

The Rights and Wrongs of Rudeness

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ABSTRACT: Rudeness is normally viewed as a moral failing, but there are times when it is excusable or even justified. In this article I propose a definition of the concept that helps us ascertain whether, why, and to what extent a rude action is blameworthy or excusable. I consider the most common sorts of circumstance in which rudeness is morally acceptable, and I argue that the perceived increase in rudeness is, in large part, a consequence of our living in a dynamic society where egalitarian attitudes challenge established hierarchies

Rudeness is widely perceived to be a common moral failing; moreover, it is generally thought to be on the rise. According to recent opinion polls, 79% of Americans say that lack of respect and courtesy should be regarded as a serious national problem, and 73% believe that people treated each other with more respect in the past.¹ Of course, these perceptions are nothing new. Pollsters in ancient Athens, Elizabethan England, or nineteenth century America would probably have reported similar findings. Regret (especially among older people) over the decline in moral standards (especially among younger people) is virtually a cultural universal. For this reason alone we should view such opinions skeptically. Indeed, when one considers the obvious progress that has taken place over the past century in the struggle to guarantee equal rights, opportunities and respect for minorities, women, gays, the handicapped and other groups that have long suffered from prejudice and discrimination, the poll results cited above are really quite surprising.²

The idea that standards of civility are in decline thus deserves to be questioned. But so, too, do the underlying normative assumptions that rudeness is bad and that any increase in rudeness must therefore also be bad. Instead of unthinkingly joining the

general jeremiad, therefore, I believe we should first try to understand better both the concept of rudeness and the social situations in which it is employed. In this essay I put forward a philosophical definition of rudeness and use this to develop a schema that can help us both classify the main forms of rudeness and assess the extent to which rude behaviour is or is not excusable. The proposed analysis brings to light some of the presuppositions underlying our common normative judgements about rudeness and indicates how these judgments might be challenged. In particular, it reveals when and why intentional rudeness may be morally acceptable; and it suggests that an increase in rudeness—whether real or merely perceived— should sometimes be viewed as a sign of cultural health rather than of moral decline.

Examples of rudeness

Let us begin by calling to mind some clear examples of rudeness. These can serve both as data to work from and as a concrete touchstone against which to check any generalities we may be tempted to venture.

- failing to return a greeting
- refusing to shake hands
- swearing at someone
- calling someone names
- pushing someone out of the way
- interrupting a speaker
- talking when you should be listening
- not listening when you should be listening
- not responding to a greeting
- using demeaning terms ('ladies', 'boy')
- being over-familiar
- making crude sexual advances or allusions
- dressing inappropriately on formal occasions
- phoning someone and then putting them on hold

- putting your finger in your nose in public
- not removing your shoes where this is normal practice
- clipping your finger nails during an interview
- eating spaghetti with your hands
- arriving late for an appointment and not apologizing
- abruptly hanging up on someone
- transferring an item from someone else's shopping cart to your own
- showing up to a potluck without a pot
- entering someone's office without knocking
- sleeping in class (apparently this used to be quite common)

Since there are unlimited ways of being rude, the list is obviously rather arbitrary, but it is intended to be wide-ranging. A few points emerge straight away. Rudeness, unlike some unethical acts such as murder or kidnapping, is very common. Most of us manage to get through life without committing murder; it is sometimes hard to get through the day without being rude to someone. But although we are all guilty of rude behaviour at times, that does not make us all rude people. A murderer is one who has committed murder, and a single violation of the sixth commandment makes you a murderer for life. Rudeness is not like that; occasional lapses are to be expected and we all make them. So most people cannot be classified as either rude or polite *simpliciter*. Some are rude often, others infrequently; some in small ways, others in ways that really matter. And while most of us think of ourselves as polite, we can all have blind spots (e.g. punctuality, table manners, garrulousness).

Precisely because rudeness is quite common, it is not a trivial issue. Indeed, in our day-to-day lives it is possibly responsible for more pain than any other moral failing. We while away countless hours mentally replaying slights we have—or believe we have—suffered, inventing wittier, sharper, more dignified or more hurtful responses. Or, if we are prone to moral anxiety, we worry about whether something we did or said was rude or perceived to be so by others. Furthermore, rudeness often causes more distress than other injurious acts. We naturally think of theft, for instance, as a more serious

moral offence than discourtesy. But I believe I would be less upset if someone stole my camera than if a colleague walked into my classroom, strode between me and the class, spoke briefly to a student, and then left without speaking to me or even bothering to close the door. Being robbed is a misfortune; being treated rudely by a colleague threatens one's self-respect. In the first case we lament, in the second case, we seethe.

A familiar and venerable kind of philosophical project is to ask what all the listed examples of rudeness have in common in order to identify a common element that we can then claim is the essence of rudeness. The description of this essence will state the necessary and sufficient conditions for an act being rude, and this description can serve as our working definition of the concept. This is the kind of enquiry pioneered by Socrates, but most philosophers nowadays are skeptical about the possibility of always finding a common core shared by every instantiation of a concept. As Wittgenstein persuasively argues, a concept can be perfectly intelligible even if the instances merely overlap with one another in various ways.³ Nor must a concept have sharp boundaries in order to be useful. Many concepts do not. For example, there is no minimum number of centimeters of rain that must fall in a day for that day to be classified as 'rainy'; but this does not mean the concept of raininess is incoherent or incomprehensible. We use it all the time without creating confusion. Like raininess, rudeness is a concept with blurred edges, but this does not make it suspect or detract from its usefulness. It just means that whether an action is rude or not is a matter about which we can have legitimate doubts and disagreements.

This becomes even more obvious if we try to distinguish between rudeness and other closely related concepts such as impoliteness, discourteousness, vulgarity, irreverence, disrespect, impertinence, insolence, uncouthness, or inconsiderateness.⁴ Clearly, these do not all mean the same thing. Each carries its own particular emphasis, connotations, and implications. Insolence implies a scornful attitude to someone or something thought worthy of respect. To be uncouth is to offend the sensibilities of others by a display of crudeness or vulgarity. To be impertinent is to assume some sort of entitlement beyond what one may legitimately claim. Nevertheless, the terms listed do form a dense cluster of interrelated and overlapping meanings.

I do not intend to define rudeness as distinct from, say, irreverence or impertinence, or vulgarity. Rather, I propose to use the term in a general sense as a rubric under which many of these other forms of behaviour fall. I do believe, however, that it is possible to construct a general definition of rudeness. Because the concept has blurred edges, this definition cannot hope to capture all and only instances of rudeness with the rigour and precision of a definition in mathematics. But it will, I believe, suffice for our purposes, and the process of developing and testing this definition can help us to think more clearly about what the concept means, how we actually apply it, and how we should apply it.

A definition of rudeness

I propose the following definition.

An act is rude if it meets two conditions:

- a) it violates a social convention;
- and b) if the violation were deliberate this would indicate a lack of concern for another person's feelings (or, in other words, a willingness to cause them pain).

Before looking at how this definition applies to various cases, a few preliminary points are worth noting.

First, the term 'social convention' (hereafter, just 'convention') is intended very broadly. A convention is a rule stipulating how one should behave in certain situations. Examples would be: You should not push in front of people in a line. You should take your shoes off before entering a mosque. You should not pull faces at people. Often the rules are unwritten, but they do not have to be. The Princeton College handbook of 1756 lays down the following rule: 'Inferiors, when they come into the company of a superior or speak to him, shall show their respect by pulling their hats.'

However, the mere violation of a convention does not constitute rudeness. For example, wearing odd socks, eating dessert before the entree, or referring to oneself in the third person all violate conventions but are not necessarily rude. What could make these violations rude is the possibility that they cause someone pain or discomfort.

Wearing red and yellow socks at a funeral, or ordering dessert as an appetizer at a formal dinner might well do this, and that is why in such situations we would usually be critical of these violations.

It would be too simple, though, to say that an act is rude if it violates a convention and causes offence. After all, the reaction of the offended party might be completely unpredictable and unreasonable. A student whose failure to wear matching socks around the house unaccountably upset a roommate could hardly be accused of rudeness. This problem is avoided by the somewhat convoluted form of part (b) of the definition.

The first thing to notice about (b) is its conditional form ('*if* the violation were deliberate . . . '). The reason for this is that the definition must capture the fact that rudeness need not be intentional. If, in the cinema, I become so engrossed in the film that I start dipping into a stranger's popcorn bucket, forgetting that my partner is sitting on my left rather than my right, I am clearly doing something rude. This is indicated by my profuse apologies should I ever discover my mistake, even though I violated the relevant convention unintentionally.⁵ The other point to notice about (b) is that it assumes that in most cases reasonable people will agree about whether certain actions are likely to hurt another's feelings. Obviously, there will be controversial cases. But I do not think it is a weakness in the definition that its application involves making reasonable inferences about the states of mind that would normally accompany and be produced by deliberate violations of social conventions.

The definition also allows for the fact that rudeness need not be recognized as such by the 'victim'. You may tell me I have 'a mind like a steel trap', implying that it lets nothing in and nothing comes out. But I may be too obtuse to grasp your meaning or intention, perhaps thinking that you are complimenting me on the way I tenaciously hold onto the truth once I've discovered it. In this case, you have not failed to be rude; your rudeness has just failed to register with me.

One final point to note is that according to the proposed definition, rudeness is not necessarily wrong. Now for some, this will constitute an objection to the definition. Anne Lloyd Thomas, for instance, in her article "Facts and Rudeness", argues that the term is irreducibly pejorative. According to Thomas, " 'Rude' is a value word: when we

say 'X is rude' we criticize or condemn a person or action or type of action for a particular kind of behaviour."⁶ The problem with this approach, however, is that it implies we could never coherently describe an action as rude yet justified. Surely, though, we do sometimes want to say this.

Suppose you refuse to shake hands with a person you consider morally repugnant—a war criminal, a traitor, or a person who callously destroyed the life of someone you love. Most people would say that your refusal in such a case is not just understandable but justifiable. Assuming this is so, how should we describe your behaviour? As both rude and right? Or as right and *therefore* not rude?

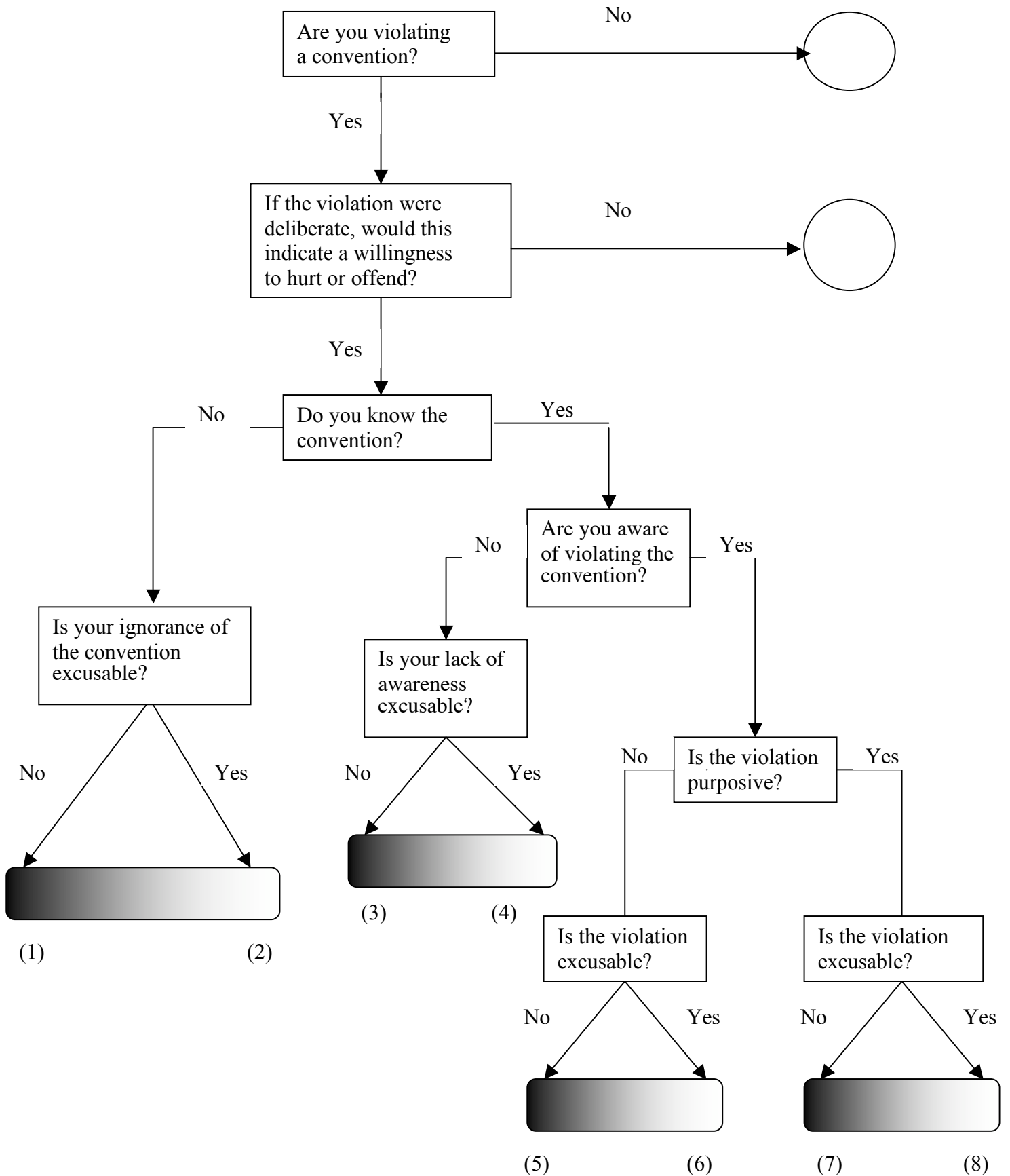
Thomas' analysis implies that we should prefer the second option. To the objection that there are situations where we believe rudeness is warranted, she argues that our descriptions of these situations will serve as excuses for behaviour which, if it is identified as rude, is presumed to be wrong. In my view, this puts a little too much weight on the conceptual analysis of terms as opposed to the cultural mores that underlie the way we use them. The reason we feel the need to excuse rudeness when we think it justified is not because the *concept* of rudeness is inherently pejorative but because the default attitude in our culture is that it is wrong to be indifferent to another person's feelings. The expression "punch on the nose " is not intrinsically pejorative; but we would similarly feel the need, if reporting that we had punched someone on the nose, to explain why we thought we were justified in doing so.

In fact, as we shall see, there are various circumstances in which rudeness is morally acceptable. When analyzing these cases, one could conceivably argue that the context makes the action not an instance of rudeness at all. But I believe it is usually more illuminating to see the context as determining not whether the action is rude but whether it is justifiable. This is especially the case when considering instances of what I call intentional rudeness (see below).

Classifying and appraising forms of rudeness

The above definition of rudeness makes possible a certain classification of the main types of rudeness and suggests general guidelines for judging how excusable or blameworthy a person's conduct is in any particular case. Both are indicated by the diagram ('Classifying and appraising rudeness')

Classifying and appraising rudeness



The diagram indicates the sort of questions we should ask, and the order in which we should ask them, in order to determine both whether or not people have acted rudely and, in the event that they have been rude, their degree of culpability. The lines of the tree culminate in boxes that are gradated from black to white—an admittedly whimsical but nonetheless effective way of figuratively representing the moral condition of the agent’s soul---darkest black representing maximal blameworthiness, pure white signifying complete excusability.

The first two questions determine whether a given action falls under the general definition of rudeness. The questions that follow concern the agent’s knowledge, intentions, and level of awareness. They identify eight possible ‘polar’ situations that could obtain—these being extreme or uncomplicated instances of excusability or justification---and help determine to which of these the action in question is closest. The eight polar situations can be summarily described as follows (S being the agent):

(1) S does not know the convention but ought to.

E.g. After living in Japan for a year foreigners should know that they are expected to take off their shoes when entering a house. Visitors to North America should know, after a few months, that they are expected to tip in restaurants.

(2) S does not know the convention and cannot reasonably be expected to know it.

E.g. A three-year old in a restaurant who blows hard through a straw into her drink to make bubbles and noise will not be judged morally deficient. She may, of course, be quickly introduced to the convention that one is not supposed to do this (“Don’t do that!” “Why not?” “It’s rude.”), although it will be a many more years before she attains the maturity and wisdom to understand exactly why this kind of fun is prohibited.

(3) S knows the convention, is not aware of violating it, but ought to be.

This is probably the most common form of rudeness. Examples are legion: talking when the convention requires silence; constantly interrupting other

speakers; failing to give subordinates sufficient attention or respect; staying at a party longer than the host would like; treating old people as if they were simple-minded.

(4) S knows the convention, is not aware of violating it, but her lack of awareness is excusable.

E.g. Someone who, because they are emotionally distraught, fails to ask a visitor to sit down; someone who falls asleep in a lecture after being up all night working as a volunteer firefighter.

(5) S knows the convention, is aware she is violating it, but is not purposely being rude (i.e. being rude is not part of her intention); however, the violation is inexcusable.

E.g. Inappropriate sexual groping; queue jumping.

(6) S knows the convention, is aware she is violating it, but is not purposely being rude; and the violation is excusable

E.g. Slapping a hysteric; opening someone else's mail to prevent a crime⁷

(7) S knows the convention, is aware of violating it and is purposely but inexcusably being rude.

E.g. Insulting someone using racist epithets; spitting at someone because they didn't vote the way you did.

(8) S knows the convention, is aware of violating it and is purposely but justifiably being rude.

E.g. Refusing to shake hands with someone who has betrayed you; refusing to participate in a ceremony you find morally objectionable.

Application of this analysis

The analysis schematized by the diagram is admittedly abstract. But it can nevertheless help to clarify (a) the circumstances in which we judge actions to be rude; (b) whether or not our judgement is justified; (c) precisely what it is we are finding fault with when a person acts rudely; (d) when and why we are sometimes willing to excuse rudeness; and (e) the way in which blameworthiness and excusability in this area are matters of degree. Let us see how it applies in a couple of specific cases.

Example A: In a departmental meeting a man keeps reading a professional journal. He doesn't read it all the time, but he delves into it whenever the discussion starts to bore him, and he clearly devotes a significant portion of his attention to it. Accused of being rude, he denies it, arguing that he is able to pay sufficient attention to the meeting while looking at the journal. He says he is simply trying to use his time efficiently.

Is there a convention that one does not read material unconnected to a meeting during a meeting? This is not a black and white issue. In a very large meeting, where hundreds of people are gathered in an auditorium, one could perhaps do this without risk of offending anyone. But if the meeting is of a kind and size where everyone can see what everyone else is doing, most would agree that some such convention obtains.

So we ask the second question: if the violation of the convention were deliberate, would this indicate a lack of concern for someone else's feeling? I would say the answer is pretty clearly yes. Most people will feel at least somewhat aggrieved, annoyed, insulted or upset if they notice that while they are speaking one of their colleagues is reading something quite unrelated to the topic under discussion. We are not, of course, assuming at this point that the violation of the convention *is* deliberate; we are just using the hypothetical question to ascertain that the behaviour in question is indeed rude.

Given that we have here an instance of rudeness, we can next ascertain to what extent and in what respect the person is at fault. Does he know about the convention? While one can imagine some scenario in which a recent arrival from a different culture might be ignorant of the relevant convention, in almost all cases one encounters the individual can be assumed to know the convention simply in virtue of being a longstanding and participating member of our culture. So we proceed to the next

question: Is the person aware that they are violating a convention?⁸ Here again, in the situation we are imagining, the answer will usually be yes. Self-awareness is, of course, a matter of degree. At one end of the spectrum is someone who deliberately, perhaps even ostentatiously, reads while a colleague speaks. This person is being *purposefully* rude—to be rude is part of his purpose, perhaps as a way of gaining revenge or showing disrespect. At the other end of the spectrum is the case of someone who first started perusing the journal at a point when the meeting was bogged down in a technical discussion that didn't concern her and who then chooses to keep reading while tuning out the rest of the meeting. It is possible, of course, to imagine a meeting so boring, a journal article so captivating, and a reader so interested in the topic of the article for the violation to be almost completely unconscious. But such cases would be unusual.

The chances are, then, that the person we have described is basically aware that they are violating a convention, and even though they may not actually be doing it purposefully, they are nevertheless aware of what they are doing and are willing to risk offending or hurting the feelings of other people. The final question to ask is whether such a violation is morally justifiable. Again, it is not difficult to dream up circumstances in which we would forgive the violator entirely: something in the article could have triggered an original idea that will eventually benefit millions of people. But in the case of normal people in normal meetings reading a normal journal article, this sort of excuse will not normally be available. It is most likely that they are simply willing to risk causing offence because their preference for reading outweighs their sense of obligation to respect the convention that one listens to one's colleagues during meetings.

Example B: A high school principal addresses a group of parents, all of whom happen to be female, as “ladies”. Fifty years ago this would have been unremarkable. Today, there are still places where it is normal practice, but many people now view the term “ladies” as somewhat demeaning. It connotes delicacy and distance from the world of work, action, and decision making; it sounds condescending; and insofar as it helps to sustain outmoded ideas about femininity, it belongs to a way of thinking and speaking that continues to limit women's freedom.

Is the high school principal being rude? That depends entirely on the historical and geographical circumstances. In some places he would be conforming to rather than violating a convention. But elsewhere his use of “ladies” would be resented in the same way, although perhaps not to the same extent, as would his use of terms like “Red Indian”, “coloured”, “half-breed”, “coolie”, or “lunatic”. In these latter places, the conventions have changed, and if the principal were deliberately violating them this would indicate a willingness to risk offending his audience. So in these situations, he is being rude. The issue now becomes *why* he is being rude and to what extent his rudeness is blameworthy or excusable.

One possibility, of course, is that he is being jocular and using the term tongue in cheek. In that case, the violation of convention is conscious and purposive.⁹ Whether or not the humour is acceptable depends on all sorts of subtle variables such as the principal’s reputation, his relationship to his audience, the character of his audience, the topic under discussion, and so on. Another possibility is that he is unfamiliar with the feminist critique of terms like “ladies” and not attuned to the cultural changes that have rendered it suspect: in other words, he is ignorant of the relevant convention. In that case, the question becomes to what extent this ignorance is excusable or blameworthy. A Southerner in his sixties, or someone whose first language is not English, will probably be cut more slack than a Yankee yuppie. Irony and ignorance are the two most probable explanations. It is, of course, conceivable that the principal knows that the term offends some women and is being momentarily thoughtless and insensitive; it also possible that he is willfully trying to cause offence; but neither scenario is very likely.

The cases discussed are deliberately somewhat messy. It is not part of my project to provide some algorithm that can be applied mechanically to any situation to yield a definitive moral judgement. On the contrary, one obvious conclusion to emerge is that any reasonable judgement about the rudeness of an action is relative to the specific context in which the behaviour being judged occurs. I take it to be a virtue of the approach I have outlined that it highlights rather than hides this situational relativity.

Objections

One objection to the proposed definition of rudeness that will probably occur to many readers is that it covers too much. Suppose I break into a man's house, steal some valuables, start a fire in the basement and then shoot them him when he tries to escape. We would not normally describe such behaviour as rude. Yet it seems to satisfy the conditions laid down by my definition. Clearly, I am violating conventions—viz. the laws against burglary, arson and murder. My actions are deliberate violations of these laws and obviously indicate a willingness, even an intention, to cause someone harm. So according to my definition, I have acted rudely. But do we really want to say that theft, arson and murder are instances of rudeness?¹⁰

The simple and, I believe, adequate response to this objection is to accept that actions like theft, arson, assault, kidnapping, and murder are indeed rude. But they are not *only* rude; they invite criticism on other grounds as well; and our intense disapprobation has to do mainly with the other, more serious negative aspects of these actions. An analogy might help here. Suppose a gang of crooks commits an armed robbery in the course of which they park next to a fire hydrant exceed the speed limit. These relatively minor infractions will not motivate the police to get after the gang; nor, if the crooks are caught, will they be given parking and speeding tickets. The police will naturally focus on the more serious offences. But the traffic violations are still illegal actions. It is just that the enormity of the crime renders them insignificant. To be sure, it sounds a little odd to say that murder is rude, but that is just because it would normally be perverse of someone to pay attention to the fact that a killer has acted impolitely when the other moral, criminal, and tragic aspects of murder are so much more important. It sounds odd to say that the stars shine in the daytime, but they do; we just don't notice them because their light is overwhelmed by that of the sun.

Granted that this answers the objection raised, one might still demand that an adequate definition of rudeness should enable us to distinguish between actions that are *merely* rude and actions that go beyond mere rudeness. On the face of it, this looks like a reasonable request. I doubt that it can be satisfied, however, for at least two reasons.

First, the expression “go beyond rudeness” is liable to mislead us. It contains the implication that rudeness is at the trivial end of the spectrum of morally reprehensible behaviour. But it ain’t necessarily so, both because not all rudeness is reprehensible, and because rudeness can sometimes be very serious in terms of the immediate suffering caused or its long term consequences. The general level and type of civility in a society are also important determinants of its cultural quality: Edmund Burke even maintained that “manners are of more importance than laws.” The temptation to trivialize rudeness is perhaps reinforced by the fact that most forms of rudeness are not prohibited by law. The exemplars of rude behaviour that we most readily call to mind also tend to be relatively unimportant actions—such things as people pushing in line or being over-familiar. But rudeness can be devastating. Imagine the emotional impact of having someone you love spit in your face. And as a character trait, a propensity to be rude is not a superficial or incidental quality. In many cases it bespeaks a lack of respect or a lack of concern for others—moral failings that most of us would consider quite serious.¹¹ Thus the very notion of the “merely rude” is suspect.

Second, even if we accept that acts can be ranged on a spectrum of moral seriousness and that mere rudeness tends to occupy the slighter end, it is still difficult to draw a sharp line between the merely rude and the rude-plus. Consider the following series of convention violations that might occur in a letter:

a) I make a grammatical mistake. This violates a convention, but it falls short of rudeness since it fails to meet the second condition of my definition.

b) I use an incorrect form of address (e.g. I write “Dear Mr. Smith instead of “Dear Dr. Smith”). This is rude according to my definition; if it were done deliberately it would indicate a willingness to offend. How one judges the violation depends, of course, on whether it is accidental, deliberate, justified, and so on.¹²

c) I write in an open letter to a newspaper, “Dear Mr. Smith, You are an ignorant idiot.” This is obviously rude and obviously intentional. It does not seem to be anything more.

d) I write, “Dear Mr. Smith, You are a cross-dressing pervert, and unless you send me \$500 I will have the photos that prove it e-mailed to all your friends and

acquaintances.” This is rude, and it also constitutes blackmail, which deepens its moral reprehensibility and makes it illegal to boot.

Most of us would agree that in normal circumstances (d) is worse than (c). But it is hard to identify any further condition satisfied by (d) but not by (c) that makes (d) necessarily worse. The motive may be baser, but it does not have to be. The harm done to Mr. Smith is likely to be more serious; but it may not be. And the fact that blackmail is illegal seems irrelevant, since this could easily not be the case. Thus, to anyone who thinks they can define rudeness in a way that makes possible a principled separation between rudeness and other acts that offend or harm others, I would issue this challenge: identify the condition that mere rudeness fails to meet but which is met by these other harmful acts. Perhaps it is possible to tighten the definition of rudeness in this way; but in the absence of plausible suggestions, it is reasonable to be skeptical.

Acceptable intentional rudeness

John Henry Newman wrote, “A gentleman is someone who never causes another person pain” (to which Oscar Wilde wickedly added—unintentionally). If we interpret this definition of a gentleman more broadly as a characterization of a perfectly well mannered person, it is rather appealing. It chimes with the definition of rudeness offered above and also with the familiar but still valuable notion that good manners and social grace are largely a matter of doing what makes other people feel comfortable and not doing what causes discomfort.¹³ However, that definition, and the analysis it supports, implies that there are times when good manners may legitimately be suspended or overridden. Of the eight ‘polar’ situations identified in the diagram, two (numbered 6 and 8) involve actions that are known by the agent to be rude but which are nevertheless morally acceptable. The difference between them is that in one case (6) being rude is not part of the agent’s purpose, whereas in the other case (8) it is.

I believe that these situations, where we may justifiably risk offending or hurting the feelings of another person, can usually be placed under one of five headings: emergencies; promoting long-term benefits; making a statement; humour; and pedagogy. Let us consider these in turn.

i) Emergencies

The general principle here is uncontroversial. Everyone would agree that the normal niceties of social intercourse should be suspended or ignored if a crisis suddenly arises. If I am talking to you and you see a child about to chase a ball into the street or grab hold of a freshly painted railing, you should interrupt and shout a warning without any preliminary apology. The normal convention is that you keep listening until I've said what I have to say or at least until I say something you feel the need to comment on. Where the need to stop listening and turn your attention elsewhere is not too pressing, you would normally indicate that you have to suspend that convention using a formula such as, "Excuse me" or "Pardon me". In effect we have here a convention for suspending a convention. Literally, you ask my indulgence or even my forgiveness for an action that would otherwise be rude. But if there is no time for that, you simply act. Interestingly, even though the acceptability of suspending the convention in an emergency is generally understood, you are still likely to ask to be excused retroactively, saying, once the crisis is over, something like, "Sorry about that . . ."

Of course, people can disagree over whether a situation constitutes the sort of emergency that justifies violating a convention. Suppose we are talking on the phone and I suddenly say, "Gotta go!" and hang up. If I tell you later that I saw someone stealing clothes from my clothesline you will probably accept this as a reasonable excuse. If I tell you that I noticed it was beginning to drizzle and needed to take the clothes in, you will probably feel that a fuller explanation could and should have been given at the time. But there is no clear line between emergencies and non-emergencies, in part because different people have different crisis-point thresholds. The best principle to employ here is probably the golden rule: we should ask whether we would be offended or hurt if in a similar situation we were on the receiving end of the convention violation.

ii) Promoting long-term benefits

Sometimes, slavishly abiding by a convention may result in serious long-term harm to oneself or others while violating it is likely to produce beneficial consequences.

Of course, this is true in the case of emergencies as well, but some situations would not normally be described as emergencies since there is ample opportunity for reflection prior to action. For example, there are some topics that many people consider unsuitable or inappropriate for discussion with anyone other than a few privileged members of their circle of family and friends—matters such as salaries, personal hygiene, marital intimacies, or a person’s self-destructive habits. Approaching such issues invites the charge of failing to “mind your own business.” Yet occasions can arise where the best course of action is to risk being thought rude in order to confront people with a truth they are unable or unwilling to recognize—that they are becoming an alcoholic, showing favouritism to one of their children, spending themselves into misery, treating their partner badly, not washing their clothes often enough, or getting married to the wrong person.¹⁴ Often, the primary beneficiary of such interventions is intended to be those who are also most likely to be hurt or offended. This will not, of course, necessarily lessen the affront they feel; on the contrary, it can even seem to compound impertinence with condescension. But ideally, at least, the rudeness will be forgiven in virtue of the good intentions behind it or the positive consequences that flow from it.

iii) Making a statement

In the sort of situations just considered under (i) and (ii), the rudeness is incidental rather than integral to the purpose of the action. It just so happens in these cases that the best means to bring about a certain end involves violating a convention. More interesting, though, are those situations where the rudeness, although morally acceptable, is much more willful, and where violating a convention is itself part of the action’s purpose. I would suggest that the two most common reasons for this sort of deliberate rudeness are to make some sort of statement and to be humorous. We will consider these in turn.

Here are some examples of people making statements through actions that satisfy the definition of rudeness:

- refusing to shake hands with someone
- not singing the national anthem (where doing so is clearly expected)

- pointedly not using a person's title
- same-sex couples kissing in public
- African-Americans in the 1950s ignoring segregationist restrictions on where they may sit, eat, drink, etc.

Typically, the statements made by convention-violating actions such as these will be about either: a) the agent; b) the person or persons at whom the action is directed; or c) the convention that is being violated. These categories are not exclusive.

If I offer you my hand and you refuse to shake it, this will normally be understood, first of all, as a statement expressing your opinion of me.¹⁵ It probably means that you despise me, perhaps because I am guilty of some terrible crime, or perhaps because I betrayed your trust. In these situations, it may also indicate that you do not forgive me. Your refusal might, in addition, affirm a belief you hold about yourself: perhaps that you are superior to me or in some sense “cleaner”, and that you should preserve this condition.

It often happens that an individual will find herself in the middle of a group where everyone else is following a convention that she does not wish to follow. In these situations she can feel considerable pressure to conform to the convention—for instance, to pledge allegiance to the flag, to sing the national anthem, or to bow her head when everyone else is praying. By not conforming, she can make a statement about her own position or beliefs-- “I don't really belong to this group”; “I do not share your beliefs”; “I am not the kind of person who makes gestures of submission”; “I am a Christian and follow to the letter Jesus' command to eschew oaths”; “I disapprove of the war currently being fought by the government of the country symbolized by the flag.” Her actions may also express her view of the convention itself: “I disapprove of the way flags and anthems are reinforcing forms of nationalism that I consider morally unhealthy and politically dangerous”; “I disapprove of this moment of prayer since I believe it violates the principle that the state should not promote any form of religious worship.”

Challenging the conventions is an interesting and sometimes valuable function of rude behaviour. People who refuse to go along with some widely accepted convention are often viewed from the vantage point of the mainstream as difficult, self-important,

attention-seeking boat-rockers. They may be, of course. But in many cases they are people who have reflected seriously on the significance of a convention and have decided that it expresses or is associated with beliefs and values that they do not wish to support. Unfortunately, it is often hard to avoid the stark choice of either conforming to or violating a convention. When the national anthem is played, you must either stand or remain seated (ploys such as pretending to look for something on the floor are awkward and demeaning). If the pope and the Queen of England come to your back yard cookout, you have to decide whether or not to bow when introduced and use phrases like “your holiness” and “your majesty”. In such situations, thoughtful people can be genuinely torn between not wanting to embarrass or offend anyone and wishing to comport themselves in accordance with their beliefs. When the latter motive prevails, it is important to recognize that their rudeness may be a sign of both intellectual autonomy and integrity.

A well-known but still wonderful anecdote about Beethoven illustrates several of the points just made. The composer was walking through a park with Goethe, twenty years his senior and the most celebrated German author of his time. Noticing that a small group of nobles accompanied by their entourage were coming toward them along the same path, Goethe followed the custom of the day and stepped aside, bowing to his social superiors as they passed. Beethoven, however, kept to his course, ploughing straight through the middle of the group, hands behind his back, head high, eyes forward. Catching up with his companion, a shocked Goethe asked how he could be so disrespectful toward the nobility, to which Beethoven replied, "There are thousands of them, but only two of us."

iv) Humour

One of the most common forms of humour that many of us engage in is mock rudeness. Here are a few examples:

- I address a friend in derogatory terms (“Mornin’ meathead!”).
- I address a friend inappropriately (“Hey sexpot!”).
- I transfer items from a friend’s shopping cart to my own.

- I ostentatiously check that the cash a friend has handed to me is legal currency, biting the coins and holding the notes up to the light.
- I snap my fingers at my host to indicate that I want him to give me more coffee.

Now one could object here that joking and teasing of this sort does not really constitute rudeness—at least not always. In the examples just given, conventions are clearly being deliberately violated, but does this indicate a willingness to offend? The answer seems to be that sometimes it does and sometimes it does not. Teasing can be quite aggressive. If I introduce a distinguished speaker from an elite university by thanking him for "condescending to come down from his lofty perch," the hostility is fairly apparent and the risk of offending great. If I pull a face at a close friend, the risk of offending her is virtually nil.

The question of whether or not mock rudeness should be counted as a form of rudeness in fact introduces an additional complication. There are conventions relating to the violation of conventions. Harmless teasing involves violating a convention in ways that are socially acceptable—acceptability being determined by further conventions (meta-conventions). The rather hostile introduction just described would be "offside" in a formal setting; but at a more intimate, relaxed gathering it could be a pleasantry enjoyed by all. However, meta-conventions are no more clear-cut than first-order conventions. Although in many cases it is clear enough whether someone is out of line, the boundary markers are broad and fuzzy, allowing plenty of scope for reasonable people to disagree.

Regarding whether or not mock rudeness should be counted as a form of intentional rudeness, we have two options. One option is to distinguish between teasing that remains "onside" and teasing that strays "offside" and count only the latter as rude. In that case, the conventions being violated are the offside laws, so to speak—the meta-conventions that determine whether or not someone has shown poor taste or "gone too far". The other option is to classify all mock rudeness as purposive rudeness and to see the meta-conventions as marking the (admittedly often blurred) line between the acceptable and the reprehensible. In my view, this second option is preferable since it makes for a somewhat simpler analysis. This is, of course, a pragmatic justification, but

that is in order. Not a lot hangs on the choice made, and the phenomena we are examining do not, by themselves, necessitate one particular theoretical scheme. Critics who prefer a different tack should feel free to chart an alternative course.

Mock rudeness is so ubiquitous in our culture that it is worth asking what purposes it serves. Take an example mentioned earlier: I attract the attention of a friend by shouting, "Hey, Meathead!" I do this to be funny but, as is well known, what people do to be funny, and what they find amusing, is often very revealing. So what does this sort of joking achieve? Two functions seem to be especially important. First, teasing is one way that we establish, affirm and strengthen bonds of friendship and intimacy. This is not true of every relationship, of course; intimacy is presumably possible where teasing never occurs. But in our increasingly informal culture, such relationships are probably quite rare. Indeed, how much license you have to transgress normal rules of polite behaviour is often a fair indicator of how close you are to someone. The door-knock test—would you enter a person's house or office without knocking, or after knocking but before they answer, or only after they have opened the door to you, is one useful boundary marker. The french fry test—would you take a french fry from another person's plate without asking?—is another.¹⁶

The other main function of mock rudeness is to provide a way for us to engage in power struggles within safe parameters. One does not have to be a dyed-in-the-wool Nietzschean to recognize that bantering is commonly agonistic. Even the most good-humoured teasing contains the threat of something stronger, like the pat on the cheek from the Godfather signifying the possibility of something less gentle. In most relationships and in most groups, power is not distributed symmetrically; teasing is one important way in which asymmetries and pecking orders are established, sustained, and challenged.¹⁷ To be able to come up with spontaneous and original jests, insults, or witticisms at someone else's expense raises one's standing relative to one's victims. Those who realize that they are less adept at this sort of jousting either have to accept their situation or deploy cruder tactics, such as clichéd insults or a louder voice. Here, too, mock rudeness can sometimes become genuinely offensive and harmful, just as the rule-governed violence in an ice-hockey game occasionally slides into a genuine brawl.

v) *Pedagogy*

A rather different kind of intentional rudeness that is morally acceptable occurs in certain pedagogical contexts. The sergeant major who tells a recruit that he's a "piece of rat crap not fit to be flushed down the toilet let alone wear military uniform" is obviously being deliberately rude. He may, of course, just be a bully who enjoys abusing his position knowing that he is protected from any riposte by strict military rules. But it is generally accepted that the sergeant major's task of turning raw recruits into toughened soldiers and the group into a disciplined cohesive unit requires the suspension of social niceties observed outside the barracks. In effect, this is another case of intentional rudeness being justified by its long-term benefits. But it is also, like teasing, a case where metaconventions permit transgressions of rules that operate elsewhere. This is the point of the hackneyed line, "You're in the army now, soldier!" The sergeant is, among other things, a teacher; and teachers sometimes use rudeness as a pedagogical tool, speaking to or about students in a manner that would be unacceptable outside the classroom. In the past such treatment was commonplace and generally approved: in traditional British schools it was considered essential! Increasingly, though, it has come to be viewed as pedagogically unsound and morally suspect. The reasons for this bring us back to an issue raised at the outset—the perceived decline in civility.

The decline in civility

Rudeness, I have argued, always involves the violation of a convention. Civility, politeness, and good manners rest on the observance of conventions. In communities where the form of life is overwhelmingly shaped by long-standing traditions, the social conventions that stipulate how people should behave in various situations are well defined and universally known. Modernity, however, is Heracleitean. We live in a world of continual change where "all that is solid melts into air." Ever since Marx identified this as the defining characteristic of modern society, it has been a commonplace that knowledge, technology, economic organization, life styles, beliefs, and values are constantly evolving. So, too, are our social conventions. The complex consequences of

this social dynamism include, among other things, technological and political progress, artistic innovation, greater social mobility, excitement, anxiety, and confusion.

Consider a few examples of how conventions have changed over the past hundred years:

- men no longer lift their hats to women
- women no longer have to keep their arms and legs covered in public
- swearing has become more socially acceptable both in private and in public
- the occasions when men are expected to wear ties are far fewer
- homosexuality and gay rights can be discussed, and gay couples display their affections openly, at least in some places
- people have more freedom to grow their hair long, shave their heads, dye their hair green, display tattoos, ornament themselves with nose rings or lip studs and so on without making themselves social outcasts
- booing, hissing, and catcalling at theatrical performances is no longer acceptable
- dropping round at someone's house without phoning beforehand is now frowned on in many communities

Confusion over what the conventions are, when they apply and to whom, are inevitable in a period of rapid cultural change. Such confusion naturally leads to more instances of people violating, or being perceived to violate, social conventions. This creates the impression that civility is on the decline, but the impression may be misleading, more an effect of living in a dynamic modern society than a result of the continually deepening moral turpitude of the rising generations.

Let us focus on a concrete example that will be familiar to many readers. I have heard college professors complain when some undergraduate has addressed them by their first name rather than more formally as "Dr." or "Professor" So-and So. "What gives with today's students?" they ask. "Who do they think they are? When I was a student I would never have dreamed of calling my professors by their first names."

The complainer is correct. In the past students were expected to address their professors more formally, and they understood this expectation. But since the Second

World War, the domain in which our culture insists on formal proprieties has clearly shrunk; casualness and informality have become the norm in many spheres, including the academy. For a long time now, most professors have addressed students by their first names, and quite a few have invited students to reciprocate. In this situation uncertainty is understandable. And if a student happens to have spent a lot of time with professors who operate on a first name basis, it is quite reasonable for them to assume that other professors will find this acceptable also.¹⁸

This example in fact illustrates more than just the difficulty of knowing what is appropriate when the conventions are in flux. It also exemplifies an ongoing conflict between two general principles governing social relations. On the one hand, we have a *hierarchical principle* which supports asymmetrical expectations in relationships. This principle underlies the idea that children should be seen and not heard, respect their elders and obey their parents. It is still evident in the way doctors and nurses interact with each other and with their patients. And it obviously informs most teacher-student relationships. The Confucian code, which lays down strict rules to ensure that children, parents, siblings, spouses, friends, and so on offer and receive appropriate degrees of deference, is one of the best known and most thorough realizations of this principle.¹⁹

On the other hand, an *egalitarian* principle, according to which every individual is entitled to equal opportunities, rights and respect, has become fundamental to modern moral and political thinking. And egalitarianism seeks to level hierarchies. In recent times, notable progress has been made in this direction, most obviously in the way that various kinds of discrimination have become unacceptable in many social spheres. But egalitarianism has also found expression in, and altered, the warp and woof of everyday life in homes, at school, in the workplace, and on the street. Families are less authoritarian, more democratic; fewer jobs require uniforms that make immediately apparent differences in rank; even college professors are less pompous than in the past.

These two principles—the hierarchical and the egalitarian—are constantly jostling for predominance.²⁰ Most of us endorse egalitarianism in a general way but still go along with traditional hierarchical practices on many occasions (for example, using or insisting on titles, pulling rank, accepting or expecting status-based privileges, deferring to

seniority). This is neither surprising nor necessarily objectionable. Both principles have cogent rationales. Equality fosters friendship, self-respect, and, sometimes, better decision-making. But hierarchy, too, can serve valuable purposes. A well-defined structure of authority is more efficient in some situations (for example, in the army, or on board the USS Enterprise), and it also helps to maintain a useful distance between, say, teacher and pupil, or doctor and patient. Bound up with child rearing practices, educational organization, and the division of labour, hierarchies are deeply entrenched in most cultures. And what look like moves towards more egalitarian relationships often mask continuing differences in real power. Even where first names are used, teachers still grade students, and bosses can still fire workers.

But although the new egalitarianism and informality may sometimes create misleading impressions about the true nature of relationships, this is not a reason for preferring something like the transparency of military protocol. Social conventions, rules of etiquette, modes of address, and so forth are not mere shells that contain forms of life, without affecting them the way glass bottles hold wine without affecting its taste. Changes in protocol both reflect and promote changes in the way people interact and relate to one another. The fact that nowadays fewer sons call their father “Sir” indicates a real shift in the character of father-son relationships, part of a gradual democratization of the family. The formality with which Jane Austen’s characters treat each other compared to how people interact today is linked to the tighter sexual inhibitions and taboos operating among the English upper middle class at the end of the eighteenth century.

The perennial complaint that civility is declining while rudeness is on the rise is thus probably misplaced. The problem is not that people today are trampling underfoot the time-honored rules of polite behaviour; the problem is rather that these rules are in flux and there is therefore some confusion about what they are. Inevitably, in these circumstances, it will often happen that one person’s confusion leads to another person taking offence. But confusion and anxiety are part of the price we pay for living in a dynamic culture. Offence, too, is an unavoidable by-product of moral progress. The struggle to claim equal rights for ethnic minorities, women, and gays would not have got off the ground if people had eschewed any action likely to cause offence.

This is not to suggest that we should countenance or ignore impolite behaviour. But we should be cautious and, as a culture, self-conscious, before we jump on the bandwagon of tongue-clickers and head-shakers all remembering a golden age of good manners. The imagined alternative to our present fluid situation is a rooted stability in which everyone knows and does what is expected of them at all times. This Confucian ideal stimulates nostalgic longings, but like all ideals and most rememberings, it is *idealized*. Moreover, even if it were historically true, it is not a real option today. Our culture and our social conventions seem likely to keep changing for a long time to come. Our task is thus not to return to some golden age of civility but, rather, to self-consciously establish social conventions that adequately express our values (for instance, a judicious egalitarianism), foster sound moral attitudes (for instance, respect for persons, tolerance of difference), and facilitate understanding. The conventions we choose should also, if possible, contribute to making our culture more beautiful.

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Endnotes

¹ These findings were published in “Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America”, a report prepared by Public Agenda for the Pew Charitable Trusts. Other polls echo this report. A 1996 U.S. News and Bozell Worldwide poll found that 90% of Americans viewed incivility as a serious problem, and 78% believed the problem had grown worse over the preceding decade.

² Sometimes, the decline in the social importance of formal etiquette is taken as evidence for a decline in civility. But it could, and to a large extent should, be viewed as a shift in our culture's conception of what constitutes politeness. Moreover, as John F. Kasson documents in *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), there are many respects in which manners could be said to have improved over the last two hundred years.

³ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Section 67 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

⁴ An unscientific trawling of a couple of thesauruses and the OED yielded the following list of terms closely related to 'rude': discourteous, impolite, disrespectful, irreverent, uncouth, uncivil, unmannerly, impertinent, impudent, fresh, tasteless, inconsiderate, ill-mannered, undignified, insolent, loutish, insensitive, clownish, clod-hopping, ungallant, ruffianly, saucy, cheeky, malapert, ungracious, breezy, primitive, inelegant, ignorant, unrefined, harsh, curt, brusque, uncivilized, coarse, vulgar, crude, savage, ungentle, brutish, violent, tempestuous, ill-bred, common, unfashionable, inurbane, ungentlemanly, plebian, provincial, unchivalrous, boorish, unsophisticated, robust, rough, sturdy, rugged, rustic, blunt, simple. The fact that we have so many words to identify different kinds of rudeness presumably says something about our culture. Exactly what is considered below.

⁵ How to respond if a stranger starts dipping into your popcorn is an interesting question. Most people would probably just move their popcorn to the other hand, but a more creative response would be to start taking sips from the stranger's soda.

⁶ Anne Lloyd Thomas, "Facts and Rudeness," *Mind* lxxvii (1958): 409.

⁷ A common moral dilemma is trying to decide whether or not to say or do something that might be criticized as an instance of failing to "mind your own business": for example, telling parents that they are being overindulgent or excessively strict with their children. Most of these cases fall between (5) and (6). Deciding when intervention is justified can be very difficult. A good number of the ethical queries discussed by Randy Cohen in his *New York Times Magazine* column "The Ethicist" are of this sort. See Randy Cohen, *The Good, The Bad & the Difference: How to tell right from wrong in everyday situations* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

⁸ I take the question, 'Is the person aware that they are violating a convention?' to be essentially the same as the question, 'Is the violation intentional? But to say that a person is violating a convention intentionally does not imply that they are violating it purposely. One is purposely rude only if being rude is part of the purpose of one's action. Thus, someone who queue jumps is only being intentionally rude; someone who throws beer in someone's face is being purposely rude. Now it could be objected here that awareness and intentionality are matters of degree, and, moreover, that they are not co-extensive. So someone could be described as being aware, in some sense, that they are violating a convention yet not so aware that the violation should be called intentional. From a theoretical point of view these are reasonable points, but I think there are practical benefits to riding roughshod over such subtleties. If someone says, "I was aware that I was breaking a rule but I didn't really mean to do it" we are naturally and justifiably skeptical. For we suspect that in prizing apart awareness and intentionality they are trying to create for themselves a moral loophole. Rather than allow this strategic possibility—both in other people and in ourselves—we should stitch the concepts together from the outset.

⁹ For further discussion of rudeness as a form of humour, see below.

¹⁰ This objection was raised by Larry Greil. The response was suggested to me by Randy Mayes.

¹¹ One of Lenin's reasons for recommending, shortly before his death, that Stalin be removed from the post of general secretary of the communist party was that he was too rude. Presciently, Lenin saw this failing as grounds for doubting that Stalin would use wisely the power already concentrated in his hands.

¹² A nice example of deliberately using an incorrect form of address is provided by Michael Moore in *Dude, Where's My Country?* when he addresses President George W. Bush as "Governor Bush" to succinctly express his view that Bush became president by improper means. This is a clear case of purposive rudeness. Some people might argue that if the mistake is accidental then it shouldn't be counted as rude. But if you failed to use someone's title accidentally and discovered your mistake later, you would probably worry that you had caused offence and would apologize if given the opportunity. Moreover, in apologizing, you probably would not say, "I wasn't being rude", but, rather, "I didn't mean to be rude." These normal responses indicate that the classification implied by my definition fits fairly well, on this point, with our normal way of thinking.

¹³ There is an often-told parable of an aristocratic lady (in some versions it is Elizabeth I) who perfectly exemplified this ideal of considerateness. One day she invited a loyal but lowly servant to have lunch with herself and some courtly friends. Before the meal was served, a bowl of water was passed around for the diners to rinse their fingers in. When the bowl was passed to the servant she misunderstood its purpose and, putting it to her lips, drank out of it. As the other guests started to snigger at this faux pas, the hostess took the bowl and put it to own lips, thereby saving her servant from embarrassment.

¹⁴ Sarah Buss examines in detail an interesting example of this sort that occurs in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* when Dorothea decides to violate social convention and ask Dr. Lydgate directly to tell her the truth regarding the circumstances that led to him being suspected of a crime. Her primary motive is to help Lydgate, whom she believes to be innocent. See Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109 (July 1999): 795-826.

¹⁵ Obviously, there are situations where a refusal to shake hands does not carry these meanings. You could be unfamiliar with the custom; you could be afraid that I will seize hold of you; you could be trying to avoid giving me your cold; you could believe that it is wrong for a man and a woman who are neither married nor related to touch each other (an interesting example of social conventions conflicting). But we are focusing here on rude behaviour that is justifiable, deliberate, and assertional.

¹⁶ Of course, casualness and informality, while they typically characterize close relationships, are not guarantors of genuine intimacy; nor should the quality and value of a relationship be viewed as a function of them. While the absence of teasing often indicates coldness or even fear, banter can easily become a substitute for, even an obstacle to, genuine conversation. Furthermore, as we noted earlier, even when the setting is thoroughly informal and the relationship close and strong—say between boisterous bantering siblings who share bedroom, bathroom, and confidences—there are still conventions in play. Even here, hanging up without saying goodbye, failing to keep an appointment for a trivial reason, using terms of abuse stronger than those generally accepted within the group, may cross a line, causing offence and inviting criticism. Furthermore, close relationships commonly introduce additional conventions that one is expected to observe, such as demonstrating affection with hugs and kisses, or helping one's host to clean up after a meal.

¹⁷ A scene in Michael Cimino's film *The Deer Hunter* illustrates perfectly this function of mock rudeness. After a brief stop on a drive into the mountains, Mike (played by Robert de Niro) drives off before John, one of his fellow hunters has got back into the car. John shouts and curses, and eventually Mike reverses the car back almost to where he is standing. John walks up to the car, but just as he is about to get in, Mike drives off again. This happens several times. The scene underscore both John's place in the group hierarchy and Mike's intense will to power.

¹⁸ The stickler for titles may say that the proper way for a student to deal with the uncertainty is to ask a professor at the outset how he or she prefers to be addressed. This would indeed be a simple solution, but it is hardly fair to expect it. For one thing, a student may well feel shy or awkward about making this sort of enquiry which, after all, involves an admission of ignorance. For another, in most cases the professor will not have followed this procedure with every student; so why should one assume that students are under such an obligation?

¹⁹ One of John F. Kasson's main points in *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* is to show how strict codes of etiquette have often been one of the means used by the privileged to express and reinforce their dominant social position.

²⁰ Mark Caldwell makes a similar point in *A Short History of Rudeness: Manners, Morals and Misbehavior in Modern America* (New York: Picador, 1999): 92.