

Incorrigible Rudeness, The Strategy For Social-Political Impotence

by Paul Poenicke

I. Why Do We Fail to Prevail?

Isonomia Quarterly readers have likely asked the following question: Why are Hayekian ideas so unpopular? Equality under the law and global federalism—two of Hayek’s most cogent ideals—are consequential from numerous perspectives and justified by many strong arguments. A dozen phrases pass through the mind—"The best arguments persuade," "The truth will out," "Survival of the fittest beliefs," "Truth emerges from the marketplace of ideas"—to accost reality. Unfortunately, society is not a truth table, where the input of truth entails the output of further truths. Truth tables are constructs of logic, and reality is not beholden to the results of formal logic and its apparatuses.

Humanity is our problem. Political animals cannot long abide morally-corrosive actions, attitudes, and institutions without some breakdown in society or

within the individuals that constitute it. Radioactive activities, perspectives, and orders are neither the foundation of healthy civilizations nor the source of thriving human beings.

Political success is important, but how we act and cooperate with others matters more. Our failure runs deeper than a lack of flexibility and pragmatism, misguided tactics and strategy, or odd presentation and messaging. Hayekian ideals will fail to gain traction unless their defenders understand why being rude is necessarily politically toxic and abandon incorrigible rudeness.

This essay opens with a Confucian account of ritual to reveal why rudeness—ranging from uninterest in social manners to manifest disrespect of social norms—cannot support either social order or individual flourishing. This qualitative account of what makes rudeness unfit for society and its normative bankruptcy is reinforced by a game theoretic investigation that models incorrigible rudeness as a goal-orientated strategy that promotes incentives and games structures hostile to coordination. The essay concludes by integrating these qualitative and quantitative insights to clarify the kind of coordination that dominates cooperation

with rude actors: infelicitous coordination. Such coordination is brittle and ersatz, appearing functional in the short term but collapsing once such behavior becomes entrenched in social interaction. Incurrable rudeness is immoral, irrational, and ineffectual—it should not be done, it fails as a strategy, and it cannot extend its capacities through coordination.¹⁴

II. The Wrongness of Rudeness and the Hegemony of Rituals

In *The Wrongness of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy*, Amy Olberding defends manners and civility against rudeness. Olberding composes an impressive defense of manners and civility, and despite struggling with their triviality, artificiality, and ability to ruin normally pleasurable acts (p. 30-34), the author rejects rudeness (p. 49-68) with critiques that will resonate with other objections in this paper.

¹⁴ This essay will focus on incurrable rudeness, and much of what is claimed about this form of rudeness can also be applied to similar forms and to individuals who have a disposition toward incurrability. Roughly speaking, the degree to which this kind of incivility characterizes a person (a point that will be discussed in three different ways) will determine the extent to which the essay's analysis applies.

Righteous rage feels good and even warranted. Yet in societies marked by widespread disagreement and deep interdependence, it is too easy for us to be misguided by cognitive distortions and impute false, evil intentions where none exist. Manners and civility, by contrast, attract allies, cultivate sympathy and empathy, and preserve hope by sustaining social bonds in moments of crisis. Rudeness corrodes these functions, leaving individuals isolated when hardship strikes—deprived of social support and exposed to chance.

Olberding uses the image of a corpse to illustrate the tension between rudeness and civility in social relations (p. 62-66). Like a dead body, humanity can easily provoke disgust, with harsh attitudes pushing us away from our naturally unappealing aspects. Manners and civility, even as social conventions, compel a reassessment of these reactions: they allow us to find value in those who repel us and restrain excessive attachment to those who please us. Civility thus functions as a kind of adornment, akin to preparing the dead for burial. Through this symbolic beautification, we express respect and affirm the worth of others within society, despite our genuine impulses to withdraw or reject them.

Olberding's rejection of rudeness (p. 69-112) relies upon Confucius (551-479 BCE), an ancient Chinese thinker who inspired an intellectual tradition that influenced Chinese politics and political thought across east Asia. Confucius (Kongzi in Mandarin), along with his immediate successors Mencius (Mengzi, 372-289 BCE) and Xunzi (3rd century BCE), identified a practice that would combat rudeness, *li*. *Li* has been translated in various ways into English, with different translations characterizing the expansive nature of this public activity. 'Ritual' and 'rite' are two of the most common translations, suggesting that Confucianism, the school emerging from the work of Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi, perceived moral significance in formal public ceremonies. But *li* is also rendered as 'etiquette,' 'manners,' 'propriety,' or 'decorum,' giving another sense of what this term means: the informal, habitual actions, courtesies, and responses that structure interpersonal life across a wide range of acts, ceremonies, and social exchanges.¹⁵

¹⁵ Olberding translates *li* as 'etiquette,' 'manners,' and 'civility,' but for this short paper I adopt a single term, 'ritual,' to encompass all instances of *li*. This choice draws on Herbert Fingarette's argument that Confucians understood *li*, though a set of mostly secular acts, as sacred or divine (*The Secular as Sacred*).

Examining several rituals reveals both the diversity of *li* and its moral potential. The ancient Chinese shared many rites familiar today—those surrounding birth, death, and marriage—while political and cultural life was also structured by formal ceremonies, including the inauguration of a new ruler, seasonal celebrations, and the commemoration of significant past events. Both ancient and contemporary ritual includes informal manners governing eating, conversation, greeting, dress, and comportment (p. 93). Such practices can play a role in addressing injustice,¹⁶ whether by cultivating habits that attune individuals to subtle social cues of racial discomfort or by encouraging practices like listening without interruption—an issue that has notably plagued male members of the Supreme Court.

III. Ritual and Success: Is Rudeness Latent in the Hayekian Tradition?

Even the most minimal account reveals ritual's significance, for it structures public action, the fundamental mode of human interaction with the world. From formal rites to banal manners, ritual

¹⁶ See especially "[The Moral Gravity of Mere Trifles](#)" by Amy Olberding.

requires common interaction with others that is sufficiently regular and significant enough to constitute a deep part of human existence. Most importantly, ritual creates a moral possibility space by providing a liminal stage on which individuals act and react. Routine interaction generates both expected and unexpected exchanges, through which events reveal or disclose others' feelings, attitudes, and orientations, as well as relevant social facts, including important situational factors and the content of social norms.

Societies also require mechanisms to constrain inappropriate behavior (especially rudeness), to cultivate moral sensibilities, and to provide exemplars capable of inspiring ethical conduct. Ritual serves these functions by educating individuals as they develop as moral agents, testing character and virtue, and offering guidance about how one ought to act through encounters with exemplars and experiences of both good and evil. Participation in ritualized social activity thus allows individuals to test, critique, and refine their desires, beliefs, and actions across a wide range of contexts, relationships, and roles. What Olberding and the Confucians provide to subvert rudeness and foster society is a platform that allows humanity to

experience morality in all its splendor and ignominy, replete with a variety of means to combat incivility and promote pro-social, ethical actions.

To return to the question posed in the introduction: do Hayekians—or our fellow political travelers—engage in, or find themselves tempted towards, forms of incorrigible rudeness ranging from mere incivility to outright inhumanity, conduct that Olberding and Confucian thinkers condemn as antithetical to ritual? There are substantial reasons to think that rudeness, or a tendency towards rudeness, may be endemic to our political worldview. The first thinkers who aligned with Hayek's thought—the Daoists, whose philosophy was inspired by Laozi (600-400 BCE) and Zhuangzi (369-286 BCE)—found Confucian ideals wanting. Their solution was to avoid society and politics as much as possible, frequently through physical removal. Versions of this approach have appealed to some Hayekians, leading at best to alienation from, and at worst disdain for, social life. The Daoist rejection of social orthodoxy mirrors the unorthodox character of the Hayekian vision itself, which already unsettles many of its contemporaries even in the absence of antisocial behavior. Unfortunately, Hayekian ideals tend to attract

individuals, especially our contemporaneous peers, who wallow in simplistic yet divisive ideas and idealize loutish conversations as the sole form of authentic free thought, further undermining social engagement with Hayek.

Psychology may underlie some of this rudeness: reflecting the research of other experts, Johnathan Haidt’s work has shown that the moral foundation¹⁷ for most Hayekian libertarians is liberty; other moral foundations—including ingroup, harm, and authority—are valued far less than liberty. This profile can incline individuals away from social attunement and toward isolation. When liberty is treated as the sole or primary ground of moral value, it becomes easy to fixate on self-interest and individual action at the expense of cooperation and public life as central sites of moral concern. It is therefore unremarkable that several 20th century thinkers associated with Hayek fixated on the self as

¹⁷ For a general overview of Haidt’s work on libertarian morality, see “[Libertarian Psychology](#),” a speech by Haidt for the Cato Institute, “[A Look at Libertarian Morality](#),” an anonymous primer on Haidt’s libertarian psychology work from the Center for Mind and Culture, and “[Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians](#),” a peer reviewed article by Haidt, Ditto, Koleva, Graham, and Iyer.

central for morality or behaved in anti-social ways. Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism defends selfishness as the foundation of ethics, while Robert Nozick's work, particularly his account of holdings and his characterization of the associated Wilt Chamberland thought experiment, can be too easily pilloried in the same fashion. Murray Rothbard swung between extreme left and right associations, supporting institutions that, whatever their rectitude, fell outside of social norms and actively promoted extreme, anti-social behavior.

Perhaps our political worldview is not as threatened by rudeness as has been suggested. If so, this should serve as a clarion call: to move further away from incorrigible rudeness and actively engage in one of civilization's most vital practices—ritual. Ritual embodies culture's ethical vitality, the ongoing reflection on what ought to be done, and the development of the capacities necessary to act rightly. Those who reject ritual appear to society as moral aliens—at best, unless they have already displayed incivility. Society's approach to the civic alien becomes an existential challenge: to survive, a group must determine whether an individual may become beastly or is simply an uninterested free rider. Ritual functions as a sensitive barometer,

revealing the morally significant dimensions of a person. Without this measure, social interaction remains limited until the individual participates in ritual and demonstrates their ethical capacities.

IV. Game Theory and Rudeness—Incorrigible Rudeness as a Strategy

I expect that more than a few readers will reject the problem of rudeness, the need for ritual, or the Confucian framework entirely. When Western ethicists consider *li*, they typically do so through the lenses of consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics, analyzing actions based upon consequences, rules, and virtues. The result tends to treat ritual as an immaterial Eastern obsession. This leads to an objection to Confucius's fixation on ritual: we in the West cannot feel its conceptual or phenomenological pull; therefore, it is unimportant for morality. Additional critiques of ritual portray it as an ad hoc category—why, for instance, should rites and manners belong to the same set of actions? Critics also argue that ritual can be reduced to other morally relevant features, such as rules, virtues, or some combination, or dismiss it as dull, specious, or trivial.

Adopting a game-theoretic framework allows incorrigible rudeness to be analyzed as strategic behavior, emphasizing its formal and interactive features—quantifiable through incentives, payoffs, and coordination—rather than its qualitative and normative dimensions, including those discussed in accounts of ritual. Game theory considers situations where individuals make decisions that affect one another's outcomes. Actions (or moves) are choices made at the moment when a player must decide what to do next (a player's decision point), strategies specify which action to take at every decision point, and games consist of players, their available strategies, and outcomes that arise from combining players' strategies, with different games varying in structure and the set of possible payoffs.

A rude individual can be modeled as pursuing a goal-oriented strategy—whether political, social, or philosophical—across repeated interactions. Their approach focuses on strategies that are best responses, choices that cannot be unilaterally improved and maximize payoffs, given the actions of others. Such individuals promote games and game environments that favor rudeness by exploiting informational asymmetries, remaining strategically unpredictable, and diminishing the

effectiveness of social sanctions. What makes such a player incorrigible is that they prioritize this goal-driven strategy over social norms or cooperative conventions, specifically in coordination games where multiple equilibria exist and mutual benefit is generally attainable. In the Driving Game, for example, the goal-oriented player will deliberately shape the outcome toward their preferred equilibrium, rather than following established conventions, using their behavior strategically to realize personal objectives.

Incorrigibly rude individuals steer games toward Nash equilibria that serve their goals—stable strategy profiles where no player can improve their payoff unilaterally. Pareto optimal outcomes, where no player can be made better off without harming another, only benefit the rude player if they align with individual incentives. In practice, players typically operate in repeated, iterated games, attempting to predict others' future strategies, in part by assessing their trustworthiness. As noted in Sections II and III and elaborated below, coordination is central to grasping incorrigible rudeness and relies upon mutual knowledge of one's own strategy, others' strategies, and relevant facts about the game. It also depends on common

knowledge: each player understands other players' strategies and reasoning, as well as what they know about what others know. This higher-order information enables players to anticipate others' actions and coordinate strategically.

Our incorrigibly rude person's goal of preference maximization over all games requires subtlety: sometimes the payoff for a game will be to increase the probability of future game dominance through asserting control or bullying, though short term losses may be required to retain one's reputation and avoid social sanction. Risk is inherent in ensuring that Nash equilibria predominate, which may require modifying different conditions across games. Such modification comes by pursuing games that favor rudeness, through making common and mutual information less prevalent, being difficult to predict for future games and strategies, and acting in ways to reduce the effectiveness of penalties against seeming anti-social.

Which games are preferred? Those that grant disproportionate control over outcomes. The Dictator Game, in which one player unilaterally determines the allocation of resources, and

zero-sum games, which reward dominance through pure competition, are especially attractive to rude, goal-oriented players. Games such as Chicken are also favorable, as they reward threats, bravado, and refusal to yield; aggressive strategies can push opponents toward less desirable equilibria. In the Tragedy of the Commons, an uncivil player can exploit cooperative norms by extracting more than the socially optimal share, benefiting from others' restraint while contributing to collective loss. The Prisoner's Dilemma is similarly useful in single-shot or limited repeated interactions: although the structure and payoffs are common knowledge, defection remains the dominant strategy and leads to a Nash equilibrium. This allows the rude player to exploit others' willingness to cooperate or to feign pro-sociality by encouraging cooperation before defecting when sanctions are unlikely.

V. Incorrigible Rudeness and Infectious Coordination

Having clarified the quantitative dimensions of the rude individual's approach to games, we are now in a position to integrate these findings with the qualitative analyses of Olberding and Confucius to

demonstrate how incorrigible rudeness undermines cooperation and births infelicitous coordination. Rarely discussed in the relevant literature, infelicitous coordination characterizes the incorrigibly rude person.¹⁸

In philosophy of language, following John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*,¹⁹ infelicity refers to a speech act that fails—not because it is grammatically incorrect, but because it is performed improperly (a misfire) or incompletely (an abuse) in the relevant circumstances (14–23). As Austin emphasizes (94–107; 144–146), words are not only descriptive but also performative: through speaking, we do things. He distinguishes between three aspects of speech acts: there is the locutionary act, what is said, the content of speech; the illocutionary act, what is done or intended through speaking; and the perlocutionary act (or effect), the impact speech has on hearers. Coordination usually occurs through commissives—promises, agreements, or other similar illocutions that commit us to future actions. Infelicities compromise coordination by causing the

¹⁸ As discussed by Poenicke (“[Infelicitous Coordination: The Significance of Knobe and Side-Effect Effects for Kleros Arbitration](#)”), the concept is significant for the legal field.

¹⁹ Austin, John L. 1955. [How to Do Things with Words](#).

resulting interaction to fail. For instance, two individuals may attempt to cooperate via a promise, achieving an outcome desirable to all parties. However, if the promise suffers a misfire—because the conditions for the speech act are unmet—or an abuse, producing a flawed or insincere act of promising, the mutual action is disrupted, resulting in coordination that is infelicitous due to being incomplete or unreliable.

Coordination may appear to preclude infelicities so long as both parties' desired outcomes are achieved. However, when a desired result is brought about through a speech act that is inappropriate for coordination—namely, a misfire or an abuse of promising—the coordination itself is infelicitous. Although the practical effects of coordination may still be obtained, the underlying speech act either fails to generate the relevant social fact (in the case of a misfire) or generates it in a way that permits noncompliance (in the case of an abuse).

An example drawn from marriage illustrates this point. For a union to be legally recognized, the parties must coordinate their actions in accordance with specific legal requirements, which may be secular or religious. Suppose a couple prefers a

sacred ceremony but believes that only a secular ceremony will confer legal recognition. They therefore schedule both. Unbeknownst to them, the religious ceremony alone satisfies the legal criteria, rendering their first, preferred ceremony legally binding and the second redundant. Although the desired outcome—a legal marriage—is achieved, the coordination is flawed: the second ceremony produces an infelicitous misfire, since the social fact it aims to create has already been brought about.

Return now to our incorrigibly rude individual. Based upon the analyses in the previous sections, we can gain a clearer sense of how coordination emerges from the foundations of social life: language and interaction. Misfires and abuses are the hallmarks of coordinating with the rude, ranging from overt unkindness to a deliberate disinterest in participating in social activities essential for building trust, predictability, and common knowledge. Although the forms of rudeness differ, their impact on coordination is similar: they disrupt the fulfillment of promises and other actions necessary for effective social cooperation.

For the ferociously rude person, who takes slurring as key to success, any form of coordination is

challenging. Intentional cruelty, insults, and bullying reveal a lack of respect for persons or groups. These actions signal that the player would exploit advantages to retain control over others, even if that made cooperation unlikely. Common knowledge depends on understanding other players' intentions; without it, coordination misfires—partners cannot discern whether the rude individual is genuinely coordinating or merely delivering a promise, joke, or command. Rudeness also manifests in the betrayal of trust: liars, gossipers, and double-crossers leave others uncertain about whether future cooperation is possible. Occasionally, cooperation with an insincere promiser may succeed, particularly when the promise serves the rude individual's future strategic ends.

Rudeness can further appear in ignoring or diminishing suffering, or in supporting institutions or practices that inflict systematic harm. For such unemphatic individuals, coordination may be completed through a declaration—fixing what the other person must do—or through directives, commands, or warnings. Such coordination is fragile because it relies upon the rude agent's continued dominance. More troublingly, when

cooperation is conditional on a player's continued disempowerment, it becomes abusive: the non-rude individual cannot reasonably be expected to cooperate when the result leaves them powerless, disciplined, or otherwise constrained. In these cases, cooperation cannot truly be achieved, resulting in infelicitous coordination.

For our intentionally uninterested individual, coordinating with them would be like interacting with the alien, uninterested in ritual, discussed in section III; for the same reasons as with the furiously rude player, infelicitous coordination is likely to result. Without active engagement in prior games, other players cannot reliably determine whether to trust or coordinate with this ET-like actor, and the lack of participation undermines the development of common knowledge about their intentions. Crucially, this intentionally uninterested individual is incorrigibly rude: they prioritize goal-oriented strategies over mutual benefit and cooperation, work to weaken the effectiveness of penalties for apparent anti-social behavior, and create game environments that favor rudeness. Over repeated interactions, such a player will encounter few opportunities for successful cooperation, while

frequent misfires and abuses render coordination unreliable and unstable.

VI. Why Do We Lose?

What is the result of coordinating with the incorrigibly rude? Unfortunately, there is little reason to expect coordination with these players to evolve beyond fragile, short-lived cooperation. The most likely outcome would be frequent clumsy, deficient coordination, especially if rudeness became a popular strategy. This aligns with game-theoretic expectations: a strategy that prioritizes maximizing selfish payoffs inherently devalues mutual benefit, treating other players not as partners in cooperation but as constraints on one's own outcomes.

The Confucian framework offers a vivid portrayal of the incorrigibly rude: such individuals are either uninterested in or incapable of engaging in minor manners, display deficient attitudes, virtues, and other morally relevant traits, and behave in highly anti-social and unempathetic ways. The game-theoretic analysis approaches the same problem from a different angle, modeling rudeness as a strategic choice across interactions, yet ultimately paints a very similar picture of how such

a truculent player engages with others. Finally, by integrating insights from both analyses and applying them to language and coordination, the paper offers a third perspective—distinct and informative, yet coherent and complementary with the previous approaches. Analyzing rudeness through language, the abuses and misfires that constitute infelicities, and the many ways rudeness disrupts social interaction brings us back to the themes of the first section, including civility, vice, and trust.²⁰

A significant question remains: how likely is the incorrigibly rude individual? If we try to picture the human being most prone to the kind of rudeness described in this paper, our imaginations conjure dictators, cutthroats, or others who resist any need for genuine, non-coerced cooperation for success.²¹ Yet the Hayekian “fish” rots from the bottom up—shaped first by unconscious patterns inherited from previous generations and ultimately reflected

²⁰ Ritual encourages pro-social strategies and prescribes behaviors that facilitate coordination, build trust, and create common knowledge among participants. The Confucian doctrine of the rectification of the names ([*The Analects of Confucius*, 13.3](#)) links language, action, and sociality in ways that the text only hints at. Space constraints prevent a full exploration of these additional connections.

²¹ This may be the mechanism by which the worst get on top.

in the moral rules and traditions that structure our shared intellectual life and ways of participating in society.²² The history of our political tradition—beginning with Daoism and ending in the present—reveals a conceptual trend that goes beyond worries about collectivism, altruism, or egalitarianism to a deeper discomfort with the idea of being part of a group or a collective activity. This tendency is reinforced when Hayek’s vision is articulated on the conceptual foundation of the ineffectual individual, conceived as solitary thinker and actor. Haidt’s work explains why this antisocial predilection exists across intellectuals who work in the Hayekian tradition or agree with him on important points.

If we recognize the potential for rude corruption in our history, friends, and fellow travelers, then incorrigible rudeness becomes increasingly likely in an era where disagreement and social change collide with disruptive technologies. Evidence of this trend is already apparent: campaigners for a Hayekian homeland explicitly sort potential neighbors through rudeness²³; legislation aligned

²² Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 61-63.

²³ Libertarian Party of NH (@LPNH)
<https://x.com/LPNH/status/2021232246766592079>.

with Hayek’s thought is advanced by legislators promoting the stupidest bigotry²⁴; and our “king makers” support a political movement that has made cruelty and boorishness a political strategy.²⁵ Hayek’s vision cannot survive if we confront critics—or society at large—with unrelenting rudeness.

Paul Poenicke is a trained philosopher, specializing in social epistemology and social-political philosophy. Send mail to him at ppoenicke@gmail.com.

²⁴ Libertarian Party of NH (@LPNH)
<https://x.com/LPNH/status/2020540707451068531> and
travis4nh (@travis4nh)
<https://x.com/travis4nh/status/2020902359522505066>.

²⁵ Real Angela McArdle (@RealAngelaMc)
<https://x.com/RealAngelaMc>