

Civil Occasions: Polished Surfaces, Hard Grace, Wit, and Tact

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I thank Megan Laverty for reacquainting me with the topic of civility and Aristotle, who has long been a favorite of etiquette books. Aristotle's position, in excessively large and detailed books, essentially puts the minutiae of dinner, social, and public rituals under erasure. Authors draw upon him in order to caution that etiquette, in the wrong hands, is simply the veneer of goodness, and that imitation cannot function as the replacement for goodness. Polish is not really what they, or Aristotle, are after. So I will part company with Laverty, hopefully gracefully, on the claim that civility is a good, even "irrespective of whether it secures ethical character or a just democracy," simply because if it does not do those things, then it will not enable companionability. Unethical or undemocratic companionate interaction would likely be occasions for inspiring suspicion, not joy.

Indeed, Laverty's argument would be strengthened by a more robust link to ethics and justice. I begin with Aristotle's and John Stuart Mill's attempts to sketch out how to balance beautiful manners with the aim of encouraging good relations with one's fellow citizens. I do so because, without the clarity of that goal, civility becomes empty ritual that soothes, but does not facilitate, communication. As much as we may enjoy watching the play of surfaces, when people are civil simply in order to be civil, civility slides into self-referential gesture. Like Aristotle's description of the buffoon who cannot control her impulse to humor in any situation, it seems to me that there ought to be some sort of vice associated with the compulsive, facile civility that we call etiquette. Etiquette is a game of superiority; rather than inviting the interlocutor to take a mutual journey, its practices only circumscribe behavior.¹ Yes, etiquette does feel pleasant to some people: usually the ones who have mastered the ritual. I will conclude by returning to Laverty's discussion of grace and tact, because there she builds a case for shifting our sense of civil relations into closer proximity, touching and responding to one another sensitively, not stiltedly — and that is the more robust connection that can enhance her point.

GESTURE WITHOUT AIM

Laverty argues for the place of pleasantries in interactions: even a shallow civility can "enact cheerfulness." But the shallowness of this version of civility defeats the purpose of interaction among diverse people, whose interaction may create friction. To mix lubricating fluids: polish may grease the social wheels, but because the polished pleasantries become habits in themselves, and not markers of a deeper commitment, they remain empty gestures that are potentially dangerous. The sharper edge of this shallow dissembling can easily become cutting — cutting itself being a much debated practice of etiquette: Should one acknowledge people one does not like, or to whom one has not been properly introduced? One must keep up appearances in order to enact one's membership in a particular social field, and this practice does not enable robust engagement with diverse others.

Mill discusses the need for public dispute of ideas, explaining that with liberty of expression comes the possibility that people will vigorously and publicly disagree, because the larger purposes of truth, freedom, and a just society require a willingness to be open to argument and dispute.² But he also points out that it is more often the dissenting opinion that is required to be civil and thus must cast itself in the least offensive way, while the dominant opinion gets to indulge in “unmeasured vituperation.”³ Bringing differences into closer relations requires new forms of interaction that are more sensitive to deviations: “even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom, is better than a blind and simple mechanical adhesion to it.”⁴

Concord for its own sake does not enable robust civil relations. Aristotle disapproves of the studied avoidance of conflict and disapproves of the “timidity” that is indicated by “conceal[ing] one’s feelings.”⁵ When discussing the gentle man he says,

It is not easy to determine in what manner, with what person, on what occasion, and for how long a time one ought to be angry... we do not blame a man for straying a little either toward the more or toward the less... what deserves praise is the media characteristic that makes us show anger at the right people, on the right occasions, in the right manner.⁶

In other words, there is a place for disruption, and it ought not to be curtailed by useless civility.

ACHIEVING GRACE

Laverty nicely reembodies civil interaction by arguing that interactions can themselves become objects of wonder, when they are done gracefully. Polishing is hard work, and Laverty reminds us that social grace is recognized as an “achievement.” Asserting that this form of communication and interaction is recognizable and difficult work helps Laverty to make a case for why civility — particularly in terms of grace and tact — deserves special attention. Her point also helps to explain the proliferation of etiquette books that are written by class, race, and gender climbers who expend considerable effort in finding a way into social networks that are defined by power and privilege. So rather than “enacting cheerfulness,” her more robust conception of civility is a site of labor where that labor is made explicit, and where recognition of the labor of the interaction becomes part of the relationship.

To work at grace, and to be able to share with one’s interlocutors the sense that this was work, but pleasurable work, demonstrates that one cares about the interaction to the point of wanting to expend energy on making it work well. Sometimes, too, the abrupt and startling are just as noticeable as the achievements.

TOUCHING WIT

Laverty follows her discussion of grace with tact, bringing the relationally of grace more firmly into center stage. Because tact is about touch, the one who is the object of that touch needs to indicate that they experience the tactful act — the right touch is not just right for the one touching. If tact means to avoid giving offense, then it also means recognizing that one can give offense, and thus so can one’s interlocutors. Tact, like civility, means not saying all that one has to say, but I think that most people recognize that tact is not just sensitivity, but the mark of something

lacking — the restraint and pause of something unsaid. I may be pushing the distinction here, but only because people are so used to manners being fairly empty. The occasion in which one is tactful also shows that there is the potential for offense. Tact, then, may be the agreement between people that their generosity toward one another is itself an activity, and that their mutual engagement in that action deserves recognition and, perhaps, mutual pleasure. The missing or potential offense is more clearly present here than in the empty gestures of mannered interaction, and it is here that I see Laverty building to a robust civility that entails a metalevel awareness of how interactions are structured.

Aristotle begins his discussion of tact by analyzing wit,⁷ implying that, in each case, there is a similar relationship between the speaker and interlocutor. He remarks that witty people shift their ideas and characters, “which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that: for such sallies are thought to be movements of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements, so too are characters.”⁸ Things turn, and the turning of ideas and personalities creates uncertainty, but interlocutors know that they are experiencing more than seems to be said, and that they, too, have a part in this close form of conversational relationship. Because wit and tact are structures that underlie particular practices of communication, they encourage interlocutors to work, both at looking for meaning beyond their opening gestures, and at deriving pleasure from that labor. Tact, like wit, requires more than spectatorship and mindless repetition of custom; wit and tact draw people into close proximity to one another. Robust civility, then, turns out to be a joke, but a good one.

1. Cris Mayo, “The Bind that Ties: Civility and Social Difference,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2002): 169–186.

2. John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty,” in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60.

3. *Ibid.*, 61.

4. *Ibid.*, 66.

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1775.

6. *Ibid.*, 1777.

7. The passage on tact starts with wit as the preferred middle state of this communicative virtue and then says: “To the middle state belongs also tact: it is the mark of a tactful man to say and listen to things as befit a good and well-bred man: for there are some things that it befits a man to say and to hear by way of jest.” *Ibid.*, 1780.

8. *Ibid.*