is in use when another child wants it, the latter – if he is normalized – will wait for it to be released. Important social qualities derive from this. The child comes to see that he must respect the work of others, not because someone has said that he must, but because this is a reality that he meets in his daily experience. There is only

one between many children, so there is nothing for it but to wait. And since this happens every hour of the day for years, the idea of respecting others, and of waiting one's turn, becomes an habitual part of life which always grows more mature. (AbsMind 223-24)

Given a lack of materials, there is "nothing for it" but to respect others' work.^{xii}

Crucially, this society is one of *character*, that is, of norm-governed *activity* towards perfecting oneself. The discipline and social harmony established in a classroom of children with character emerges naturally from their activity rather than being imposed from without:

The children then are orderly and have a harmonious discipline, a discipline in which each has his different interests. It is different from the discipline of a soldier, with his forced obedience, when all have to do the same thing at the same moment ... What is known as discipline in ordinary schools is a social error. It is the discipline of the school, but not a preparation for social life, because in society each person chooses his work – each must do different things – but all must work in harmony. (17:235)

The "normalization" of a person that occurs when she is able to engage in sustained and self-chosen work includes the development of "normal" social awareness. And central to that social awareness is mutual respect, where doing one's own work involves leaving others to do theirs. Just as it originates from participation in society, an essential characteristic of and justification for respect is that it secures harmony amongst free individuals. Montessori explains how "Studying the behavior of these children and their mutual relationships in an atmosphere of freedom, the true secrets of society come to be revealed" (AbsMind 228) such as that "Society does not rest on personal wishes, but on a combination of activities which have to be harmonized" (AbsMind 224). Montessori's "social contract" is one within which *harmony of activity*, rather than maximization of preference-satisfaction or even securing of rights to choice as such are the fundamental good of – and basis for – society. Respect, as the means for securing this harmony, is morally required.^{xiii}

Because it focuses on harmony of *activity*, the fundamental object of respect is the activities – not the wishes or preferences – of others. Thus interference or interruption, even in order to provide assistance,^{xiv} is a paradigmatic form of disrespect. Montessori compares interruption of the child to "the manner of masters to slaves" (SA 17) and insists that "He who interrupts the children in their occupations in order to make them learn some pre-determined thing ... confuses the means with the end and destroys the man for a vanity" (SA 139). The reason should be clear. In "those marvelous moments when their attention is fixed," the child who "is roughly interrupted" can rightly object that their *will* is being thwarted (SA 18).^{xv} When "they are interrupted ... they lose all the characteristics connected with *an internal process regularly and completely carried out*" (SA 77).^{xvi} Interruption, in other words, violates the child's expressions of the virtue of character. Throughout her pedagogy, Montessori emphasizes that interruption and unnecessary help are among the most severe errors that teachers and caregivers make in dealing with children. And in her moral philosophy, she explains why. The exercise of one's own efforts towards achieving worthwhile goals is the core virtue in character. The most basic form of moral respect, then, is precisely respecting others *in their effortful work*.^{xvii xviii}

Besides these paradigmatic and negative forms of respect as non-interference with the free activity of others, Montessori adds that respecting others' work can, at times, involve directly helping them. Because of the dangers of unnecessary assistance, she distinguishes between "service" and "help." Service involves doing something *for* another, and it "suffocates their useful, spontaneous activity" by treating them like "puppets [or] dolls." Help, by contrast, is always directed towards

“helping him to make a conquest of such useful acts as nature intended he should perform for himself” (MM 97). We all too often serve in place of helping:

The mother who feeds her child without making the least effort to teach him to hold the spoon for himself and to try to find his mouth with it, and who does not at least eat herself, inviting the child to look and see how she does it, is not a good mother. She offends the fundamental human dignity of her son,—she treats him as if he were a doll, when he is, instead, a man confided by nature to her care. (MM 98)

For Montessori, “normalized”^{xix} children are particularly good at distinguishing help from service and giving help only when needed. This distinction is one of many cases in which children show sensitivity to moral distinctions that adults, particularly in our relationships with children, often miss:

Children ... solve their own [social] problems, but we have not yet explained how. If we watch them without interfering, we see something apparently strange. This is that they do not help one another as we do. If a child is carrying something heavy, none of the others run to his aid. They respect one another’s efforts, and give help only when it is necessary. This is very illuminating, because it means they respect intuitively the essential need of childhood which is not to be helped unnecessarily. (AbsMind 228)

Children intuitively understand the proper object of respect, which is neither the choices nor the pleasures of others, but their effortful work. In a healthy environment with conditions conducive to the development of character, they show one another a respect that is agency-centered, offers only necessary help and not mere service, condemns interruption, and strongly protects the ability of each to do his own work. Montessori’s experiences (or experiments) throughout the world showed this “normal” form of mutual respect as a *universal* feature of healthy social life; such respect for others is a universal value.^{xx}

3. Local Norms and the cultivation of character

In section 1, I outlined the central virtue of Montessori’s moral philosophy: character understood as a persistent, autonomous, attentive work at tasks with normative standards that are conducive to self-perfection. Montessori’s empirical study of children showed a universal tendency to develop character in children placed in the right environments, and she identified the moral value of this character as a condition of human excellence and a basis for all other human virtues. As we saw in section one, she also found several key elements that are intrinsic to character as such, including independence, adherence to normative standards of excellence, and the pursuit of perfection.

Character in this sense is a universal virtue with several specific characteristics, but it is also intrinsically indeterminate. The commitment to “have character” rules out certain forms of life that are inconsistent with the virtue (a life of pushpin, for instance), but it does not tell one what to actually *do* in any given circumstance. In some respects, any set of moral virtues or moral principles will be indeterminate. With the exception of some forms of brute utilitarianism, which could – at least in theory – prescribe precisely what to do in a given instance based on a calculation of net overall happiness, most moral theories underdetermine the actions they govern. Kant’s exhortation to act only on universalizable maxims does not dictate which among many possible universalizable maxims one should act on. The instruction to “tell only the truth” doesn’t dictate which truths to tell, or when. Aristotle’s account of the moral virtues is built on a context-sensitivity that precludes specifying in advance precisely how one should manifest any given virtue. The notion that one ought to find the

“mean” or act as the rational person would act do not give specific guidance for how to act in any given situation.

The indeterminacy of Montessori’s conception of character differs, however, from that of ethical approaches like Aristotle’s.^{xxi} For Aristotle, the description of each virtue underdetermines action because what is fitting for a given situation depends upon specific features of that situation. A virtuous person must have practical wisdom (*phronesis*), a capacity to discern, based on the specific features of the situation, what one must do in that situation. Here the vagueness of virtue arises from its *situation-dependence*. For Montessori, by contrast, character is indeterminate because *open-ended*. Even in a fully specified situation, there is no specific course of action that the person with character (and practical wisdom) would do. Take one of her exemplars of character, Admiral Byrd, who first set foot on the South Pole: Byrd “felt ... the attraction of doing something never before done, and so he planted his banner among the others in the zone of perfection” (AbsMind 213). Of course, there were lots of other things that had never been done before; pursuing *this* perfection was not required even in the context, except in that it was the activity to which *Byrd* committed himself. What character requires is pursuing perfection through independent work that has normative standards to which one persistently attends. Adventuring to the South Pole, excelling in portraiture, seeking new principles of chemistry, or investigating moral philosophy can all manifest character. One who engages in any of these tasks well has the virtue of character. In that sense, universal virtues underdetermine the course of one’s life

We can see this underdetermination by considering how Montessori thinks about the question of the “perfection” towards which one with character strives. She asks “What is perfection?” (AbsMind 213) and rejects the circular answer that defines perfection in terms of “possession of all the virtues” (AbsMind 213). Instead, she emphasizes indeterminacy, while insisting that perfection as such is still the goal of one with character:

Man does not have a precise heredity to do one special thing ... he is not obliged to do just one thing ... Man is capable of everything but has no heredity for anything. This sounds like a strange fact. But from this stems the obvious fact that every man must prepare in himself an adaptation that is not hereditary. He must prepare his own adaption. (1946:91; see too Formation 3:52)

While other animals have specific and determinate “perfections” of their nature, human beings have none. Perfection does involve an *adaptation* to the world, but not any determinate adaptation. It even involves participation in what Montessori calls man’s “cosmic task” (1946:91), but this task is always in the process of being discerned, refined, and revised.^{xxii}

Other universal elements of character such as independence and precision also underdetermine the activities in which one with character engages. The fact that one seeks to act independently (in the sense described in §1) precludes activities in which one would be *wholly* dependent on others for success. But one can independently play violin or paint a portrait or do experiments in chemistry or hike a mountain or write a story or do any number of things. One we take seriously the integration of “independence” with social life, and particularly with the role of cooperative activity, one can “independently” play baseball or apply for grants for research or raise one’s children.^{xxiii} Moreover, while one with character seeks activities with normative standards that can be done with increasingly refined standards of excellence, this leaves indeterminate just *what* norm-governed activities one participates in. In fact, Montessori’s description of these characteristics *emphasizes* the indeterminacy of the specific activities one engages in. With respect to precision, for instance, she highlights that “this precision *itself* seemed to hold their interest” (AbsMind 186, emphasis added) and compares this to

“sport[s],” where “this feeling of enhancing our abilities is the real source of our delight in the game” (AbsMind 180). Just as there is no “correct sport” or even “best sport” to play, so too there is no best activity for one with character to engage in.

The analogy to sport helps highlight a further point. In my (United-Statesian) family, we mostly played baseball as children, while my children play “soccer” (the United-Statesian^{xxiv} term for what the world calls football), at least partly because we live in Seattle, where soccer is at least as popular as baseball or “American football” (the kind where you throw the ball and wear armor). When I talk to friends from India, they are perplexed by baseball and try to teach me the perplexing rules of cricket. And so on. Sports are culturally specific, though – as the example of soccer shows – they can also be learned across cultures. Crucially, however, Montessori’s point about sports holds true across cultures: sports provide a context within which human beings stretch themselves and enhance their abilities, and this self-enhancement is the real source of delight in the game. A “sport” that involved no such stretching of ability would not be a sport worth playing (or even watching), so even as different cultures develop and appropriate different sports, they all have *sports*, physical activities that enhance human capacities. The local norms governing each sport all govern “sports,” a universal practice that contributes to the universal “virtue” of athletic excellence.

Similarly, those with character pursue perfection through norm-governed activities, but *which* activities they engage in are largely culturally-determined. There are at least four important ways that the universal character connects with adherence to local norms: the process of developing local competence expresses character, further expressions of character depend upon various forms of (locally specific) cultural proficiency, local norms set aspirational standards of excellence, and the “progress” towards which one with character ultimate aims includes progress towards the development and refinement of local norms.^{xxv}

First and most importantly, character universally requires attentive work on self-chosen and norm-governed activity, but *what* activities one engages in – and the norms by which those activities are governed – are largely determined by local norms. Sports provide one excellent example; one can demonstrate character through seeking to excel in sports, but in order to do so, one has to play some sport(s) or other. To some degree, what sport or sports one participates in are determined by individual predilection or family traditions, but to a considerable extent, people play the sports typical of their cultures. Either way, these sports come with their own local norms, not only in the explicit rules of the game but in the social expectations associated with them. A more important set of examples is illustrated in how Montessori constructs her classroom environments. In particular, she chooses materials for those environments with two important goals in mind. First and foremost, materials must engage children’s interest spontaneously. They should be materials that children will choose to work with, and that can sustain children’s attentive work. That is, they should be materials that foster character. But second, they should be materials that introduce children to the culture they live in. As Joen Bettmann notes, one of the most “important principles to keep in mind when gathering items for the Casa [Montessori classroom]” is that they be “culturally relevant to help the child adapt” (Bettmann 2003:5). Montessori primary (pre-school) classrooms include “sandpaper letters” that children trace with their fingers, and these letters correspond to the alphabets of the places where children live. Japanese Montessori classrooms include materials designed to prepare little fingers for adept use of chop-sticks. Classrooms in the U.S. and Europe include place settings so that children can learn how to properly set out spoons, knives, and forks. Roman Catholic schools should have small chapels with “little chairs and kneelers and holy water fonts ... that reached only to the knees of an adult” (DC 2:315),

while Muslim schools should have Arabic sandpaper letters, prayer mats, and clear indications of the direction of Mecca. And so on. As children and adults look for norm-governed activities that can sustain attention in order to promote and express character, we choose activities available in and characteristic of our local contexts. Central to the role of these activities in manifesting character is their normative character. The life of character is thus a life of adherence to local norms.

Second, insofar as character involves *progress* towards greater excellence, such progress always occurs on the basis of competence in adhering to local norms governing particular activities. The great poet must first be competent in the customary rules of the language(s) in which he writes: “his mother tongue may be enriched indefinitely, but it will always be on the basic pattern of those sounds and grammatical rules which were laid down in [early childhood]” (AbsMind 189). The innovative scientist must first learn the practices of her scientific community before she can push the frontiers of her discipline further. The soccer phenome who plays in a whole new way must still internalize the rules of the game. The innovative painter must master established norms of good painting. In general, “a man may develop himself indefinitely, but it will also be on this foundation” of competence in established “patterns to which the social life of his group conforms” (AbsMind 189).

Third, as those with character seek to progress, such progress takes place relative to local (cultural) norms. One with character may have “added a point to the circle of perfection which fascinated him” (AbsMind 213), but every such fascination is formed in a particular cultural context. Admiral Byrd went to the South Pole because this *kind* of striving for perfection was comprehensible *as* a form of progress given his late-nineteenth-century-U.S. cultural context. Character is rooted in our absorption of our cultural heritage, so norms of perfection internal to that cultural heritage direct what we consider progress. The writer, or dancer, or explorer, or scientist, all work in the context of a history of excellent exemplars and seek specifically to add to that repertoire of excellence, starting with the effort to do what has already been done more and more excellently and rising to the desire to do something new, something recognizably more perfect from within the existing norms of the circle. Pushing the frontiers of alchemy or perfecting the art of chivalry were once ways in which one could manifest character in Europe, but they are no longer. Pushing the frontiers of chemistry or perfecting the art of making chocolate are ways of manifesting character in Europe (and much of the world) today, but they may not always be, and they may not be in every part of the world. The increased cosmopolitanism of the world (a point Montessori emphasizes elsewhere) increases the extent to which we can share in the ideals and aspirations of other cultures, and it partly erodes the culturally distinctive practices of local communities in favor of more widespread norms, but there are still local emphases that affect the sorts of progressive ambitions that govern character-driven lives.

The three intersections between character and local norms discussed heretofore all depict ways that local norms govern the expression of character in individuals. There is also a fourth way in which character relates to local norms, however; the progress made by those with character ends up *affecting* local norms. Scientists who excel in their work discover new facts, laws, and approaches to their disciplines, which in turn change the way those disciplines move forward. Innovative artists push the frontiers of art and change the norms by which future artists are governed. For Montessori, one of the distinctive features of human beings – what gives human character its glory, so to speak – is that accomplishments of one generation are absorbed by the next generation, which can then make further accomplishments that move society as a whole forward: “new individuals born into [a society] have a creative power, one which can adapt them to the circumstances into which they are born. This is the child’s true biological function, and it is this which permits of social progress” (AbsMind 191-2). Children

Montessori taught learned to read and write through character-driven work on sandpaper letters and other materials, but the practice of writing was a human invention made possible through character-driven work on language.^{xxvi} Children now learn to type and interface with the internet, absorbing norms governing activities which were invented by previous innovators amongst their parents' and grandparents' generations and increasingly even amongst their peers. Explorers learn new norms for ethically engaging with wilderness areas. As we, philosophers and psychologists and educators, engage in character-driven work to articulate and defend values and practices for education, we – if we are successful – will change norms in the future.^{xxvii}

In sum, then, while character is a universal virtue, given what character *is*, it needs to be exercised through engagement with local norms in four ways: expressing character through participating in practices governed by local norms, developing fluency in following local norms as a basis for future active work, aspiring to excellence in terms of culturally approved (or approvable) standards, and advancing the frontiers of *one's own* civilization (even if partly in a cosmopolitan direction).

4. Local Norms of Respect: Grace, Courtesy, and Manners

Unlike character, which must in principle be expressed in ways reflective of local norms, respect has certain specific manifestations that can and should be put in practice in every culture. Universal respect for the self-directed work of others require that one avoid interrupting others and preventing them from being able to do their work. One ought, when appropriate, to help others, though only to help them help themselves. And these forms of assistance should flow from a genuine esteem that recognizes others' value as agents and admires their particular accomplishments. These are universal moral principles of respect. In the absence of character, they will be perceived as constraints to which one must submit, and the very submission to them, even though morally necessary, will be felt as an inhibition of one's agency. But for one with character, they are natural outgrowths of the respect for perfection and active work that is part of one's own self-conception.

Beyond these universal principles of mutual respect, however, various local norms of grace and courtesy are part of each person's culture. These, too, are connected to one's character in that the perfect fulfillment of these norms – like the perfect writing of letter or the perfect execution of a master artwork – can and should be a focus of one's innate impulses. Just as in the case of language, where children have an innate tendency to absorb a particular language and make it their own, so here they have an innate desire to absorb a particular society's norms of propriety.^{xxviii} Like language, there are norms of polite society, and (unlike the case of language) these norms are essential elements of respect within that culture. But as in the case of languages, the norms vary from context to context. What is ethically required, then, is that one respect others in specific universal ways (not interrupting their work, etc.) *and* that one be graceful and courteous in the (culturally-specific) ways suited to one's environment.

Respect for others – both other individuals and one's community as a whole – can and should manifest itself in adherence to social norms of propriety and good manners. These social norms specify and make precise otherwise general and vague requirements of social life, and they make what would otherwise be neutral forms of activity into normative requirements of polite society in a particular context. For many theorists, such norms of polite society are sharply distinguished from moral norms, and in some cases – most famously in Rousseau – they are seen as fundamentally *opposed* to moral life. But Montessori treats them as essential components of socially-situated respect, ways in which individuals “adapt to life with other people” (Montessori 1984, quoted in Sackett 2003:4).

Montessori explicitly highlights the two-fold nature of respect in explaining the (only) constraints that should be imposed on children's free choice of activities:

A child's liberty should have as its limit the interests of the group to which he belongs. Its form should consist in what we call good breeding and behavior. We should therefore prevent a child from doing anything which may offend or hurt others, or which is impolite or unbecoming. But everything else ... may be expressed. (DC 2:50; MM 87)

The "limit" of liberty here, with its emphasis on "interests of the group" and avoiding what would "offend or hurt others," fits well within the role of the teacher in promoting universal features of respect such as ensuring that all in the classroom are free of interruption. Montessori later gives the example of children "pushing their companions about" (DC 2:54) to illustrate the breakdown of respect in this sense. But the "form" of social life – "good breeding and behavior" – is intrinsically tied to local norms.^{xxix} This language draws attention to the need to engage with each other in terms of socially accepted norms of polite society. Montessori gives the example of children with "fingers in their noses" (DC 2:54), which is certainly "impolite and unbecoming" in many cultures, but would not necessarily violate social norms in others. There is no intrinsic violation of others' character-driven activity when one picks one's nose in public, but because it can conflict with local norms, it should be avoided. Likewise, in many cultures, morally excellent people will refrain from "pay[ing] a certain visit" to a friend when it is "not her day for receiving" and also "rise to our feet" when "a venerable person enters" (SA 133). Social life is made up not merely of abstract norms of respect but of specific and culturally-local requirements of civility, and the respectful person will bring herself into accord with both sets of requirements.^{xxx}

I should add three important caveats regarding the enforcement of local norms of grace and courtesy. First, some local norms may actually be contrary to respect for persons. Montessori particularly rails against widespread expectations that children sit still and be inactive, insisting that teachers *not* force children to conform to those norms because they are intrinsically disrespectful in that they prevent others' (that is, children's) attentive work. By contrast, a norm that prohibits picking one's nose does not inhibit one's ability to engage in attentive work of one's own choice, and so is a neutral norm, one that should be enforced in order to promote more effective adaptation to one's social environment.

Second, the enforcement of local norms is a feature of Montessori's *pedagogy*, but adults who have internalized those norms can and sometimes should break them for the sake of other goods. Norms of politeness are an important part of living together as a community and are often more important in terms of preserving a sense of community than universal features of mutual respect. Unlike those universal features, however, local norms can be compromised or changed without undermining the possibility of society as such.

Third and most importantly, while Montessori admits that sometimes a teacher (or other enforcer) needs to "patiently intervene to ... check and little by little eradicate all those [improper] actions" (DC 2:54-5), she emphasizes that the primary way of teaching local norms is through positive instruction in effective means for satisfying the expectations of one's community.^{xxxi} Bringing oneself to conform to norms of politeness can and should be a manifestation of character; such conformity provides a challenging form of work that can be done with precision and is conducive to self-perfection. What have come to be called "Lessons in Grace and Courtesy" (e.g. Sackett 2003) began, for Montessori, when she set about to give a "humorous lesson on how you blow your nose":

After having imitated various ways of using a handkerchief for this purpose, I ended by showing how it can be done discreetly, so as to make as little noise as possible, slipping out the handkerchief so that the action remains more or less hidden. The children listened and watched with the keenest attention, and did not laugh, and I wondered to myself what could be the reason. But hardly had I finished when there came a burst of applause ... Then indeed I was utterly amazed ... It occurred to me that perhaps I had touched on a sensitive spot in the social life of this little world. The question I had treated was one that children associate with a kind of continual humiliation, a permanent derision; they are always being scolded about blowing their noses. Everyone shouts at them, everyone insults them (they are habitually referred to as “snot-nose” ...), and, in the end, especially in schools, handkerchiefs are pinned visibly to their overalls ... like a stigma and badge of shame. Yet, no one had ever taught them without attacking him or her directly how they ought to blow their noses. (Secret 22:113)

The story seems humorous; Montessori teaches a group of children how to blow their noses. But it actually illustrates a fundamental point about the role of local norms in social life and the importance of those norms to the children seeking to become full members of social life. Blowing one’s nose discreetly is not a universal norm. There is nothing intrinsically disrespectful about having a snotty nose, or about blowing one’s nose loudly. But in many cultures, including early twentieth-century Italy, discreetly blowing one’s nose is a local norm of courtesy and good manners. It is part of the “form” of adult social life and should be part of the form of life in schools. In that sense, it is a local norm of respect that should be enforced. But the notion of “enforcement” misstates how Montessori approaches norms of courtesy and respect. She specifically condemns the stigmatization that comes from constantly calling attention to children’s failures of propriety. Instead, she makes politeness and good manners into a sort of *work* that character-driven children can attend to. And children are *interested* in this work, partly because it is norm-governed and thus a suitable expression of character, but also for distinctively social reasons.

Montessori diagnoses the cause of the children’s profound attention based on “long experience” studying children’s responses to lessons in grace and courtesy. She found that “children have a profound feeling of personal dignity and their souls may remain wounded, ulcerated, oppressed, in a way the adult can never have imagined” (Secret 22:113). They “are sensitive to all the disrespect that is showered upon them, and which leaves them with a sense of humiliation. Such a lesson as mine did them justice, redeemed them, enabled them to raise themselves in social life” (Secret 22:113). Children’s own character-driven interest in work gives rise to universal forms of respect for the work of others, and it also gives them a profound sense of personal dignity. They want to be seen as fully integrated members of society, and that requires that they be able to conform to local standards of good behavior, however arbitrary those standards are. They are thus acutely interested in lessons that help them be more mannerly, more polite, more in adherence to local norms.

Moreover, some adherence to local norms is necessary even in principle if society is to function well. In giving examples of common lessons of grace and courtesy, Joen Bettman mentions such things as “Blowing one’s nose,” “Serving a guest,” “Covering one’s mouth,” “Giving comfort to a friend,” “Introducing oneself,” “Introducing an adult (using a title),” “Answering the telephone,” “Opening a door for another,” and “Leaving a message on an answering machine.” Some of these, such as giving comfort to a friend or introducing oneself, are essential features of social life in any setting. For others, such as answering the phone or leaving a message, there must be norms of propriety in societies with the relevant technologies, but these are not “universal” values because the technologies are not

universal. And others, such as covering one's mouth or opening a door for another, are tied to local norms that need not be present in a well-functioning society, whether it has our forms of technology or not. Moreover, *all* of these lessons will teach locally specific ways of addressing the relevant situations. The example of "introducing and adult (using a title)" highlights this. For any society, it is likely that there will be occasions within which someone will have to introduce another, but the practice of assigning titles is culturally local. Societies work out local norms in order to meet universal demands of living together, to deal with emerging technologies or practices, and for a variety of other reasons. From wherever the local norms come, however, as long as they do not undermine universal requirements of respect, adherence to them is a contingent but nonetheless real condition of being respected in that local context, and those with a strong sense of personal dignity thereby have a reason to develop skills at conforming to those norms.

Conclusion

Character and respect are the two most important universal virtues in Montessori's moral philosophy. Both were identified through work with children in a wide variety of cultures, and Montessori prescribes both as universal values to be promoted in human beings everywhere in the world. They are, for her, the fundamental bases of moral and psychological health for all people. However, both character and respect are culturally instantiated in particular ways. While there are universal aspects of character as such, the kinds of work that human beings can and should engage in depend on the ways that natural predispositions interact with cultural possibilities for activity. And there are culturally specific instantiations of mutual respect, embodied in local norms of politeness and courtesy. What is morally required is that one respect others in specific universal ways (not interrupting their work, etc.) *and* that one be graceful and courteous in culturally-specific ways.

As I noted in my introduction, Montessori developed her moral philosophy in the context of a world that was always either at war or on its brink, and also of a world that was becoming increasingly integrated through technology and economic forces into what she calls a "single organism, one nation" (EP 10:22). On the one hand, "there will always be human groups and human families with different traditions and languages" (EP 10:23). But developments in transportation and especially communication technologies – which made Montessori remark, already in the 1930's, about how the fact that "men can communicate with one another with amazing ease" makes it so that "today all mankind is a single group" (EP 10:94) – unite all human beings. We know about one another. We trade with one another. We work together to solve problems. Culture is shared across oceans and national boundaries: "No longer are there separate groups of human beings, as was the case until just yesterday" (EP 10:94, in a lecture delivered in 1939).

Education must deal with this increased unity of humankind, and the education that can deal with it must begin with the twin virtues of character and respect. Everywhere, in every context, adults and children alike should engage in self-chosen work with standards of excellence that allow them to self-perfect and contribute to the progress of humanity. They should respect others' efforts to engage in such work, helping (only) where necessary and avoiding unnecessary interference. These virtues are universal. But both virtues will have local variants. The kinds of work individuals engage in will vary from one community to another. Norms of decency and good manners, ways that individuals show respect to one another, will take different forms in different local contexts. Essential to the universal structure of respect is that one take into account the legitimacy of differences that do not compromise the essential qualities of these virtues. If I do not find the projects of a particular locality to be

worthwhile, I can still respect the expression of character – norm-governed work towards perfection – manifested in those who engage in those projects. If I grew up with different standards of good manners than I find in a new context, I can recognize the universal value of adhering to the standards of good manners for the place in which I find myself. Greater consciousness of our unity as a single people will provide increasing opportunities to arbitrate differences in local norms. For those equipped with character (in the universal sense), these opportunities are chances to effect progress through hard work. For those equipped with respect (in the universal sense), they are social problems that can and should be solved through cooperation, with an emphasis on non-interference in the character-driven work of others. Montessori does not, of course, provide a template for solving every problem of the modern world. But she provides the basic structure of an education that will allow the children of today to become the problem-solving adults of tomorrow.

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ⁱ Many thanks to the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues for organizing this conference and to Oriel College (Oxford University) for hosting it. For ease of reading the main argument of my paper, I have moved some substantial discussions to endnotes. I apologize for any awkwardness of this format.

ⁱⁱ See too EP 10:27, 46, 101. (E.g. "the child, a free being, must teach us and teach society order, calm, discipline, and harmony" (EP 10:101).)

ⁱⁱⁱ For the sake of simplicity, I have left off of this list one other very important Montessorian virtue: love. As she emphasizes throughout her writings, love permeates every other virtue, and it is something about which children are particularly well suited to teach adults (for a wide variety of reasons).

^{iv} Montessori uses the Italian *uomo* (human being) here. Nonetheless, I generally follow the approved translations of the Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company endorsed by the Association Montessori Internationale that Montessori established, unless there are significant reasons to highlight a variation with Italian editions.

^v This "striving" for perfection is not "dutiful" in the Kantian sense. The person with character need not constantly constrain her inclinations for the sake of sticking to this or that principled commitment. Instead, she is one of the "stronger types *attracted by* perfection" (emphasis added), where

There is no force of gravity [pulling them down, against which they must struggle], but a *true* wish to become better. Often there is aspiration without the prospect of absolute perfection, but in any case these people are drawn towards perfection, naturally and without effort. It is not the fear of imprisonment that stops them from stealing ... nor are they tempted to acts of violence from which they refrain by a pretense of virtue. They simply do not want other people's things, and violence repels them. Perfection attracts them because of their nature. Their search for it is not sacrificial, but is pursued as if it satisfied their deepest longings. (AbsMind 212)

Insofar as such people are governed by rules or principles, "they keep the rules wholeheartedly of their inner natures" (AbsMind 212). She compares this with "people in good or bad health. For example, a person with

chronic bronchitis ... or [whose] digestion is bad” must be careful how he acts and eats and “keep up with the others, but only with great care and wit the dread of hospital or death always in their hearts ... But ... those who enjoy good health ... eat what they like without troubling about rules, go out in all weather, break the ice to have a swim” (AbsMind 212-13). “The great task of education must be to secure and to preserve a normality which, of its own nature, gravitates towards the center of perfection” (AbsMind 239). This wholeheartedness does not imply that the pursuit of perfection, or the keeping of rules, is *easy* for one with character. Quite the contrary, it is precisely the *challenge* of pursuing perfection that is attractive. But this challenge consists in overcoming difficulties presented by the work itself, not in overcoming conflict amongst one’s volitions, concerns, or loves. In this sense, Montessori contrasts those with true character from those (adults) who have to act in accordance with character but without having true character. She says of the latter, “These sufferers impose rules upon themselves to save them from falling. They attach themselves to someone better than themselves. They pray Omnipotence to help them in temptation. More and more they clothe themselves in virtue, but it is a difficult life” (AbsMind 210). Montessori here distinguishes her virtue of character from the ethics of Kant (rule-based), Aristotle (looking to the person of practical wisdom) or Hobbes (turning to politics or the sovereign), and theological ethics (“Omniscience”).

^{vi} Relatedly, character involves an *integration* of previously separated aspects of oneself, a “unity of personality” (1946:139). This emphasis on integration is consistent with Montessori’s broader metaphysical concept of higher forms of agency emerging from the harmonious relation of lower forces. In the human case, it means that one with character strives not only to perfect various particular powers but also to integrate these into a coherent individual personality:

The ... development of each of its [psychological] parts, which is at first carried on separately from birth till three, must in the end become integrated, when it will be so organized that all of these parts act together in the service of the individual. That is what is happening during the next period, from 3 to 6, when the hand is at work and the mind is guiding it. If outer conditions prevent this integration from occurring then ... [t]he hand moves aimlessly; the mind wanders about far from reality; language takes pleasure in itself; the body moves clumsily. (AbsMind 203)

One with character works towards increased perfection through a dexterous hand capable of moving food to his mouth and a sensory acuity capable of recognizing that food, but also through the hand-eye-stomach-mind coordination that brings these perfections together. She strives not only for strong fingers, visual-cognitive recognition of letters, and trained motor skills in hand and arm, but also for an integration that brings these together into an ability for writing. Over time, she seeks to develop further capabilities, such as that independence of mind that lets her consider new food sources or think new thoughts, and further integration, such that she can cook and eat those new foods, write down her new thoughts in creative stories, or even compose poetry about tasteful delights.

^{vii} That is to say, it is portrayed as a fact according to Montessori’s observations. My purpose here is not to decide whether or not these observations are ultimately supportable, but to lay out the structure of Montessori’s approach. For a collection of evidence that supports Montessori’s empirical claims, see Lillard 2007.

^{viii} This is not to deny that there is no need for external goods in the pursuit of perfection. Admiral Byrd needed resources to get to the South Pole, and Montessori emphasizes how the right environment is needed for children to pursue perfection. But one with character does not seek external goods *for their own sakes* nor even merely *for the sake of pleasure*; and it is typically these motives that generate conflict over external goods.

^{ix} This development of the moral sense does not imply that children operate in a complete vacuum, however. In the right environment, a child is confronted with constant *models* of respect, and she comes to see how the mutual respect amongst her peers, and well as the universal respect shown by the teacher, give rise to a community of peaceful pursuit of perfection. For all children, there is an attraction to such a community, and for one with character, this vision contributes to her greatest aspirations for herself.

^x Carol Dweck echoes similar points in her discussion of those who have growth mindsets, and who therefore have no need to prove their superiority to others and are not intimidated by others who are, for now, better than them at something. See e.g. Dweck 2006:30.

^{xi} While Montessori’s conception of character involves endorsing a broadly Nietzschean emphasis on human self-overcoming towards ever higher ideals, her insistence on respect leads her to reject Nietzsche’s failure to connect his *Übermensch* with genuine concern for others. For her, this is not merely a failure of opportunity, but a blindness to the implications of Nietzsche’s own ideal:

To Friedrich Nietzsche, the superman was an idea without practical consequence, strange and erroneous even when tested by the very theories ... which inspired him. His conception offered no help in overcoming the ills of humanity; rather was it as a chain binding man to earth, there to seek means to create of himself the man superior to himself; and thus leading him astray into egotism, cruelty and folly. (SA 266)

The failure to extend striving towards *individual* perfection with a broader interest in others is an “egotism” that sets its sights too *low*, binding itself to all-too-narrow scopes for its agency. Moreover, Montessori emphasizes that the inner impulse to self-perfection is an impulse *of life*, and life’s striving for growth and development is not limited to the boundaries of any particular organism. The pre-eminent forms of progress and growth are those that enhance life *for all*:

It is enough that souls should “feel.” How, then, could they live quietly amidst evil? If under the windows of our house people were piling up refuse until we felt that the air was being vitiated, could we bear this without protesting, and insisting on the removal of that which was causing us to suffer? If, moreover, we had a child, we should clamor still more loudly, and should even set to work to clear away the nuisance with our own hands, in our solicitude for his health. But if the bodies of mother and child lay dead, they would no longer be conscious of the pestilential air. It is characteristic of “life” to purge the environment and the soul of substances injurious to health. . . . And this is the morality that springs from sensibility: the *action* of purifying the world, of removing the obstacles that beset life, of liberating the spirit from the darkness of death. The merits of which every man feels he owes an account to his conscience are not such things as having enjoyed music or made a discovery; he must be able to say what he has done to save and maintain life. These purifying merits, like progress, have no limits. (SA 265-6)

The same inner forces that push each individual towards perfection also equip them with a “feeling” for the ills and potentials of others. The ideal of striving towards perfection, an ideal rooted in the deepest inner impulses of human beings, thus naturally realizes itself in a project of liberating others.^{xii}

^{xiii} Moreover, given character properly seeks *perfection*, and because the *object* of that perfection is indeterminate, social life *itself* can – and does – become such an object, such that among the perfections that one seeks – or at least can seek – is perfection *in social intercourse itself*. Even more, those with character seek to engage in their activities with greater and greater excellence and precision. Thus those with character who are *actively* involved in social life – as all in a Montessori classroom are – will seek to engage in that social life with greater and greater excellence. And this gives rise to a desire to know and conform to the standards of excellence for such interactions. Preeminent amongst those standards, as one comes to see, is mutual respect. Thus agents seeking perfection seek to perfectly contribute to a community of mutual respect. Relatedly, character involves the cultivation of healthy *love*. We love our environment, and thereby also love those around us (our social environment). When we seek excellence, we seek excellence *of adaptation to our environment* (see 1946:80ff.). We seek to understand, care for, and engage with our environment in accordance with norms of excellence. And that extends to other people as well.

^{xiii} Character is thus the basis of respect in two senses. First, the establishment of character naturally gives rise to respect, as those who are capable of freely engaging in concentrated and persistent work come to feel a need to respect others. Second, character is the ultimate end and object of respect. What one respects when one respects another person is precisely her capacity to engage and persist in attentive work that interests her. For both reasons, character is a more basic moral good than respect for others; it is the best foundation and the ultimate end of respect. But the concept of respect adds to what is a broadly Nietzschean perfectionism a deeply Kantian commitment to the equal dignity of human beings, and a distinctively Montessorian conception of what respect for that dignity involves. Character is a perfectionist moral ideal; respect for the freedom of others to develop their own characters is a categorical imperative.

^{xiv} At least, when this assistance is unnecessary. Assisting a person who is genuinely in need of help can be respectful, but even in those cases, help should always be given in a way that maximizes the contribution of effortful work by the person one helps.

^{xv} In this context, Montessori has rough words for the schools of her time (and, alas, of ours): “yet it is well known that, in spite of such results, constant interruption and change of work are commonly practiced in schools, as part of a scientific plan for combating fatigue” (SA 48).

^{xvi} One very practical implication of this abhorrence of interruption comes in Montessori’s approach to sharing, one rooted in respect for the wills of others rather than mandatory generosity. While many in our culture see “sharing” as requiring that a child interrupt her own attentive work to give an item to another (who may or may

not really care for it), Montessori “sharing” preeminently means waiting patiently until one’s fellows are finished with their work before taking what they were working with.

^{xvii} Relatedly, one ought to care for the environment in a way that avoids inhibiting the self-directed work of (oneself and) others (see AbsMind 220 for how this flows directly from character). In the case of children, this means putting work back where it was found and in good order for the next child to take it up. In the case of adults, this would mean working in the world in a way that leaves the world in a condition in which others can also thrive. One ought not overuse scarce resources, etc.

^{xviii} While this avoidance of interference and interruption is the core concept of respect, respect for others also involves affective dimensions. Thus respect includes a feeling of mutual esteem for others *qua* agents, what Steven Darwall has called “recognition respect” (Darwall 1977): “Finally, the children come to know one another’s characters and to have a reciprocal feeling for each other’s worth” (AbsMind 227). Respect also brings an absence of envy and jealousy, and even that “appraisal respect” (Darwall 1977) that consists in “admiration for the best. Not only are these children free from envy, but anything well done arouses their enthusiastic praise” (AbsMind 231, cf. MM 347). For those who lack character, even when such peers express disrespect for others and “disturb the class,” the dominant mood is pity rather than resentment: “[the respectful child] has felt pity for [the disruptive one],” and Montessori suggests that this is a childish insight from which we should learn: “How the world would change if wickedness always awakened pity” (AbsMind 229-230).

^{xix} Xxx footnote on normalization xxx.

^{xx} The universal nature of this respect marks a contrast between Montessori and the more communitarian and aristocratic perfectionism of Aristotle. The emphasis on respecting each individual person as a unique individual engaged in her own unique projects aligns this aspect of Montessori’s views with Kant’s rather than, say, with utilitarian moral theories. Like Kant, Montessori insists that one’s actions – including one’s pursuit of perfection – be harmonized with the requirement that one respect others. Just as, for Kant, one ought always “so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G 4:429), so with Montessori one must respect the activities of others even while one pursues one’s own. Her two-fold emphasis – on *not infringing* on others’ humanity and on *directly promoting* others’ humanity – even fits Kant’s own distinction between perfect and imperfect duties (in G 4:422) or between duties of right and duties of virtue (see MS 6:239-40). And while the requirements of character are psychologically more fundamental within Montessori’s ethical ideal, respects “trumps” character both in that people must show respect whether they have character or not (see note 33) and in that even when people are exercising their characters – pursuing their chosen perfections – they ought not do so in way that disrespects others. In that way, respect is a categorical imperative.

Montessori’s conception of respect differs from Kant’s, however, in several respects. For one thing, Montessori includes both *Kantian* and what we might call *communitarian* conceptions of respect (see discussion in note 32). Respect for others requires conformity to a universal principle of respect for humanity but also incorporates particular norms of individual societies. Montessori can thereby make sense of why diverse individuals feel the ethical pulls of diverse traditional values in the deep ways that they do. Without conflating norms of grace and courtesy with universal forms of respect necessary for any social life at all, she can and does give them moral importance.

More importantly, Montessori’s conception of the “humanity” that one must respect is importantly different from than Kant’s. In one important respect, her notion of humanity gives a *narrower* scope for respect than his. For Kant, one ought to respect others’ capacities for choice and thus not interfere with or compromise others’ ability to pursue objects of their choice in the ways they choose to pursue them (as long as they do not wrong others). Further, one ought to make some efforts towards positively advancing others’ happiness, that is, the sum of objects for which they “wish and will” (CPrR 5:124). For Montessori, however, there is an important distinction within “objects” of choice between *actions* – and particularly the norm-governed, progress-oriented actions in which work consists – and mere *preferences for ends*. Thus Montessori would distinguish between a child’s choice to work with a particular material and that same child’s choice of a particular flavor of ice cream or particular TV show to watch. There might be contexts in which individual’s choices of mere *ends* are worthy of respect, but in general, respect for others fundamentally involves respect for their *work*, not for choice as such. Thus we ought avoid interference with the *work* of others, not their mere preferences, and we should actively promote others’ opportunities for work, not their mere happiness. There is a fundamental difference between a

person's choice of *ice cream*, which is a mere preference, and her choice of a particular occupation, hobby, or project. In that sense, Montessori's respect for others has a narrower focus than Kant's.

In another important respect, however, Montessori's conception of humanity is *broader* than Kant's. For Kant, we ought to respect only agents that have a capacity for reason-guided reflection, and – on some readings – only those choices made or endorsed in the context of that reflection. Thus for him, there would be a fundamental difference between a *child's* choice of ice cream, which need not be respected, and an *adult's* choice, which must be, because the adult, but not the child, makes the choice in the context of (a capacity for) reason-guided reflection. Relatedly, one ought to respect adults' deliberate choices made in the context of reflection more than (or even rather than) their immediate intentions, even when those immediate intentions are part of attentive work (or flow). Montessori does distinguish between choices rooted in reason and reflection and those that are not, and she even allows that that adult agency is fuller than children's, in some respects, by virtue of its greater reason-guidedness. But for her, the bare capacity for norm-governed work is, for her, an agency worthy of direct respect, even without any invocation of reason or reflection.^{xx}

Moreover, not only does the proper *object* of respect not require reflection, the *nature* of respect is not first and foremost a matter of *maxims* endorsed on reflection but rather of a set of *patterns of respectful behavior* (waiting patiently, helping, etc.) and *feeling* (esteem, admiration, patience, etc.). As the child matures, these patterns of behavior become incorporated into reflectively endorsed principles and explicit codes, but those laws are only a way of making explicit what is already implicit in well-governed behavior, and they never exhaust what is required by respect. One with coarse or envious feelings towards others, clumsy interactions with them, and habits of interference, even should he have the best maxims, fails to "respect" them in Montessori's sense. Respect is not a commitment made in reflection but a whole way of life, and it is directed not only towards rationally guided and reflectively endorsed choices but towards any manifestation of character is sustained, concentrated, freely-chosen, effortful activity.

Finally, Montessori rejects Kant's account of obligation as requiring inner conflict. In keeping with Romantic and later Idealist critiques of Kant (e.g. Schiller, Hegel), Montessori sees respect for others as a natural outgrowth of character, so that one with character need not feel inner conflict about respect.

[P]ersons of strongest character ... feel in themselves a natural attraction toward perfection; [others] are always feeling tempted ... Therefore they need moral support to protect them from temptation..., which demands a constant struggle and defense. The effort to resist evil is regarded as virtuous because it does in fact prevent us from falling into the moral abyss. These sufferers impose rules upon themselves to save them from falling. They attach themselves to someone better than themselves. They pray Omnipotence to help them in temptation. More and more they clothe themselves in virtue, but it is a difficult life. (AbsMind 210) Like Kant, Montessori sees deference to superior authorities (including God) as a sort of heteronomy, but unlike Kant, she sees the imposition of rules, even a categorical imperative, as equally heteronomous. For those with character, "Perfection attracts them because it is in their nature. Their search for it is not sacrificial, but is pursued as if it satisfied their deepest longings" (AbsMind 212). In Kantian terms, Montessori respect is a natural *inclination* that arises for one with a properly cultivated character.

In this turn towards a more integrated and unified conception of agency, Montessori can rightly be seen as akin to Aristotle's virtue ethics, wherein true virtue is distinguished from mere self-control precisely by the lack of inner conflict. But unlike Aristotle, for whom respect for others is at best a component of virtues of justice or generosity, she shares with Kant an insistence that respect is the most important social virtue and must extend to *all* other human beings, treating them as capable agents equal in dignity to oneself. In its content, her virtue ethics is much closer to Kant's, but in its moral psychology, it is closer to Aristotle's.

One final difference between Kant and Montessori on respect is worth noting in closing. For Kant, "respect" encompasses the whole of moral theory, and from respect all other virtues derive; for Montessori, it is merely *one* element of a broader ethical vision grounded in character.^{xx} Thus Kant can say that *the* single categorical imperative is that we "treat humanity ... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (4:429). Partly this difference is due to Montessori's Nietzschean conception of character as self-perfection. Merely treating one's humanity as an end does not quite capture the nature of one's duties to self, and the need for character cannot easily be reduced to an obligation to cultivate talents as part of some broader self-respect.^{xx} But even in the context of specifically *social* virtues, Montessori's moral theory emphasizes not merely *respect* for others but also what she calls "social solidarity," a deep form of *positive cooperation* with others that extends one's agency. This aspect of her ethics is more like that of Hegel (see especially his *Philosophy of Right*), with

whom she shares a project of incorporating a basically Kantian moral theory into a more comprehensive ethical whole.^{xx}

Alongside the respect embodied in “a discipline in which each has his different interests” where “each person chooses his work” and “each must do different things ... but ... in harmony” (1946:235), she posits a social solidarity that involves “a true brotherhood ... cemented by affection,” (AbsMind 227), “something that allows easy communication between individuals – sympathy, cooperation, ... *society by cohesion* (1946:233). “[V]italized by a social spirit,” at this stage “It is normal for children to join together” (AbsMind 232; 1946:233) into something akin to a single organism, such that the children can be “compared to the ... cells in ... an organism” (AbsMind 232; cf. EP 25, 62-3). As with the relationship between character and respect, Montessori describes how “Little by little a development occurs in these new children” where mutual respect gives rise to a tendency to “absorb the prevailing sentiments of his group” and give rise to “a more complex kind of unity ..., a higher sentiment like the love we have for a city or a nation” (1946:235-6).^{xx} For Montessori, in fact, social solidarity is a fruit of character that both relies on and extends it, bringing about a new sort of character, one that is at once social and individual, and a full discussion of social solidarity would involve showing how *this* virtue relates not only to respect but also to character. For the present, however, it is sufficient to note that just as character provides the context for the cultivation of mutual respect and a sense of justice, so too it provides a context for various other social virtues, foremost among which is social solidarity. And in this way, Montessori not only integrates a broadly Nietzschean foundation with Kantian commitments to equal dignity and mutual respect, but incorporates a Hegelian and Marxist commitment to greater social wholes as a fruit of character and respect.

^{xxi} It also differs from that of Kant, but in different ways. Kant, like Montessori and unlike Aristotle, does not see there as being a single “right” thing to do in this or that situation. Unlike Montessori, however, he provides principles of self-love, self-perfection, and others’ happiness as guides for choosing amongst morally permissible maxims. Montessori would discount the importance of self-love in the Kantian (hedonic) sense and even discount the importance of the happiness of others, replacing those principles with a broad principle of advancing the perfection of oneself, others, and ultimately the species and even the cosmos itself (see EP 10:52, 106).

^{xxii} Montessori does emphasize certain ends that are *not* equivalent to the pursuit of perfection, most prominently highlighting that perfection is not identical to mere *enjoyment*. She rhetorically asks, “The great man with his great intellect, with his special adaptation, does he have a purpose on this earth or is he here only to enjoy it?”(1946:91). For Montessori, to achieve perfection is to be more fully *active* and to become more capable of action, not simply to become happier. Like Admiral Byrd, one should “add a point to the circle of perfection” (AbsMind 213), but this still leaves open what circles of perfections to advance, and Montessori even highlights that Byrd added to the circle “which fascinated *him* and drove *him* to action” (AbsMind 213, emphasis added).

^{xxiii} Integration, too (see note 5), imposes some guidelines on character-driven activity. Montessori bewails the tendency by which “man must be classified either as a worker with his head or with hands, instead of being allowed to function with his whole personality” (EHP 6:7). Generally speaking, those with character will aim to excel in activities that more fully *integrate* their personalities. But even this criterion leaves a vast territory of possible activities, from dance to chemistry to exploring the South Pole.

^{xxiv} I use the term “United-Statesian” here because of the obvious absurdity of thinking that soccer – my next example – is not a particularly “American” sport, given its prominence throughout most of the Americas.

^{xxv} “Local” here refers both to cultural/spatial locality and to locality in the sense of the practices one with character engages in. The norms of my Seattleite community are shared by those in my immediate vicinity; they require recycling, support soccer as a serious sport, and preclude asking new acquaintances what they do for a living early in conversation. The norms of my philosophical community are shared by a relatively small number of people spread throughout the world and require citing sources, taking counter-examples seriously (even pretty far-fetched ones), and sitting quietly through long and complex talks while saving one’s questions until one is called on at the official “question time” at the end. This distinction between culturally local norms and disciplinary norms is an important one when thinking about the application of universal virtues to specific contexts, and the two sorts of “locality” intersect and mutually support or undermine each other in ways well worth study, but the distinction is not particularly important for the purposes of *this* particular paper.

^{xxvi} See Formation 3:82, where Montessori bewails the lack of attention to the history of writing, a history which could inspire children with the value of writing in particular while also filling them with gratitude for their cultural inheritance and ambitious hope about the potential of human beings to transform culture in profound ways.

^{xxvii} To some degree, these forms of progress are relatively universal. Admiral Byrd's trips to the Poles, or Newton's new theory of gravity, or Picasso's cubist revolution in art, have effects far beyond their local communities. As the world becomes smaller, human accomplishments in one area affect the human community as a whole. But the changes always begin in, and are felt most forcefully in, local norms.

^{xxviii} And as in the case of language, imperfect or coerced absorption at an early age inhibits perfect and fulfilling execution at a later age.

^{xxix} To some extent, this is true of "offense," as well. What causes offense is often tied to culturally-specific norms.

^{xxx} To a considerable extent, both forms of respect are developed simply through life in a community of others. In the case of general respect, the basic facts of the environment – scarce materials, a limited scope for movement within the classroom, the need for cooperation in certain activities in the classroom, etc. – combined with the spirit of respectfulness engendered by the development of character can take students a considerable way towards understanding and practicing respect. But some explicit instruction in respectful interaction is an important part of Montessori's pedagogy, and this is particularly important with respect to norms of propriety and good manners, which are culturally-relative and in that sense arbitrary. These explicit lessons are what Montessori educators describe as lessons in "grace and courtesy," which range from culturally specific norms of politeness to more universal standards of good behavior.

^{xxxi} There is one important exception to this emphasis on instruction over coercion, one that brings out a way in which universal respect can take priority even over a given child's free activity. Because character in general is a moral good that teachers must work to protect and promote, acting towards others with the universal forms of respect necessary to protect their character is an enforceable moral good. Because of the centrality of creating a social context within which character can be protected and promoted, teachers have an obligation to ensure that children respect each other in their actions *even before* they have developed character; she "must not only not interfere when the child is concentrating, she must also see that [the child] is not disturbed," which will require that she "be a policeman" with respect to children that are interfering with others (1946:229). This teacherly emphasis on universal respect as a condition of possibility of cultivating character has three important implications. First, it shows that respect is an *independent moral good*. Those without character have a moral obligation to respect others, even if this respect does not flow from their deepest personality. Such moral agents will be incomplete and conflicted; they will never have the thoroughgoing respect for others of one with character. But they must exhibit as much respect as they can, for the sake of those others. Second, the *focus* of respect is human agents *as attentive workers*. The object of respect is not human "choice" per se, but specifically – at least for the most basic forms of respect – the exercise of choice in concentrated work. And finally, this highlights an important distinction between grace and courtesy in line with local norms, which should be taught but not "police[d]," and universal respect, which must be enforced even antecedent to any establishment of character.

^{xxxii} Actually, I haven't quite fixed all the references, so this isn't yet true, but I'm working on it.