Received: 23 August 2023 | Accepted: 27 August 2023

DOI: 10.1111/jola.12406

Linguistic Anthropology

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking politeness with Henri Bergson

Duranti, Alessandro, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. x + 176 pp.

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Rethinking Politeness with Henri Bergson engages with Bergson's "*Discours sur la politeness*"—an essay he addressed in 1892 to pupils at the Lycée Henri IV, a public secondary school in Paris. Following Bergson, the authors of this edited volume explore the ethical and theoretical dimensions of politeness, tying them to a larger discussion about citizenship, democracy, and human sociability without losing sight of the specific sociohistorical context out of which Bergson's ideas were born: the turn of the 20th century French republicanism. The purpose of delving into a minor work by a somewhat forgotten philosopher is to examine how Bergson's ideas can expand our contemporary understanding of politeness. This exploration, as Alessandro Duranti notes, goes beyond viewing politeness as a functional tool that rational actors employ to achieve specific objectives in and through interaction (p. 5).

Bergson's politeness involves a three-tiered structure: politeness of manners, politeness of mind, and politeness of heart. Politeness of manners adheres to societal conventions, while politeness of mind involves the art of expressing respect and esteem. Bergson identifies politeness of mind as originating from a genuine love for equality, whereas politeness of heart embodies goodness, essentially a virtue (p. 16). Although Bergson primarily focuses on exploring politeness of heart, this form of politeness cannot operate effectively without the presence of the other two forms. For instance, Bergson notes that the goodness of politeness of heart "would perhaps remain ineffective if the penetration of the mind [politeness of mind] did not add to it finesse and a deep knowledge of the human heart" (p. 18). Bergson encouraged his students to practice politeness of heart, which involves perspectival shifts and an opening of the self to others. However, this ethic of politeness is not ideologically neutral; the love of equality upon which it is based implies various forms of inequality—a point of agreement between Bergson and the authors in this volume.

Mahalia Gayle, in chapter 2, answers the question of what such equality looks like. The noble person who has mastered a politeness of heart, Mahalia Gayle writes, "treats the Other politely and in doing so creates a *feeling* of equality for as long as the interaction lasts" (p. 51). This feeling is an interactional achievement against the backdrop of social stratification. Perhaps paradoxically, Bergson and some of his contemporaries yearned for a type of politeness as practiced by the pre-republican nobility, as they believed it could uphold the revolutionary values of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité among the new French masses and rising bourgeoisie (Gayle p. 47). Gayle's point is that Bergson's evocation of the motto of the French Republic harkens back to pre-revolutionary aristocratic social structures, suggesting

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that his framing of politeness is rooted in the values of the Ancien Régime and that the love for equality, a crucial element for Bergson, should be understood in this light.

Judith Irvine, in chapter 3, delves into the socially mediated dimensions of politeness. Since politeness, like any other aspect of human sociability, is expressed in semiotic forms, it remains shackled to all the particularities of context and interaction. And yet, with Bergson Irvine, she wishes to elevate politeness to an overall ethics, a pursuit that, as she notes, "requires imagination, social analysis, and the possibility of seeing one's interlocutor as human with needs and fundamental rights" (p. 63). The latter, as Aliya Morgenstern in chapter 4 demonstrates, starts at a young age. Morgenstern analyzes how children are taught to be polite. She identifies politeness scripts, which are modeled by caregivers. While scripts model proper behavior, they also allow children to switch perspectives in interaction, which is important for creativity. For Morgenstern, *politeness of manners* performed through such scripts acts as a scaffolding that "provides the affordances for politeness of mind and of the heart to blossom through role reversal and perspective-shifting and through displays of affect" (p. 80). Whatever an ethics of politeness might look like, both its moral implications—that is, all humans have fundamental rights—and interactional frameworks are taught through culturally specific politeness scripts.

In chapter 5, Graham M. Jones delves into the transformative influence of politeness on individuals' development as citizens. Jones analyzes a comic strip featuring a Black French girl recounting an encounter with a school principal. Although her school theoretically adheres to color-blind principles, its underlying racism prompts the girl to exhibit what Jones terms *impolite civility*: "a manifestation of interpersonal civil disobedience while maintaining the premise of equality that citizenship confers" (p. 93). It is the principal who failing, to live up to the French ideal of equality—however polite in his expressions of it—subverts the social contract of a pluralistic France. As Jones illustrates, acts of impoliteness can serve to restore equality, highlighting the need for an ethics of politeness to acknowledge the role of impoliteness in this dynamic.

In chapter 6 Terra Edwards shows that what is considered polite or impolite can largely differ by its semiotic modality. Becoming polite in a fully embodied modality, such as the protactile one that the DeafBlind community in Seattle was developing during Edwards' fieldwork, requires a certain flexibility, which Bergson associates with politeness of mind. Edwards articulates this as "the ability to renounce old habits and put the preoccupations of others before one's own" (p. 101). The embodied experience of protactile politeness required Edwards to renounce her own habits and to "learn to be polite all over again," underscoring the significance of being receptive to others' perspectives (p. 106).

In chapter 7, Kamala Russell provides us with an alternative view of politeness that, unlike Bergson's, centers not around recognition but "reflects a discipline of avoidance" (p. 109). Russell's avoidant politeness reminds me of what Jones calls *polite incivility*: the showing of etiquette "without the assumption of equal citizenship" (p. 93). For Russell's interlocutors, women in the highland areas of Dhofar (Oman), however, it is not about equal citizenship but about one's orientation toward the divine in Islam. Consequently, while Bergson's ethics of politeness emphasizes receptivity to others, the "work of submission," as Russell argues, "requires a disengagement from the other and retreat to concern for one's own soul that is enabled by affable, welcoming, and calm performance of relaxation" (p. 119). Unlike Bergson's emphasis on a separation between self and Other, Russell's interlocutors incorporate a tripartite orientation that includes self, Other, and the Divine. This perspective leads to a distinct ethics of politeness, one that is less focused on interpersonal vulnerability and more concerned with respectful interpersonal disengagement and alignment with the Divine.

Keith M. Murphy delves into the realm of polite computing, examining how programmers and designers incorporate politeness into personal devices like Amazon Alexa, Google Home, and Apple's Siri. His analysis in chapter 8 reveals that such forms of politeness can

inadvertently reinforce divisions within broader social structures. Murphy argues that, due to varying cultural perceptions of deserving conversational partners, achieving a universally accepted conceptualization of politeness might be impossible (p. 131). While I agree with murphy on this point, I am less convinced by his assertion that "the servantry model that elite Western designers have used to create [digital assistants] compels everyone…to engage with these devices according to that elite behavioral scheme of servant and served" (p. 137). Putting cross-cultural variations aside, hierarchical stratification and servant-served dynamics extend beyond the Western context. Additionally, considering the labor of non-Western designers in Silicon Valley and the multinational reach of companies that they work for prompts us to question whether the politeness exhibited by Apple's Siri, for instance, is truly defined from the viewpoint of a "white gentry," as Murphy posits (p. 134).

Both Jason Throop in chapter 9 and William Hanks in chapter 10 explore the philosophical and affective dimensions of Bergson's politeness. Throop contends that concepts like grace and sympathy are connected to the perception of pleasing bodily movements (p. 145), while Hanks reminds us that Bergson's conceptualization of politeness, though not excluding representation or language, emphasizes the virtues of politeness of heart and intuition (p. 172). Grace, sympathy, and even intuition are key for intersubjective synchronization and timing: knowing when to say something and when to listen. It is through such micro-attunements in conversation that, as Throop notes, "politeness and ethics co-emerge and co-imbricate" (pp. 145–6).

The contributors to this edited volume have shown genuine regard for Bergson's address. Some have examined it from the perspective of their fieldwork, while others have explored its philosophical and historical roots. The prospect lies in using Bergson's ideas not as a model but rather as a thought experiment that can help us delve into the transitory nature of human sociability—offering valuable insights into the complexities of politeness and/or interaction. While it is inadvisable to universalize Bergson's framework, Bergson's politeness, as Duranti notes, "can be used to enter the flow of live encounters in previously unexplored ways" (p. 39). What such novel perspectives look like will differ, but that is exactly the point: thinking with Bergson necessitates flow and flexibility from us, like that at the core of his ethics of politeness.

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