

Politeness

excerpted from André Comte-Sponville, (trans. Catherine Temerson), *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, (London: William Heinemann, 2001)

Politeness is the first virtue, and the origin of perhaps all of the others. . . .

It can clothe both the best and the worst, which makes it suspect. Politeness is artifice and we rightly tend to be wary of artifice; it is an adornment and we tend to be wary of adornments. Diderot speaks of the "insulting politeness" of those on high; one might also mention the obsequiousness or servile politeness of those below.

What is so disturbing about the polite bastard? It isn't hypocrisy, since a polite bastard *is* polite. The polite torturer is nevertheless a torturer. Just as blood is more visible on white gloves, so horror is more apparent when it is civilized.

I have digressed, perhaps, but not so much by accident as out of vigilance: the important thing about politeness is, first of all, not to be taken in by it. **Politeness is not virtue and cannot take the place of virtue.**

In that case, why call it the first of virtues, the origin of all the others? The contradiction is not as great as it may appear to be. The origin of the virtues cannot be a virtue (for if it were, it would itself require an origin).

Politeness comes before the others in time rather than in importance. It serves as a foundation for the moral development of the individual. A child does not have moral standards. However, it does discover quite early on "prohibitions." "Don't do that: it's nasty; it's bad; it's not nice; it's naughty . . ." Or else, "It's dangerous." Very soon the child learns to distinguish between what's merely bad (a misdeed) and what is also bad *for* him (a danger), between the hateful and the harmful. A misdeed is a strictly human evil, an evil that does no harm (at least not to the person who commits it), and evil without immediate or intrinsic danger. Some things are allowed, some things are forbidden. The rule suffices; it precedes judgment and is the basis for it. But then does the rule have no foundation other than convention, no justification other than usage and the respect for usage? Yes, it is a *de facto* rule, a rule of pure form, a rule of politeness! Don't say bad words; don't interrupt people; don't shove; don't steal; don't lie. To the child, all these prohibitions appear identical ("It's not nice"). The distinctions between the ethical and the aesthetic will come only later, and gradually. **Politeness thus precedes morality, or rather, morality at first is nothing more than politeness: a compliance with usage and its established rules . . . a compliance with the world and the ways of the world.**

Now, **a principle of Kantian ethics is that one cannot deduce what one should do from what is done.** Yet the child in his early years is obliged to just that, and it is only in this way that he becomes human. Kant himself concedes as much. "Man can

only become man by education," he writes. "He is merely what education makes him," and the process begins with **discipline**, which "changes animal nature into human nature." What better way to say it? **Custom precedes value; obedience, respect; and imitation, duty.** Hence politeness ("one doesn't do that") precedes morality ("one shouldn't do that"); morality only comes into being little by little, as an internalized politeness that has freed itself from considerations of appearance and interest and focuses entirely on intentions (which politeness doesn't concern itself with). . . **Good manners precede and prepare the way for good deeds.** Morality is like a politeness of the soul, an etiquette of the inner life, a code of duties, a ceremonial of the essential. Conversely, politeness can be likened to a morality of the body, an ethics of comportment, a code for life in society, a ceremonial of the inessential.

So morality starts at the bottom – with politeness. But it has to start somewhere. There are no natural virtues; hence we must become virtuous. How? "For the things we have to learn before we can do them," **Aristotle explains, "we learn by doing them."** Yet how can we do them, if we haven't learned them? There are two ways out of this circular causality: apriority is one way, politeness is the other. But apriority is beyond our reach; politeness is not. "We become just," Aristotle continues, "by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts." Through habit, Aristotle seems to say, but that answer is obviously inadequate: a habit presupposes the prior existence of what we would be making a habit of and therefore cannot account for it. **Kant provides a more helpful answer.** For him, these first semblances of virtue can be explained in terms of discipline, in other words, as a product of external constraint. . . . **discipline . . . a respect for usages and good manners.** . . . To say "please" or "excuse me" is to pretend to be respectful; to say "thank you" is to pretend to be grateful. And it is with this show of respect and gratitude that both respect and gratitude begin. Just as nature imitates art, morality imitates politeness, which imitates morality. If we become moral, . . . it is not through virtue, but through education, not for goodness' sake but for form's sake, not for moral reasons but for reasons of politeness. Morality is first artifice, then artifact. By imitating virtue we become virtuous. "For when men play these roles," writes Kant, "virtues are gradually established, whose appearance had up until now only been affected. These virtues ultimately will become part of the actor's disposition." . . . "States of character arise out of like activities," says Aristotle. Politeness is that pretense, or semblance, of virtue from which the virtues arise.

We end up resembling what we imitate, and politeness imperceptibly leads – or can lead – to morality. **Every parent knows this; it's called bringing up one's children.** I am well aware that politeness is not everything, nor even the essential thing. Yet the fact remains that, in everyday language, being *well brought up* means first of all being polite, which is highly revealing. . . . The word *training* rubs us the wrong way, I know; but who could do without it? **Love is not enough when it comes to bringing up children; it's not even enough to make them lovable or loving.** Politeness isn't enough either, and that is why both politeness and love are needed. Family upbringing is located, it seems to me, between these two poles. . . .

Politeness, then, is not a virtue, but a simulacrum that imitates virtue (in adults) and paves the way for it (in children). **Politeness in the child may not be different in nature**

from politeness in the adult, but it is different in its significance. In the child, it is essential; in the adult it is inessential. What could be worse than an ill-mannered child, except perhaps a wicked adult? **We aren't children anymore.** We know how to love, how to will, and how to judge. And so we are capable of virtue, and of love, for which politeness is no substitute. . . . There are even some people whose politeness disturbs us in its perfection. Indeed, consummate politeness smacks of insincerity, for honesty sometimes demands that we displease, shock, or offend those around us. We all know people like this, people who, for all their honesty, will remain prisoners of good manners all their lives, not revealing themselves to others except from behind the glazed screen of politeness, as though having once and for all confused truth and decorum. . . . **It is better to be too honest to be polite than to be too polite to be honest!**

There is more to life than good manners; and politeness is not morality. Yet it is not nothing. Politeness is a small thing that paves the way for great things. . . . A self-satisfied politeness, one that takes itself too seriously and believes in itself, is one that, taken in by its own manners, fall short of the very rules it prescribes. Self-satisfaction is always impolite.

Philosophers will argue over whether form isn't really everything, whether the distinction between morality and politeness isn't merely an illusion. It could be that usage and respect is all there is – that politeness *is* everything. . . . Yet I believe nothing of the sort. Love holds its own, and so does gentleness and so does compassion. Politeness is not everything; indeed it is almost nothing. *Almost*, but not quite; for man, too, is *almost* an animal.