

Politeness

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Henri Bergson

Dear students, I would not be living up to a sacred tradition if I did not first apologize for interfering with your well-deserved vacation. I especially would be lacking in Politeness, which is exactly the subject about which I would like to speak with you.

I admit that I have some misgivings about engaging in a lecture on morals at this festive event. But all things considered, I think that you will forgive me, first because the speech will be short and then because it's the last one today, and finally perhaps also you will not have to learn it.

Therefore, I would like to investigate with you that in which true politeness consists. Is it a kind of knowledge, an art, or a virtue? Some people imagine that politeness consists in knowing how to greet, enter and exit a room, how to sit, and how to observe, in all circumstances, the precepts that are so self-righteously listed in the Codes of child-like and decent civility. If that was all that politeness amounted to, we might think many primitive peoples are more polite than we are, since the complicated nature of their ceremonies astonishes those who travel to see them. We limit ourselves to removing our hats; they take off their sandals and even some of their clothes in order to better indicate their considerateness. The tone with which we say to the first person who comes along, "how do you do?" is enough for him to understand that the last thing we are asking about is his health. Don't believe that such ways of doing things would be tolerated by the Indians of South America. There, one person does not interact with another without exchanging with him, for around fifteen minutes, conventional forms of politeness, whose omission would be considered something like a mortal offense. The most civil people are not always the most civilized. It's still a question whether civility is the same as politeness and whether genuine politeness is ceremonial. The infinite precautions with which certain people surround themselves in order to speak with you seem calculated in order to keep you at a distance. Their politeness is really a kind

of varnish, but one of those varnishes that is too costly, making one afraid to go near it. You don't feel at ease when you encounter them by chance. You sense that they are egoists, proud, or indifferent. Soon, being unjust yourself, you interpret badly all of what they say and all of what they do. If they smile, you believe they smile because of pity. If they completely agree with you, it is done in order to be more quickly free of you. If they walk you to the door, it is in order to be better assured that you are really leaving. I do not mean that you have to break with the forms and formulas of civility. Of course, not to take account of these forms is the sign of a bad education. But I cannot believe that the ready-made formulas, which are learned by heart and effortlessly, which are suitable in the same way for the most stupid and the wisest, that inferior races respect as much and more than we do, I cannot believe that these formulas are the last word in politeness. What is politeness therefore and how are we going to define it?

At the bottom of true politeness, you will discover a feeling which is the love of equality. But there are really different ways of loving equality and of understanding it. The worst of all consists in taking no account of superior talent or of moral value. This way of understanding equality is a form of injustice, issuing from jealousy, from envy, or from an unconscious desire for domination. The equality that the just appeal to is an equality of relation, and consequently a proportion, between merit and recompense. Let us call politeness manners, if you like, or a certain art of testifying to each person, by means of his attitude and words, the esteem and consideration to which he has a right. Would we not say that this politeness expresses, in its own way, the love of equality?

Mental politeness is something else. Each person has particular dispositions that he has received from nature, and habits that he owes to the education he has received, to the profession he engages in, and to the situation he occupies in the world. These habits and dispositions are, most of the time, appropriate to the circumstances that have given rise to them. They give to our personality its form and its color. But precisely because they vary infinitely from one individual to another, there are no two humans who resemble each other. The diversity of characteristics, of tendencies, of acquired habits becomes accentuated insofar as a larger number of human generations succeed one another, insofar as the advancing civilization divides social work and moreover encloses each of us in the increasingly more strict limits of what we call an occupation or a profession. This infinite diversity of habits and dispositions must be considered something like a benefit, since it is the necessary result of progress accomplished by society.

But it is not without problems. The infinite diversity of habits and dispositions results in us feeling out of sorts when we are taken out of our habitual concerns. The diversity results in us not understanding each other. In a word, this division of social work, which strengthens the union of human beings on all the important points by putting them into contact with

one another, risks compromising the purely intellectual relations which should be the luxury and pleasure of civilized life. It seems then the power to contract lasting habits, appropriate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves and to the place that we claim to occupy in the world, calls forth consequently another faculty which corrects it or attenuates its effects, the faculty of renouncing, when necessary, the habits we have contracted or even the natural dispositions that we have been able to develop in ourselves, the faculty of putting ourselves in the place of others, of being interested in their concerns, of thinking their thoughts, of in a word living their life, and of forgetting ourselves.

Spiritual politeness especially consists in that, and this faculty is hardly anything other than a kind of intellectual flexibility. The person who is accomplished in the world knows how to speak to each person who interests him. He enters into the viewpoints of others without always adopting them. He understands everything without however excusing everything. What pleases us in him is the facility with which he circulates among feelings and ideas. It is also perhaps the art that he possesses when he speaks to us, of letting us believe that he would not be the same for everyone. For, what defines this very polite person is to prefer each of his friends over the others, and to succeed in this way in loving them equally. Thus a judge who is too rigid might cast doubt on this polite person's sincerity and candor. However, don't be deceived. There will always be the same distance between this refined politeness and obsequious hypocrisy as between the desire to serve people and the art of using them. This refined politeness originates – and I really mean this – from the desire to please. But don't we also find the desire to please at the bottom of grace?

I do not know if you have ever tried to analyze the feeling that comes about in the soul while watching, for example, a gracious dance performance? The first feeling is that of admiration for those who execute, with agility and as if there were being played, varied and rapid movements – without sudden jerks or jolts and without a gap – each of the poses being indicated in the one that preceded it and announced in those that are going to follow it. But there is something more. The feeling of the gracious dance performance enters into our feeling of grace. At the same time as there is a sympathy for the weightlessness of the artist, there is the idea that we are freeing ourselves of our weight and of our materiality. Enveloped in the rhythm of the artist's dance, we adopt the subtlety of the dancer's movement without participating in his effort. And, in this way, we rediscover the exquisite sensation of those dreams in which our body seems to have freed itself from its own weight, in which existence abandons resistance, and form its matter. Therefore what I'm saying is that we find again all the elements of physical grace in this politeness, which is a grace of the mind. Like grace, politeness awakens the idea of a limitless suppleness. Like grace, politeness makes a current of mobile and light sympathy pass

between souls. Like grace, finally, politeness transports us from this world where language is bolted to action, and the action itself to interest, into another, ideal world, in which words and actions overcome their utility and have no other objective than to please. Would we not say that this politeness with a thousand various aspects, which presupposes certain qualities of the heart and many qualities of the mind, which consists fundamentally in the perfect freedom of intelligence, is ideal politeness? Would we not say, as well, that the strictest moralists are lacking in grace when they demand a better politeness or some other kind of politeness?

I think we would not say this, my friends. Below this politeness, which is only a talent, I conceive another, which would be nearly a virtue. There are some timid souls, desirous for approval because they do not trust themselves. They connect the desire and the need to hear praise from others to a vague consciousness of their value. Is this vanity or is it modesty? I don't know the answer to this question. However, while we find the smug person repulsive because of his pretention to impose on others the good opinion he has of himself, we find rather attractive those who anxiously wait to have this beneficial opinion, which we really wanted to give to them, attributed to their value. A deserved word of praise, a word of friendship, will be able to have the effect on these souls of a ray of sunshine opening out onto a desolate countryside. Like the ray of sunshine, a friendly word will make them take up life, and even, having more effects, at times it will make the flowers which would be dried up without sunshine bear fruit. In contrast, an involuntary allusion, a word of blame coming out of the mouth of an authority can throw us into a sadness, which, disappointed with ourselves and despairing of the future, makes us see all the avenues of life close up before us. And just as the infinitely small crystal when it falls into a supersaturated solution calls to itself the immense multitude of scattered molecules, making the transparent liquid suddenly turn into an opaque and solid mass, likewise with the slightest indication of a reproach barely falling in the middle of these anxieties, all the apparently vanquished timidities and all the disappointments that were for an instant consoled, all the sadness floating on the surface, which were awaiting but one occasion in order to crystalize into a compact mass and make all of their weight weigh on a soul that has become inert and discouraged—with this one word of reproach all of these anxieties run from here and there, from a thousand diverse points and through every possible path to the bottom of the heart. Fortunately, this sensibility, which is a bit sickly, is something rare. Nevertheless, show me someone who has not felt, at certain moments, his self-esteem painfully affected and his expansiveness stopped immediately in its flight—these moments being so different from the one where a sweet harmony comes to penetrate the soul—because a word being slid into your ear, insinuating itself into the soul, and burrowing into the soul's most secret chambers, comes to strike this hidden string that cannot resonate unless every power of your being comes to be engaged and vibrate in unison. Would this not be,

my young students, the highest form of politeness, politeness of the heart, the one that we were calling a virtue? It is charity being exercised in the region of self-esteem, where it is as difficult to recognize an evil as it is difficult to want to cure the evil. An immense natural goodness is at the bottom of this charity. But perhaps this goodness would remain without any effects if the penetrating power of the mind were not connected to it, a kind of finesse and a deep knowledge of the human heart.

It seems therefore, in all of its forms, spiritual politeness, politeness of manners, and politeness of the heart, inserts us into an ideal republic, a genuine city of spirits in which freedom would be the liberation of intelligence, and in which equality would be an equitable distribution of consideration, and fraternity would become a sympathy for the suffering that one's sensibility undergoes. It would extend justice and charity beyond the tangible world. To our everyday lives in which relations of utility are established between humans, it would add the subtle attraction of a work of art. Understood in this way, politeness calls for the interaction of the mind and the heart. This is to say that politeness is hardly taught. But if something can be predisposed to it, this would be disinterested studies, and that means the studies you undertake here, my students, studies in the classics.

The eminent schoolmaster who has done us the honor of presiding over this event has spoken somewhere about the sympathy that, long ago, the cult of classic antiquity maintained among the literatures of all countries.¹ Then there were uncontested works of beauty, and everyone agreed to admire them. We put something of ourselves in the authors we love. We love ourselves in them, and we even boast a bit about their glory, as when we participate, by thinking about it, in the reputation of an old friend who has become famous. Is it not true that the studies we do in common, and the memory that we preserve of them can bring together a society of minds of the same kind? At your age, my young students, memories come to be imprinted very quickly and very deeply in memory. If our most dear friends are the friends from childhood, this is perhaps because childhood memories are the most lasting, because friendship lives from memories, and because the very joys that humans alone have, whatever they might be, owe the best part of their seductiveness to a distant past whose freshness the joys bring back, for a few moment, to the person. Wouldn't these childhood memories, which are the ground of friendship and which are themselves like friends to us, become the great conciliators of minds and hearts, the light in which a genuinely national education unites the largest number of citizens through the things they admire in common? Then spiritual politeness would spread out all over, it would be generalized. But this would not be the artificial politeness to which the simple commerce with the world gives rise. This would be the politeness that emerges naturally from the agreement and the camaraderie of intelligence. Without exaggerating, could we not say that the best preparation for this spiritual

politeness is still the reading of the classics? The authors of the ancient world had devoted a love that is purer than ours to the ideas. They loved the ideas for themselves, instead of us loving them for what they give to us. For us, the idea is above all else a principle of action; for the ancients, it was an object of contemplation.

We should recall certain pages of Plato's dialogues. Here we find the delicious uselessness of the conversations where Socrates and his disciples appear less concerned to assert their opinions than to witness the spectacle of thought and even to play with thought. We press ourselves to find the goal, and our pursuit of ideas resembles a racetrack. The pursuit that the ancients undertook was more like taking a stroll; they willingly took their time as they walked on the path because they found the route to be beautiful. Finally, if our sense of morality is more profound than that of the ancients, if our justice is more precise and our charity greater, if we understand better what is serious and grave, and most above all else, the importance of life, the ancients had better sensed the seductiveness of life. It is by loving life that they made themselves loveable, and they loved life because they knew how to find beauty in it, and how, as Plato would say, to transform things into ideas. We should follow their example. If we no longer have the same kind of leisure through which we can enter into the contemplation of the beautiful, we should at least learn, in their school, the politeness of the mind and the art of finding life loveable.

Do I need to add that, on this point, philosophy fortunately completes the studies of literature? An ancient philosopher (Aristotle) has said that in a republic where all the citizens were friends of knowledge and of philosophical speculation all the citizens would be friends with one another. It seems that the philosopher did not understand by this that knowledge would put an end to debates and struggles. Rather he meant that, when they enter into pure ideas, debates lose their acrimony and struggles lose their violence. For, fundamentally, one idea is friends with the other one, and even with the opposite idea. Serious dissension always comes from the fact that we mix our coarse, human passions with the very ideas that provide what there is divine in us. Intolerance is perhaps only a kind of inaptitude in the attempt to isolate thought from action. It consists in making the ideas that other people have appear, not before reason alone, but before the appetites and the desires which are always noisily present with reason. Therefore, in order to detach our intelligence from the passions and in order to teach it to find itself in others, we have to show our intelligence clearly that the doctrines that are apparently the most opposite have a common principle. We have to show that the one doctrine emerges from the other in a slow evolution. We have to realize that when we get carried away against what we think is someone else's opinion, we also condemn our own opinion. We have to teach intelligence that error itself is the source of truth. This is what the teaching of philosophy shows us most clearly. This mental

disposition, which appears rather frequently in those who have immersed themselves in philosophy and which some at times have the affectation of confusing with skepticism, yes, this mental disposition, we would have to call it tolerance, impartiality, courtesy – and politeness. Politeness therefore is something other than a luxury. It is not only a nicety of virtue. Politeness would join force to grace when, communicating itself step by step, politeness would everywhere substitute debate for disputes. It would soften the shock of opposite opinions and it would lead citizens to know themselves better and to love one another. My young students, I'll finish with this piece of advice. Be aware that by cultivating your intelligence, by expanding your thought, and above all by exercising superior politeness, you are working to strengthen the connections and to fortify this union on which the future and greatness of our country depends.

¹ Boissier, "Les theories nouvelles du poème épique" *Revue des Deux-Monde* (février 1867).