Politeness: a strategy or beginnings of virtue?

“If a Nazi is polite, does that change anything about Nazism or the horrors of Nazism? No. It changes nothing, and this nothing is the very hallmark of politeness. …A show of virtue, its appearance and nothing more.”

From reading the quote from Andre Comte-Sponville¹ above, we can safely deduce that if a gangster is polite, it certainly doesn’t change anything about his criminality although it may make the whole affair a little more agreeable. This sort of politeness is nothing more than a show or appearance of virtue. The refined scoundrel may put a high value on politeness, but it doesn’t change anything about her lack of virtue. After all, she just about to steal your wallet and her civility won’t make it any more moral.

But can we dismiss this act of polite criminality so easily? Virtue, you will agree, has to start somewhere. It is not something that is naturally inherent in us when we are born. There is no inherited gene for politeness, as far as we know. So we must learn it. Aristotle tells us we must learn it by doing it.

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, puts it another way. We can become virtuous by imitating virtue. According to Kant, “For when men play these roles, virtues are gradually established”.² Virtue, in Kant’s view, is acquired through imitation. So, following both Aristotle and Kant, maybe there is hope for our polite thief as she imitates virtue. Maybe someday she will eventually become virtuous?

Andre Comte-Sponville in his excellent book, Great Virtues, says that “Without politeness we would have to be virtuous to become virtuous”. Comte-Sponville continues by telling us that “Morality starts at the bottom – with politeness. But it has to start somewhere.”³ Politeness is that pretence of virtue
from which virtues arise. So we must first acquire the appearance and manner of ‘good’ and then imitate it. It is from this that we gradually develop the habits of virtuous behaviour.

Comte-Sponville writes, “But why is politeness first? The priority I have in mind is not cardinal but temporal; politeness comes before the other virtues in the sense that it serves as the foundation for the moral development of the individual.” Then Comte-Sponville quotes Jean de la Bruyère, “Politeness does not always produce kindness of heart, justice, … or gratitude; but it gives to a man at least the appearance of it and makes him seem externally what he really should be.”

People have always been aware of this and have invented codes of civility for us to follow. For example, the French Jesuits composed such a code of civility at the Jesuit College of La Fleche in 1595. This code, “Bienséance de la conversation entre les Hommes”, in fact, formed part of their educational system. The first English translation of this little book appeared in about 1640 and became popular in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Richard Brookhiser, the American author of “Founding Fathers”, maintains that in writing about these codes of civility "all modern manners in the western world were originally aristocratic. Courtesy meant behavior appropriate to a court; chivalry comes from chevalier – a knight." The Jesuits took these rules and wrote out this system of courtesy that saw people as equals or near-equals. They were based on the simple premise that if we show our respect for others, we in turn will grow in virtue. The key here is that if we practiced these rules we would grow in virtue.

Oddly enough, it was George Washington who made the English language translation of the Jesuit rules popular. Washington as a boy had copied the English language translation as part of a handwriting class. Later a copy was published by Washington’s admirers under the title of “Washington’s 110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation.” These were rules of politeness which Washington himself practiced; in fact, the Jesuit rules of civility became part of a value system that was translated into many languages.

This, we could say, is a movement from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’. It is about identifying with others. Organizations have seminars after seminars that include
modules on behavior, but yet, as recent reports seem to indicate, progress is slow. Alison Maitland in the F.T. writes “Rudeness at the office hits morale and productivity, but it is often perpetrated by those at the top”. But, we may ask, is this something new? Maitland quotes a London Business School professor in the same article as saying, “The erosion of hierarchy and authority, and the growing pluralism of society, has left people less clear about how to behave at work.” Bullying and verbal abuse are reported to be on the increase. Three interesting pieces of data regarding workplace bullying and intimidation illustrate this:

1. A study of 5,000 employees in England found that 25% had been bullied and 50% had witnessed bullying.
2. A study of 175 registered nurses found that 60% had been “verbally abused, yelled at, and insulted by a physician at least once every two months”.
3. 27% of a representative sample of Michigan employees reported being victims of psychologically abusive co-workers.

Is there a solution for this type of behaviour where the perpetrators can be at top management level as much as in the ranks of the organization?

Maybe the answer lies in what Aristotle, Kant and Andre Comte-Sponville tell us - that we should encourage people to imitate politeness, and from this basis we hope that virtuous behaviour will result. The Jesuit rules written nearly four hundred years ago and copied by George Washington served many people well in bygone years. Today, perhaps, we need something similar.

There have been some attempts. One such attempt is a short book entitled “Common Courtesy” by Judith Martin. This writer claims that the solution lies in teaching etiquette or simply the practice of good manners. She then goes on to outline what good manners are.

Others will point the finger at this and say that it can lead to snobbishness. They will further point out that politeness without virtue can be equally as destructive for the individual as bullying and the use of insulting and belittling language can be. However, we should be on our guard not to be unfair to people who make a sincere effort to be polite.
A snob, according to Collins Dictionary is a person who strives to associate with those of a higher social status and who behaves condescendingly to others. In this meaning of the word, snobbishness shows a lack of respect for those others who are not of a higher status. Politeness can be a tool in this social play.

However, this need not be the case. For example, children learn to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, and if they are taught to be respectful to others as equals, the type of snobbishness we mentioned above is unlikely to develop. Children can become respectful through training. Education is important here because when children learn to speak, the habits of speaking politely can be developed as the habit of respecting others can.

But if these good habits are not taken further, there is, of course, a danger of remaining in the superficiality of empty politeness. People can take politeness to a position of near perfection where politeness is the beginning and end. They remain its prisoners and hide behind their sophisticated smokescreen. They cannot empathise with others or even to be known by others. They are either dupes of custom and propriety or use it as a strategy to dominate others.

Peter Drucker, the management guru, emphasised that “Good manners are the lubricating oil of organizations”. Some of the advice given to us by writers such as him for developing polite behaviour is simply and easily understood like the following:

1. Don't interrupt others when they are speaking.
2. Treat each person you meet as if he or she is truly important.
3. Listen! Listen! Listen! Develop good listening skills.
4. Learn to remember the other person's name.
5. Don't mentally cut out if you are not immediately interested in what the other person is saying.
6. Respond in a visible way to the other person such as smiling and using his or her by name.
7. Concentrate on other person rather than to yourself.
8. Use sincere flattery as people often respond positively to a genuine complement. But if you don't feel it, don't say it.
9. Give a firm handshake; look the other person in the eye for about 60 to 70% of the time. Search for something attractive in the person.

10. Don't go overboard with assertiveness as this could be construed as arrogance.

11. Be proactive with people. Take the initiative with them.

According to the writers, Brown and Levinson in their book, “Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage”, there are two forms of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness treats the listener as a friend or as someone to be included in discourse. Negative politeness is designed to save face.

For example, if someone is wearing clothes that are out of place or the colours clash, we would say something kind in order to help the wearer save face such as the following, “Your suit looks great on you”, even though you feel it is completely out of place. In negative politeness, a little hypocrisy is inevitable. The justification for a little hypocrisy is that it may do more good than harm at certain times. Your intention is good even though your behaviour may be a little forced. It is done so the other person can save face.

If, for example, you have an impossible sister-in-law, you may decide to make great efforts at being tolerant and purposely search for the good in her, for the good of the whole family. You may lack a sincere liking for her, but you have a sincere will to be tolerant and to make the relationship work. Indeed, to do this you may very well have to be hypocritical at times. Although this is negative politeness, it is done with good intentions.

So what about our refined scoundrel? What about the honourable lout? They have the basis of politeness on which virtue can be built and certainty their wrong doings are no reasons for us to reject politeness as a priority in our organizations.

References
4. Ibid, p.12
5. Ibid, p.9
7. FT, Friday, 12 May, 2006, “Bosses with no time to be nice” by Alison Maitland, p.7