

INTRODUCTION

On Being Becoming

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Book 1 of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* is a series of acknowledgements of gratitude for the specific gifts provided to the philosopher king by his family, his teachers, his friends, and even the gods themselves. As such, it could be seen as a simple literary device, a poetic conceit akin to the classical use of a dedication. Yet in this case, this particular formality embodies the rich dynamics of etiquette itself, and indicates the profound sense in which manners, mere gestures, can provide an armature for living ethically. For example, Marcus writes, "From Alexander the Platonist; not to say to anyone often or without necessity, nor write in a letter, *I am too busy*, nor in this fashion constantly plead urgent affairs as an excuse for evading the obligations entailed upon us by our relations towards those around us."¹ For Marcus, being rude, then, has an existential significance, one that implicates surfaces—in this case, *bad appearances*—within the depths of ethical complexity. In so doing, Marcus declares himself part of a renegade tradition that has dwelt within Western philosophy from its inception (what some might consider philosophy's shadow). This is the tradition that resists the temptation to baldly insist that appearance is one thing and reality another (a Platonist opens the thought here!), a tradition also inclined to equate ethics with aesthetics, living well with living beautifully and gracefully.

Etiquette, the field of multifarious prescriptions governing comportment in life's interactions, has been generally neglected by philosophers, who may be inclined to dismiss it as trivial, most specifically in contrast with ethics, which is where philosophers find the substantive issues. In its devotion to codes of behavior, etiquette may be a superficial extension of morals, but it seems far removed from serious ethical issues. Ethics is taken to be the site of life's real conflicts, while etiquette remains trapped within the shallow realm of mere appearance. Aiming toward coherence, and at least a provisional terminus, ethical inquiry offers the prospect of a comprehensive theory or stable set of principles. However, the disparate and apparently arbitrary codes of etiquette seem to confirm their inevitable relativism right on the surface, thereby circumventing hope for a serious theory from the outset, condemning analysis to endless fragmentation and indeterminate particularity. In short, while ethics offers principles, etiquette provides only precepts. This is the way the hierarchical relationship between them tends to get established. It is not our desire simply to reverse this hierarchy (an act that one might argue would only preserve it). Although we might seem to be engaged in a reversal, our ambitions are something different, since we want to upset things in order to preserve understanding, to move back in order to move ahead in exploring the outward practices that facilitate our capacity to live with each other, the practices that determine the difference between the appropriate and the offensive.

Philosophy has tended to grant absolute privilege to ethics over etiquette, placing the former alongside all of the traditional values favored by metaphysics (order, truth, rationality, mind, masculinity, depth, reality), while consigning the latter to metaphysics' familiar, divisive list of hazards and rejects (arbitrariness, mere opinion, irrationality, the body, femininity, surface, appearance). Ethics has been viewed as the principled foundation of the moral structures that pertain to life's real conflicts, leaving ethics' diminutive shadow, etiquette, to be relegated to the endlessly arbitrary sets of conventional codes that shape the superficial world of manners, a place to turn, perhaps, for advice on what to wear to a wedding or a funeral, but hardly a source for counsel on matters of life and death.

This book intends to challenge these traditional values, not in order to favor etiquette over ethics—not, as we have already said, simply to turn the tables—but to explore the various ways in which practice comes before theory, in which manners are morals, or as Mary

Wollstonecraft put it, “Manners and morals are so nearly allied that they have often been confounded.”²² To be blunt (but, we hope, not offensive), etiquette prefigures ethics, and ethics, the practice of living a good life, has always depended on the graceful relations for which etiquette provides a ticket to enter the domain of sociability.

Thus, the common starting point of all of the various elements comprising this book is a certain imperative, an insistence that etiquette must be addressed as something more than and other than just a diminutive form of ethics. An alternative, less metaphysical (less hierarchizing) reading may open up the possibility that in all of its superficiality, etiquette has substance for theoretical purchase, too, a substance worth cultivating in its own right, an enterprise that may in fact also have ramifications for ethics.

To begin with, the cosmetic codes provided by etiquette profoundly affect the functional organization of specific spheres of human activity and interactivity. Etiquette is, therefore, vital, in all senses of this powerful word. Simply consider the significance of greetings. The style in which one says “hello,” in any language, may initiate patterns of inclusion and exclusion, distance and intimacy, as we negotiate all of the names we have for each other, whether names of respect or of flattery, names of love and of optimistic expectations, hospitable names, the names by which we address our hosts, names of disdain or derision, even the insults we hurl at those who have offended us. Consider, too, the ramifications of a faux pas, such as the awkward forgetting of someone’s name. What tends to get dismissed as mere manners shapes the contours and borders of particular domains of existence, and cannot be skimmed off the surface by theory without falsifying the nature of the life in question.

This book considers the possibility that ethics relies on etiquette in ways previously ignored or underestimated by most philosophy. But one might ask whether such a consideration is really likely to make much headway. For us, this sort of move would only be a transitional maneuver, a transition that might lead to a new understanding of not only etiquette but also of the experience of ethics. The general assumption of the contents of this volume is that etiquette matters.

“Tact is a brief and modest word,” writes Alphonso Lingis, “but it designates the right way to speak or to be silent before our adolescent child in his anguish and before the excitement of two people in the nursing home who have fallen in love.”²³ The chapters in this book aim

to engage anguish and love on this side of the hypothetical, as the collective contents of the volume categorically constitute an exercise in eidetic variation on what Foucault thought of as the art of living well.

What does “living well” mean in this context? Contemplate the following familiar images, breaches, conflicts, imperatives, and notes of generosity and rudeness, all of which seem unavoidably to refer, oddly enough, to something like a universal. What makes you take offense? Some things do.

Automobile protocol, for instance, is not just about vehicular formalities. Consider the moment when lanes must merge. Consider what it means to “take turns” here, and the way people respond to jerks who rudely cut in line (maybe you are one of these jerks). The breach constituting “cutting in line” here has little to do with morality, but everything to do with patience and generosity, and therefore with a common understanding of what needs to be done, or, more precisely, should be done. Driving etiquette expresses the sense in which we can work together, because we must in order to make progress.

But rude behavior can be ameliorated: things set straight. The phrases “excuse me” or “I’m sorry” can compensate immediately for inadvertent clumsiness or negligence; timing, too, then is crucial, since apologies delayed are often apologies not genuinely offered . . . nor accepted.

When is it okay to eat in public? Picnic, okay. But in a bus or a subway it is always bad manners, bound to elicit glares of various forms—including jealousy—even though it is otherwise normally rude to stare (but then, of course, staring is quite different from glaring). Here, bad form is bad aesthetic; eating in the wrong situation is simply ugly. Appropriate or acceptable behavior clearly contrasts with a juridically conceived understanding of right and wrong. In short, in this situation, it is impolite to eat when others cannot.

And what about sexual etiquette? For instance, keeping track of when, where, with whom, and how many times is surely not an ethical question. That it matters, however, is a positive indication of the significance of etiquette, which in this case has to do with taking care of the other and the way the other feels, taking care, too, of oneself.

So somewhere between aesthetics and ethics is the philosophically significant domain of etiquette, which links the two, and ensures that the line between them is often difficult to discern. And this ambiguity may be more important to some cultures than to others. For example,

William Fenton writes, “There is a principle that students of the Iroquois must inevitably learn: the way a thing is done is often more important than the issue at stake.”⁴ Who says what, in what order? On some occasions, such protocol makes all of the difference. Who gets served first and last? Men? Women? Children? These are questions that really matter, sometimes maybe even more than proper moral issues, as Thorstein Veblen intimated when he wrote, “A breach of faith may be condoned, but a breach of decorum can not. ‘Manners maketh man.’ ”⁵

Of course, there is also the utter indeterminacy and disorientation of those moments lost beyond meaning precisely because etiquette can find no purchase, moments when the architectonic of cordiality, civility, and consideration are rendered inoperative, that is, when people just don’t care. It is perhaps only at times of such absence, of such lack, that etiquette is understood in its full social and political, that is to say, material merit (just like Heidegger’s broken hammer).

Some, therefore, might want to consider etiquette as ritual—ritual that binds, ritual that heals, ritual that sustains human interactions locally and globally. Tempting as this thought may be, we want to resist the desire to restrict etiquette to a question of formulaic or enforced codes. As Aristotle understood, good habits—and thus good manners—are gestures of grace beyond measure rather than of conformity to law as such, something truly fine. The practice of etiquette is not, finally, about mere compliance to external rules or static imperatives.

As the chapters in this volume suggest, etiquette is about the execution and performance of those opportunities for consideration of the other, whether stranger or friend, that emerge in everyday lived experience. Etiquette duly acknowledges the existence and necessity of boundaries while negotiating, respectfully traversing, and even transforming the conditions that allow one to become presentable, and thus allow one to extend oneself to the world, as we extend ourselves to you.

Notes

1. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, ed. and trans. C. R. Haines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 11.
2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 4.
3. Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 2.