

NEW MANUAL OF "POLITESSE" FOR USE BY YOUNG PEOPLE BY A FORMER DIRECTOR
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CONCERNING POLITESSE IN GENERAL

Civility is the art of living in the world. It consists of the exact observance of social conventions, and an unending care to avoid any expressions or mannerisms which might cause offence. Its aim is to make one appear considerate, generous, modest, affable and caring: in short, to be sociable at all times and towards all.

At its highest state of perfection, civility becomes politesse. It is not content with avoiding the giving of offence, but rather actively seeks that which pleases. Present in one's self-presentation as well as in one's physical make-up, in one's accent as well as in one's conversation, politesse crowns a gentle nature with charm; it moderates the severest of moods; it even lends grace to the most mediocre opinions and acts.

Politesse also contains the notions of discretion, compliance and circumspection, offering to each the consideration which he has the right to expect; it is a reflective modesty and honesty; in fact it is the science of honesty¹.

One must have intelligence and know how to think in order to maintain all the conventions of one's station in life² and to observe them aptly.

One's age, station and character impose different duties and if one remains blithely unaware of the differences imposed by social convention one can be taken for an impolite or uncivil person.

It is not enough simply to speak correctly: one must also know when to speak and when to remain silent; how to judge when it is wise to concede a point; how to show deference; to respond to criticism nobly and without rancour. One's manner and gestures, one's expression and one's actions all contribute to politesse.

Lack of politesse causes universal offence. The most dazzling of temperaments is tarnished by uncivil manners. Were one born a prince, were one powerful and rich, had one the most brilliant mind; if one lacks politesse one meets with the sound disapproval of honest men.

On the other hand, anyone who makes the effort to be honest and polite towards all will receive that universal approbation which is shown towards good tone, to a fine mind, to good manners and to correct behaviour.

As for respect, we earn this through our virtue. We should, therefore, be virtuous in order to gain respect. But we should be virtuous without exaggeration, since virtue without tact and without consideration for others is not esteemed by society. In a way virtue has to take on a human face in order to meet with approval. A Christian who is tactless or blunt could be said to make piety hateful, whilst a pious man who is modest and polite makes piety loved and respected.

Politesse and virtue share such an intimate relationship that the curse of both of them is egoism, and both of them subsequently demand a certain abnegation which, in the virtuous, is rooted in humility, charity and mortification; in others it is most usually rooted in a vain desire to please. In these cases it is no more than a superficial gloss of politesse.

In fact, what does real politesse demand of us? Generally it demands that one forgets one's self for the sake of others; that one cares for them and is considerate of them in everything; this is charity. Sometimes it will be necessary to make painful and demanding sacrifices in order to spare others: this is the spirit of mortification.

Religion does not content itself with imposing general duties towards God and towards society; rather it prescribes specific duties towards our superiors, our equals, and even towards our inferiors. To convince ourselves of this we have only to look at Scripture. Consider in particular the letters of the Apostles, full as they are of charity and consideration; on their own they would form a perfect code of politesse. In particular, read the admirable letter of St Paul to the Romans; you will be struck by the recommendations he makes to them to care for one another. This same letter, chapters XI and XIII, contains some exquisite lessons in politesse; lessons based on the consideration that people in various positions in life should have for those with whom they come into contact. The first letter to the Corinthians, chapter XIII, is a précis of Christian urbanity. It is precisely there that young people should go in order to discover the spirit and sentiment of those gentle and decent manners through which they will gain the esteem and regard of those with whom they come into contact. All the letters of the Apostles are suffused with the most affective sentiments on the part of both the Apostles and of those who surround them. They always end with words which are full of goodness and consideration, using language which has subsequently been faithfully imitated by the Fathers.

The different rules of politesse to which a well brought up young man should always conform will be the subject of the

¹ The "honnête" man is not specifically the man who avoids untruths, but the sound, straightforward man.

² One must remember here that the idea of men being born into a station or social class in life was at the time a matter of fact rather than of conjecture.

current work which is divided into seven chapters.

CHAPTER ONE THE OBJECTS OF POLITESSE

We can, together with the author of “La Philosophie Sociale”, consider politesse from three different viewpoints, the body, the mind and the heart. We will, therefore, make a distinction between politesse of the body, of the mind and of the heart. Politesse of the body directs external movements and attitudes. Amongst the rules which it lays down, several are dictated by simple reason, based on decency and established to safeguard morals. To understand them it is enough to consult those feeling of honesty³ which reign in the depths of our souls. But there are some variable rules of civility: not all peoples have adopted the same way of expressing the same signs of consideration. A certain manner of presenting one’s self, of standing or of acting, which might be taken as an acceptable convention in one group, might be a distasteful contravention with another group.

A nation quite reasonably expects that one respects its conventions, as long as they are neither criminal or absurd. One must rapidly conform one’s self to those of one’s own country in order not to appear impolite or singular, and conform to those of other places when one is there so as not to appear to disapprove of them or to wish to be noticed. Within the same nation politesse of the body is different according to different stations in life. Such manners as might befit a businessman, for example, would often be ridiculous in an ecclesiastic.

It is not a question of modelling one’s manners on a general consensus of the well brought up; one should choose one’s models among others of one’s station, avoiding affectation at all costs: if boorishness shocks, affectation is even more intolerable.

Politesse of the mind discretion in conversation. It does not permit, therefore, that one should speak, even with the best of intentions, of a deformity in the presence of one who is afflicted by it; of any humiliating event in front of a person who might be embarrassed by it; of any unfortunate accident in front of anyone who might be hurt by the memory of it; of anything at all which could cause fright or disgust in an impressionable person. This sort of politesse purifies language, moderates tone, learns to distinguish between circumstances, conditions and persons so that one can be flexible, raising or lowering one’s self at will, and always without flattery or pride. It gives graciousness to the mind, proposing only those things which are agreeable and acceptable.

Politesse of the mind also has different rules for different persons, sexes and stations; such careful compliments as one might applaud in a man of the world would seem dull and out of place in the mouth of anyone vowed to an austere state.

Politesse of the heart teaches one to avoid pride, pretension and brashness, to control one’s mood, to perfect one’s character, greatly to respect others and to respect one’s self even more, to forget one’s own comfort for the sake of others’, often to give up one’s own rights, not always to insist on the demands of reason; in a certain sense to humanise reason and even virtue: it is the natural language of consideration.

Politeness of the mind and of the body are, in a sense, the polish of society: politesse of the heart is its soul. I cannot insist on this too much, but I know that the austerity of a state which, to a certain degree, suppresses politesse of the mind and of the body provides an even greater reason to excel in politesse of the heart.

CHAPTER TWO CONCERNING PRESENTATION

This chapter deals with 1. Facial expression; 2. tone of voice; 3. clothing; 4. posture; 5. self-presentation.

Young people entering the world after leaving a house of education should expect to be severely judged. However much one might excuse their inexperience, it is rightly expected that they should live up to the good opinion which has been formed of their education. They must, therefore, show in their attitudes much modesty, reserve and decency.

1. FACIAL EXPRESSION

Facial expressions make a major contribution to the decency of the whole self. As the face is the mirror of the soul, just as the eyes are its faithful interpreter, the most certain way of giving to the whole body a pleasant demeanour is to have a heart free of care and passion⁴. A sincere and pure heart will always show itself through an open and gracious face. A soul without reproach shows itself in a clear expression of cordiality in the eyes and in the caring look which accompanies virtue. Your expression should betray nothing hard or fierce; it should be neither too passive nor too changeable; it should be gentle, natural and unaffected; it should not demonstrate any uncontrolled emotion. Keeping

³ See above concerning honesty.

⁴ For Van Crombrugge the “passions” are those emotions which, without care, can lead the person to rash actions. The “passions” are to be fought and won over.

your eyes closed whilst talking to someone, or looking away over their shoulder, is impolite, as is winking in a mistrustful or scoffing manner etc. In a word, any uncontrolled movement of the eyes often denotes pride or insincerity and, even worse, it can lead one to suspect a corrupt heart.

2. TONE OF VOICE

The voice is the expression of our thoughts and of our character. Too much strength or weakness makes it unpleasant. In truth, it is not within our power to give ourselves a fine voice; but we can at least study different inflections, raising and lowering it according to circumstances and using the appropriate tone: careful practice can make it clear, distinct, intelligible and even agreeable.

There are people who affect certain very unpleasant tones of voice; others who speak ridiculously fast or slowly. One must avoid speaking so loudly as to be taken for a loud-mouth; talking through the nose or not opening the mouth whilst speaking – this results in half pronounced words and unpleasant conversation; bursting out laughing as if one were shouting. This extravagant form of laughter is only appropriate to the lowest order of society, especially if it is accompanied with grimaces; it is the sign of a bad education. To be avoided also is laughing at others' mistakes or clumsiness or, worst of all, at any accidents. This childish habit of laughing inappropriately could even lead you into serious difficulties – one has seen sad examples of this. Avoid any tone of excessive modesty or brashness; any form of affectation is unacceptable always and everywhere; one must be natural, even in one's imperfections.

3. CLOTHING

Convention, as well as modesty, demands that we should always be clothed in a clean and decent manner, even in our own room, even on getting out of bed, and even when we are not in the presence of witnesses. It demands that our clothing should be appropriate to our state and our position in life. No luxury, no affectation, but always great cleanliness. Negligence in clothing often hides a great negligence in personal habits and at least in the duties of our state. Always and everywhere our clothing should be properly adjusted. The strictest of propriety should preside at one's washing and changing so that nothing could possibly offend against modesty.

Without an overly assiduous avoidance of the fashions of the time one should, as far as possible, be in tune with common usage, as long as it contains nothing which could be contrary to moral values or could show you up as ridiculous.

One would hold in low esteem a young man who took too much time in dressing; this is the sign of a vain and capricious spirit

4. THE POSTURE

Even when one is alone one should not get into the habit of sitting, lying or walking in a manner which would cause embarrassment in company. This is a way of being always at one with others; it is always a way of practising much virtue, since it demands much courage and mortification continually to discipline one's self in this way. If one is standing, one should not lean against a wall; seated, one should not lean or sit across a chair, lean forward or throw one's self back against the chair back; one should not lean on one's elbows on a chair or on any piece of furniture, stretch one's arms and legs at the same time if one is tired; cross one's legs, put one's hands on one's knees, put one's feet on the fire surround or on chairs etc; yawn, sigh, shudder, hum, whistle, etc; spit on the floor, on the carpet, in the fire or through the window; blow one's nose noisily, cough or sneeze noisily, have furrowed eyebrows, make sudden movements of the nose, eyelids or tongue. Whilst speaking one should not make any sudden movement, like motioning with your arms, shaking the head, or taking an un-natural posture; nor should you keep up any unusual attitude of the body, such as balancing on one leg then the other, standing hunched up (apart from anything else this position is bad for the health); walk with the head bowed, or unduly rapidly, hop on the point of the feet or drag them carelessly; cross your arms behind your back, put your hands on your hips, stare at yourself in a mirror, adjust some part of your clothing or its accessories; stand in front of the fire with your back to the room, play with them coal tongs, or endlessly play with the fire. You should not have your hands uncontrolled with your arms hanging, drum with your fingers or pretend to be playing the organ etc.

In order for one's presentation to be perfect, every posture should be natural, every pose unstudied, every movement without pretension. It is, thus, most important to develop from an early age the habit of good presentation; it is a means of ridding one's self of that gauche and affected air which is always present in those who have not been careful, since their schooldays, to avoid these faults which we have indicated.

5. SELF PRESENTATION

A modest air of assurance is the most desirable that one can acquire. One should have an unforced attitude and movements, totally divorced from the bad habits which one might have developed in childhood. One should also

present one's self with a natural and gracious manner which gives a favourable impression. One meets many young people who can be upset by a mere trifle; circumscribed and worried by fear, they present themselves uncertainly and lose confidence, and one can see immediately that they are ill at ease. They should conquer this timidity which holds them back, rapidly examine the time, place, persons and things they are dealing with; then they will be persuaded that their childish fear stems most often from a vain amour-propre of which any reasonable man should rid himself if he wishes to do good.

Frank and open manners suit young people and are the prerogative of their age; they should enjoy them therefore, but without any air of boasting or effrontery; above all they should be on their guard against that gauche and assumed manner which betrays their efforts and their work; they should replace it with that air of ease and aplomb which gives to their attitude and their actions a grace and a freedom which are attractive to all.

If one presents one's self with an open and agreeable manner, gracious and polite, this is the obvious way to attract the respect and attention of others, and making them well-disposed towards one; whilst a frowning, hard and bad-mannered air gives rise to mistrust and dislike.

CHAPTER 3

CONVERSATION AND GAMES

Man is made for society; he can not live alone and in isolation; he needs to communicate his ideas and his reflections in conversation. It is in conversation that that highly regarded politesse, which is in itself the charm and complement of conversation, shines most brightly.

A young man should be modest, should listen much and say little. Loquacity, which is so much a part of the frivolousness of the young, is often offensive to even the most indulgent people. On the other hand, excessive timidity is also a fault, whilst a studied posture, a sulkily silence or a repulsive casualness give evidence of a lack of spirit in young people who otherwise lack nothing in the way of talent and knowledge.

1. CONVERSATION

Rules to observe in conversation.

Be careful not to adopt a sad or downcast face in a happy group. Equally, do not adopt a light-hearted or happy face in a group of serious people, or people occupied with serious matters; do not talk of games, recreations or happy things with anyone who is afflicted by sadness.

Conversation should be frank, discreet, friendly and useful. It is impolite to dominate the conversation, which should be general. If there are a lot of people one talks to one's neighbours, taking care not to raise one's voice more than is necessary to make one's self heard.

It is also impolite to continually talk to the same person if the conversation is general. It is the convention to share one's attention with every member of the group.

Pay attention when anyone speaks to you. To seem distracted when you are addressed, to look at the floor, to gaze at a painting or to chat with a dog etc. is also impolite. In general, any lack of attention is a type of insult to one's company.

Do not get involved in arguments except to try and reconcile the two sides; but always be prudent and gentle.

Do not show off any vain erudition, using words borrowed from foreign languages or technical terms which your company would not know. It is also a lack of politesse to talk in a language which no-one else present understands.

Whatever the subject of the conversation might be, put your opinions forward with modesty; if anyone disagrees, defend your position without passion and in a gentle and affectionate tone; if you are wrong, surrender with good grace. If the thing in question is not of great importance, surrender anyway even if you are right, especially if your adversary is someone to whom you owe respect.

Avoid that argumentative spirit which one finds in people who, enamoured of argument, start by contradicting instead of listening and are always ready to argue the opposing point of view, and who mercilessly take over any conversation from whoever started it. There is nothing more ridiculous than this hectoring manner; it only offends those who have to listen to it and indicate a deplorable education.

Avoid no less assiduously that unpleasant familiarity which causes many young people to berate each other with rude exchanges, cutting epithets, continual mockery and bluntness etc.; a hangover from that bad habit, developed in school, of mocking everything and treating one's peers too familiarly and even rudely.

Don't whisper into your neighbour's ear, and don't gesture to anyone at any distance; if anyone hesitates in conversation, do not rush to suggest what they might be going to say as this could offend.

Never make anyone repeat themselves by rudely saying "what?", "eh?", "sorry", "what did you say" etc.

Don't interrupt whoever is speaking; this would be gross rudeness.

Playing on words and using ambiguities are the resource of the man of no spirit. If the ambiguities are such as to give a meaning which might offend against propriety, they become an insult to those in whose presence they are spoken.

To contradict others and to open them to the sarcasm of the company is the attribute of the evil minded. To make one's self the fool, and to seek to entertain by gross imitation of others, is in the worst possible taste.

Don't use jokes except with delicacy and sobriety. Avoid teasing; even the best of it is worthless as it is rare that it avoids damaging self-esteem. The malign applaud it, but in fact its authors are almost always disliked.

If you have to deal with someone's teasing, don't do so in a brutal or offensive manner. Laugh at them yourself; it is often the best way to make them backfire on their author.

At the start of a story, don't state that you are going to amuse everyone: that would be the best way of amusing no-one.

Lies, flattery and criticism are the scourge of any conversation. A liar is only heard with disgust; a critic is only ever held in low esteem and a flatterer is mistrusted.

One should speak rarely of one's self or of anything which would lead to praise of one's self.

In order to have one's conversation esteemed, one should know how to express one's ideas with clarity and elegance; be careful, but without affectation, to use only the most acceptable terms and to use them aptly; speak with ease and facility, and never open your mouth except when you are sure of what you are going to say. Nothing is more irritating than to hear a man stammer, or to see him embarrassed by endless hesitation.

3. CONVERSATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Omitted: this chapter simply contains a list of titles, modes of address, etc.

3. PUBLIC READING

Omitted.

4. GAMES

Games are a social activity of less importance than conversation, but it is an area where it is especially important to show one's self to be civil. Remember that it is never allowed to be uncivil or gross; a good education should be evident everywhere.

There is no other exercise where the passions are more obvious than in games; it is precisely here that they can be most easily inflamed and most free in their expression. One's true character always appears in its unmasked simplicity. Those who are impolite or badly brought up are given to awkwardness, offensive terms and rudeness.

Games are only an amusement introduced into society to provide a release for the mind. When passion comes to the fore it is no longer a release but rather a violent and unpleasant exercise.

Bring to all games an air of calm and enjoyment: keep your mood balanced whether you enjoy good or bad fortune.

Carefully avoid any sudden or uncalled for shouts of joy or upset according to the result of the game. Politesse demands a balanced moderation.

If an opponent, unbalanced by lack of success, allows any hurtful words to slip out, you would be wrong to make any bitter reply; rather you should attribute them to a moment of lack of control and ignore them.

Nothing is more ridiculous than to lose one's temper with the instruments of one's game and to try and blame them for one's own lack of skill.

You should be entirely calm. Nothing in your face, in your tone, in your actions, should reveal any undue joy or disappointment; that could hurt the person against whom you are playing.

Games are but an amusement and not a shameful speculation; they should thus be moderated in such a way as to ensure that success does not bring undue benefits, nor failure bring undue disappointment.

CHAPTER 4

VISITS, WALKS AND GREETINGS

CHAPTER 5

AT TABLE

These two Chapters contain specific instructions for behaviour in certain circumstances and are omitted.

CHAPTER 6

DAILY DEALINGS

This chapter will cover daily dealings: 1. with the house, 2. with superiors, 3. between equals, 4. with inferiors, 5. particular rules to avoid contravening the conventions of one's state.

1. CONCERNING THE HOUSE

A house of education is only, in actual fact, an honest and polite family where all the virtues should reign under those considerate forms of dictated by politesse.

A wise and discrete young man will therefore carefully avoid:

- Ever speaking badly of the house where he is being educated. On the contrary, he will defend it everywhere: if he is aware of any failings in things or people he will cover them beneath the cloak of charity.
- Ever forming a separate clique, or spreading in any manner the germ of disunion among his condisciples.
- Condoning, through a guilty silence, or threatening or mocking those who might prudently warn those who have the right to know about them, any abuses which might be spreading in the house.
- Damaging, without feeling guilt, any object belonging to the house. This would be to act against all convention, against all justice, and to run the risk of retribution. As a general rule one should always be more careful of a borrowed object, or an object belonging to another, than of an object of one's own. Delicacy in this matter is natural to well brought-up people.

2. CONCERNING SUPERIORS

It is not normal to lack respect for one's superiors; only common people are guilty of this fault.

Be careful, therefore, to show much respect, deference and familial trust to your masters. Do not be prejudiced against them, do not lose your temper with them, do not raise your voice whilst speaking to them. If you have any observation to make to them, do so with submission and deference to their position, and without any hint of argument or criticism. Remove your hat when speaking to your superiors, except when they allow you to keep it on, or when, in the open air, it would be inconvenient to leave it off – but even in this case you should ask permission. To criticise or be inconsiderate to your masters is not only contrary to all the conventions but provides further proof of the ingratitude of which only a flawed heart is capable.

3. CONCERNING EQUALS

In a house of education all are equal, and thus all equally owe mutual consideration. Fatuousness and pedantry in particular should be banished. Easy, frank, polite and considerate manners are appropriate to youth. Everyone should work to acquire them, modelling themselves on those who are highly esteemed in this regard.

FAULTS TO AVOID

- Lack of mutual respect; ridiculing an individual either because of his simplicity or because of some physical defect.
- Leaving a recent arrival in confusion or taking a malicious pleasure in mystifying them etc.
- It is sometimes excusable for there to be gentle teasing between equals, because of the variety of characters, minds and spirits among young people. This exercise often helps to get rid of many faults which would otherwise go uncorrected. However, even if those who are the object of this teasing show no objection or sensitivity, those who are doing the teasing must never waver from the principle that joking becomes evil and forbidden when it contravenes charity; that is, when those who are being teased cease, rightly or wrongly, to take it in good part.
- Any form of physical rough-housing, which always is, or ends up as, invasive. One should not therefore bump, push or lean against one another, or rush to leave a classroom or the refectory etc.
- One hardly dares mention here some real unpleasantnesses, unfortunately not rare, but extremely repugnant in a house of education, nor also any infraction of those stern rules of propriety which are necessary when a large number of young people are gathered together in a house. They denote a revolting egoism and place those who take part amongst the worst brought up of people.

4. CONCERNING INFERIORS

You must accustom yourself to seeing your inferiors through the eyes of religion, that is with charity; consequently you must never deal with them without consideration.

RULES TO OBSERVE

One must speak honestly and with simplicity to one's inferiors. Do not confuse them so as to mock their confusion; do not be abrupt with them by using a tone of humour, disdain or hardness.

- Never be over familiar and avoid too frequent contact with them: familiarity breeds contempt.
- Show them constant goodness and interest and above all, when they show themselves to be worthy, trust and esteem. In this way one earns their respect and devotion, their trust and their attachment; this is the only way of being well served.
- Be careful not to be taken by first impressions, be they positive or negative, of the person with whom one is dealing; rather, study them carefully and without prejudice before giving or refusing your trust.
- Above all, be fair to your inferiors and even, in so far as your position permits, generous; but always act with discernment and prudence.

5. SPECIFIC RULES

Any man of honour in the world avoids anything which could degrade his profession. You are destined for an honourable profession. It is important for you to work, right from the beginning, to acquire those good manners whose lack could later compromise the state which you are to embrace.

You should, therefore, right from now, completely rid yourself of any trivial, liberal or uncivil manners which are more appropriate to the lower orders of society. There should be, in your exterior as in all your actions, a certain distinction which gives a favourable impression, pleases by its simplicity, and which denies any sense of pretension through the care you take to show yourself gracious and kind everywhere and towards all.

FAULTS TO AVOID

Concerning one's self with trifles, to affect small mannerisms, to allow yourself affectations; this only suggests a weak mind.

- Saving what is one's own and rather using what belongs to others: this shows a deep selfishness and little nobility of sentiment.
- Being overly generous especially for reasons of vanity or ostentation. People who do this are despised even by those who profit from their folly.
- Boasting of things which would not be particularly esteemed by the well-bred. An example would be to boast of excesses of food and drink.

- Using certain base expressions.
- Speaking of certain repugnant things about which it would be best to remain silent.
- Allowing one's self any tactlessness,
- Blustering, pointing aggressively at someone.
- Keeping one's hat on in company, or even in the presence of a single person of quality.
- Putting one's hat over one's ear, or too far to the front of the head; in the first case this gives the impression of a braggart; in the second, of a fool.
- Giving a "half greeting", keeping one's hat on one's back.
- Being heavy, stilted, or fickle in one's manners, appearing distracted, dreamy, bewildered, etc.
- Speaking a dialect or using incorrect or affected language.
- Pronouncing words carelessly or like common folk; this is the easiest way for a young man to lose respect.
- Being careless about one's person, one's clothing, or in one's room. It is important therefore that in a well brought up young man the face, mouth, nose, ears, hair, hands, etc., should give no hint of negligence. Everything that is for his use should be well looked after and should give evidence of a spirit of order, of regularity, of decency and regularity. The importance of these details cannot be over estimated.

CHAPTER 7

CONVENTIONS IN WRITING

This chapter contains rules for letter writing and is omitted.