

Everyday Aesthetic Practices, Ethics and Tact

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Introduction

The discussions on ethics and politics often explore the importance of aesthetic factors in the totality of life: if we want to live well, how do aesthetic values, knowledge and skills relate to other factors that guide our actions and thoughts? The question is also important in terms of understanding everyday aesthetics. In recent years, the ideas of classic writers, such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Søren Kierkegaard and Theodor W. Adorno, have been taken further, for example, by Arnold Berleant (e.g. [2010]), Jacques Rancière (e.g. [1999] and [2006]) and Crispin Sartwell (2010). Views differ on whether ethics, aesthetics and politics always inevitably overlap, whether they can sometimes be separated from each other, or whether one has more importance than others. Writers on these subjects, however, seem to have one thing in common: they discuss things on a relatively general level, although they do offer analysis of individual cases, too.

This text is written within this broad tradition, but my goals are much narrower in scope than those of universalist theories. I will attempt to illuminate everyday ethics and the role of aesthetics within it, by focusing on only one concept and on the phenomena and questions it opens up. I will discuss only a small part of a broad issue and leave the political implications largely implicit. My topic is *tact*, which I understand as an attitude toward behavior that guides action and thought, and brings together ethics and aesthetics. By focusing on one special aspect of ethics, I can offer a clearer picture of the topic than an overview could, and, as far as I know, phenomena emerging through tact have not been widely discussed.

Tact remains a fruitful concept even today, although people may find the term old-fashioned and shy away from using it: the related forms of behavior and thought have not disappeared. My main argument is that people still generally pursue tact in everyday situations, but tactful behavior will inevitably lead to conflicting situations in which one is only "in step" with certain things and in conflict with many others. However, the principle of tact strives to hide its conflictual aspects, unlike, for example, confrontation-based political thinking. Within the framework of tact, there is no escaping the conflict between aiming for good results but at the same time producing negative outcomes, which emphasizes the special tragic nature of tact. I will come back to this topic in more detail at the end of the article.

I will start by presenting a few recent example cases from my home country of Finland, which feature situations in which tact is centrally involved. I will then discuss tact in relation to some of the neighboring concepts and studies on them, and will conclude with my main topic, that is, a conceptual analysis of tact. My approach emphasizes the conceptual, that is, I am not primarily concerned with the empirical study of tact, but strive to clarify what it is that we actually mean by it. A broader empirical analysis of the contexts and ways in which the concept of tact is connected to concrete phenomena, and how these connections vary by time and culture, would require another type of forum. Below, I will refer to some studies in this vein.

Tact manifests itself in a variety of ways. One way is related to the objects and articles that fill up our everyday lives and that are crucially linked to our behavior. We use objects to express our aesthetic and ethical values to other people and to create connections with them. Although this text is not really directly concerned with the aesthetics of everyday objects, I think that one can use tact as an approach to understanding it: tact is related to objects such as interior design items, clothes and consumer electronics, in so far as their appearance and use is concerned, and this is an important dimension in everyday aesthetics. One can, therefore, use tact as an approach to understanding the aesthetic-ethical choices made by both the designers and users of various objects. Another way of expressing these choices is to talk about the practices and principles of everyday aesthetics¹.

¹ This text is a slightly edited version of the original Finnish article, which was published in the magazine *Tiede & Edistys* (Science and Progress), issue 4/2011, and which won the Kone Foundation's Vuoden tiedekynä ("the scientific article of the year") award in 2012. I have explored everyday

"Everything OK with you?"

In a seminar held on Monday 24 January 2011, Matti Halmesmäki, the President and CEO of Kesko, Finland's second largest retailing chain, used the expression «a good figure of a minister» («kokovartaloministeri» in Finnish) to describe the then prime minister of Finland, Ms. Mari Kiviniemi. Apparently, Halmesmäki's aim was to compliment Kiviniemi on her looks and state that she not only has a sharp head on her shoulders but that she has a figure to match. His choice of words soon caused controversy, and for the following week or so, it remained the topic of the day in the press, radio, television, the internet and countless break rooms. As late as April, a Google search with the key Finnish words «Halmesmäki kokovartaloministeri» produced almost 8,000 hits, while «kokovartaloministeri» produced more than 20,000 hits. Some people thought that Halmesmäki's remark had been inappropriate, while others thought it was amusing, saying that the people who were offended did not have a sense of humor. While Halmesmäki's choice of words clearly constitutes a controversial case, it is nevertheless an example of behavior that many consider tactless and therefore condemnable and counterproductive for the community.

A similar debate took place in May 2011 when the Finnish men's national ice hockey team arrived in Finland after winning the world championships, and some of the players were visibly drunk in public. Often, tact is only recognized as an issue through negation, that is, when dealing with a lack of tact. The basic assumption is that people behave tactfully and that, in the normal state of affairs, tact does not merit any special attention. The scolding of Halmesmäki and the ice hockey champions in the media proves that if people, especially public figures, exceed a certain limit of tactlessness, very many people will find it offensive. Even those who are not offended will recognize when people's behavior is tactless. On 29 January 2011, a contributor using the alias "Kaunis ja fiksu" wrote on the *Helsingin Sanomat* discussion forum:

It is alright to say nice things about women and men, it boosts your self-esteem. It is not sexist to admire a co-worker's new hairstyle or tie, whereas slapping the butt of a secretary or a

aesthetics and its relationship to art-based aesthetics in my other published works, including the book *Aesthetics of the Unavoidable* (1998) and the articles *Variations in Artification* (2012) and *What is "Everyday" in Everyday Aesthetics* (2013).

waitress, certainly is. Halmesmäki's comment may have been somewhat tactless, but has anyone asked Ms. Kiviniemi whether she was offended?

I am not taking a stand on whether Halmesmäki violated just the general requirements of tactful behavior or whether he was guilty of something more serious. Whatever the truth, it is obvious that the limits of tact were at least tested – people noticed it, and most of them disapproved of it.

My third recent example of tact in action comes from the world of fiction but, I think, hits home even harder. Chapter one of the Finnish writer Mikko Rimminen's excellent novel, *Nenäpäivä* conjures up the main characters and sets the tone of the relationships between people, and between people and inanimate objects. The protagonist, Irma, has accidentally found herself in the home of her almost namesake, Irja Jokipaltio, and she thinks to herself: «She was nice, Irja was. We could sit quietly, too, and did not have to chatter all the time. We would just look out into the yard, as children, dressed in overalls in all possible colors, crawled under the autumn-tinted trees, like some sea snakes from a nature show. And then we would slip quite naturally into conversation». The book ends on a hopeful note, when, along the way, various people have repeatedly asked Irma «everything OK with you? [...] If we could just somehow all of us be together, be together and be nice to each other». The rich image emerging of Irma over the course of the book cannot be expressed concisely without making gross simplifications. Yet I may venture that Irma's underlying disposition is to take others into consideration and to be accepted at the same time: «That I wouldn't cause any harm». Her intentions may, at least to some extent, be similar to Halmesmäki's, but she goes about things in a different style.

Like all good art, *Nenäpäivä* clarifies and complements our view of phenomena that most people find important and familiar in real life. It does so through exaggeration and extension, yet, for this very reason, it improves our understanding; the analytical power of precise fiction is far greater than that of tabloid newspapers and reactive online writings. *Nenäpäivä* is one of the richest single-person perspective accounts of how aiming for tact guides a person's life and of the gap between this goal and actual behavior. Furthermore, the book does not limit itself to discussing the negation of tact, tactlessness, unlike what often happens in public debate. The book's critical and sales success may be an indication that the theme resonates with many people, which is no wonder, as the pursuit and evaluation of tact is constant and extends to all areas of life. Tact is expected in working life, from both manag-

ers and employees, teachers, nurses, priests, waiters, telemarketers, taxi drivers, reporters; and outside work, from all those with whom we deal, from loved ones to people we happen to meet in the elevator.

But what is the requirement for tact and its evaluation all about? What things are highlighted in connection with tact?

Earlier takes on tact

Themes closely related to tact have been widely discussed previously. Of course, you cannot say that tact is equivalent to taste, discretion, sociability or other similar topics that are important from the point of view of everyday aesthetics; each term seems to refer to a slightly different conceptual whole and field of phenomena, that is, the words are not synonymous. However, I assume that tact, like a variety of other similar concepts, has blurry boundaries and partly overlaps with neighboring concepts. Therefore, some of the observations I make in this article would probably equally well characterize the other listed concepts, while, on the other hand, the discussion on taste and the analysis of sociability, for example, shed light on tact. There may not be any one single element of tact that cannot be found in some other concepts. Yet I think that tact can be understood to refer to a conceptual *combination* that no other term covers. To use more technical language, the term's extension and intension are not identical with the scope and content of any other term. This article does not allow a more detailed comparison of the related concepts, so I will focus on analyzing the characteristics of tact, and I can only state that my views of these characteristics have been influenced by the above-mentioned analyses of taste, sociability and other similar concepts, of which I will only highlight some of the most important ones; a more comprehensive comparison is offered, for example, by Joseph Früchtl (1996).

On the boundaries of ethics and aesthetics, the topic has been given attention ever since Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*: how to act in a way that is good, convincing, smooth and agreeable at the same time. Classics from the 16th century include Baldesar Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* and Desiderius Erasmus' highly practical *De civilitate morum puerilium*. Both give instructions on how to behave, offering models for the Halmesmäkis of their time and of later ages. The must-read works of the 18th century are Friedrich Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* and, from the world of fic-

tion, Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Both emphasize the importance of an aesthetic relationship with the world, emerging through art, and of educating oneself, for the attainment of a good life. The lively 18th-century British debate on taste, from David Hume to the Earl of Shaftesbury, can be seen to have been concerned with tactful behavior: how to be part of a community and act in such a way that you become accepted, noticed and appreciated, at least partially owing to your good behavior.

A more recent thinker, who would deserve a separate study, is Georg Simmel. He has discussed taste, sociability and other topics closely related to tact, by combining sociological, psychological and philosophical-aesthetic views, in a way that is, in part, linked to Schiller and Kant. Tellingly, in a Finnish translation of the essay *Psychologie der Diskretion*, Tiina Huuhtanen has Simmel speak specifically about tact (Simmel [2005]), even though it is not the term *Takt* that appears in the original text, but *Diskretion* (see Simmel [1993a], Simmel [1993b]). In some passages, Huuhtanen also uses «hienotunteisuus», the Finnish word for discretion, and considering Simmel's views (and the etymology of the word), “restraint” would be a justifiable choice. I think that this demonstrates the closeness of the concepts and the terms that refer to them.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the position of aesthetics in the big picture of human life has been at least touched on by many writers in philosophy and social science, such as Michel Foucault (1990), Terry Eagleton (1990), Michel Maffesoli (1996) and Jacques Rancière. Some of the ideas of these writers come close to the study of tact, even though the word “tact” (and the French *tact*, the German *Takt* and the Swedish *takt*) is used relatively infrequently. Other topics that have been analyzed, partly based on Simmel, are taste (Bourdieu [1984]; Gronow [1997]), aesthetic experience (Schulze [1992]; Shusterman [1997]), and sociability (Gronow [1997]). The common thread running through all these is that they emphasize the importance of aesthetic elements in human existence.

There are, however, some writers who have dealt specifically with tact. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, links tact (*Takt, Taktgefühl*) with humanities subjects and, through them, with the more general notions of cultural understanding and self-development (*Bildung*): to (hermeneutically) understand works of art, history and cultural acts in general requires tact, which for Gadamer means a tradition-conscious, yet context-specific sensitivity, with no generic and explicit rules (Gadamer [1990]: 22). Gadamer's approach to the theme focuses on interpretive theory and even epistemology, rather than the characteristics of human inter-

action, which is in contrast to Simmel, who operates on concepts close to tact, or Max van Manen, who works in educational research and who has particularly researched the importance of tact in pedagogy (van Manen [1991]). Van Manen considers tact as a prerequisite for all successful teaching, and I will come back to his ideas in more detail below.

Theorists are only one side to the story. The subject area has been frequently, comprehensively and effectively discussed at a much more practical level in the countless works that reproduce Erasmus' ideas, including books of manners, schools' codes of conduct, and management skills guides and courses, not to mention the instructions that parents constantly give to their children: «that was not a nice thing to do; don't point the finger at people; look people in the eye when you say hello; and when you're in a theater, you sit quietly».

These books and instructions are very influential, which is why some researchers have focused on analyzing them. The most famous of them is Norbert Elias (1994), whose work has, in recent years, been most directly continued by Cas Wouters (2007). Having analyzed books of manners and behavior in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and the USA in the last hundred plus years, Wouters concludes, in particular, that the trend is toward "informalization", that is, our behavior today is in many respects freer and less controlled by explicit rules than, for example, a hundred years ago, although there are also examples of manners becoming "reformatted". Because Wouters approaches manners and behavior from a variety of angles, the topic of tact can be considered to be one thread under his wide umbrella of interests, although he does not discuss tact explicitly. In any case, the relationship between informalization and tact is an interesting theme that would also deserve empirical study. In conceptual terms, the relationship seems quite straightforward: if our behavior is controlled by clear and explicit rules or etiquette, there is no real need for tact. If, on the other hand, there are no, or very few, rules, the art of tact becomes more important. Wouters' material would seem to support the idea that this is a fairly common view; he quotes (and translates) a German book of manners from 1988 that includes the slogan "Fewer formalities – more tact!" (Wouters [2007]: 178). To demonstrate how widespread this view is would require a study of its own, so I will confine myself to conceptual analysis and will shortly come back to why informality and the art of tact are related.

Writers who touch upon tact and related subjects repeatedly raise the idea that our actions and relationship with the world are simultaneously influenced by many intertwined

factors, from theories of truth to opinions of what is right and what is aesthetically valuable. One consideration, then, is how to make tact a characteristic part of our behavior. The pursuit of tact is simultaneously linked to theories of truth, ethical values and aesthetics, although the emphasis is on ethics and aesthetics.

The motivation for recent ethical discussions has often been to find answers to the question of how to behave in today's globalized world, where we inevitably meet very different people who do not share any common and easily definable tradition, culture or norm. How do we get along if there are no common and general rules, and how do we do so fairly and smoothly? Perhaps this, too, could be considered to be one variation of informalization. The answers to the challenges of global ethics range from the Rawlsian veil of ignorance (Rawls [1971]) to contemporary takes on virtue ethics (MacIntyre [1981]). One generic theoretical model is Jonathan Dancy's (2004) moral particularism. According to this idea, judging actions to be good or right needs to be done on a case-by-case basis. No generally valid principles exist, nor are they needed, and what is desirable in one context may not be so in another. If this is the case, are there any guiding principles – except for the vague and practically meaningless "act right, be good"? How do we achieve this type of behavior in concrete everyday situations, and what guides our choices? What do we do when we are not behind an imagined veil of ignorance but before it, encountering actual people and things? How do we avoid complete subjectivism and relativism that can justify any action?

The discussion of tact can be seen to fall under broader ethical questions such as these. We may think that whatever the broader world view or ethical approach that guides people's actions – whether it is markedly particularistic or leans towards an idea of universalism – one dimension in human interaction will in any case be tact, which in turn is realized in action and its evaluation in concrete instances of interaction. Tact also emphasizes the aesthetic point of view in a way that I will come back to in more detail shortly. Views vary as to whether we are dealing with "behavioral fine tuning", operative alongside other principles, or an absolutely essential faculty that may even dominate other perspectives. I will not here take a stand on how essential or marginal tact, as a perspective, generally speaking, is. I will focus on analyzing what we are dealing with *if* tact is emphasized. At the end of this article, I will come back to the limitations of this perspective, which is connected to its relative relevance to ethical analysis.

What is tact?

The word "tact" has, for some time, had an old-fashioned ring to it. For some, it may first conjure up ideas such as court etiquette or the overly correct ladies of black-and-white movies scolding young boys. However, it deserves to be revived, because it conveniently brings together a number of issues that are essential for human existence. It points to a trait in our coexistence that is constantly being evaluated in all interaction; that is not believed to have explicit rules; that is not very often openly discussed; and that, if disregarded, is likely to elicit a strong reaction. A tactless person does not have the ability to ask or even consider the question "everything OK with you?", even when the rest of the community assumes that this is what they should do.

In everyday speech, the word "tact" refers to behavior that is considerate, respectful, empathetic, responsible, and even open-hearted. It promotes and facilitates mutual understanding, and all the involved parties find it pleasant. It is not shocking, destructive or aggressive. The result, or at least the aim, is a good mood, a sense of togetherness, a strengthening of the group, maintenance of a good rapport, and satisfaction. Yet the word itself does not directly reveal what people should or should not do in order to be tactful.

Often, tact is associated with markedly aesthetic qualities such as elegance, style, grace, discretion and sensitivity. It is also customary to emphasize that the art of tact is not about adherence to explicit rules. On the contrary, a person of tact knows how to choose behaviors and objects that are pleasing and convincing to them personally and to others, even if no rules exist for a particular activity or situation. An idea in this vein is also highlighted in Gadamer's hermeneutic interpretation of tact. And vice versa: just rigidly adhering to rules, if such exist, is not enough to produce tactful behavior. One can even think that tact belongs specifically to that part or level of human activity for which there are no unambiguous, explicit rules, and for which such rules may not even exist. This can be linked to Wouters' observations about the informalization of manners; if his analysis about the trend of informalization is correct, there is, in this sense, more room for tact than in the past.

When shifting the emphasis to elegance and the related absence of rules, tact and its ethics approach the debates in aesthetics. When viewed like this, both tact and aesthetics are essentially about the sensory, context-specific evaluation of things, rather than their universal definition or precise measurement, within which the rules of the SI system are

central and which is constantly being used as a perspective that guides action. Tactful behavior would, then, be produced and evaluated in the same way as aesthetic behavior in connection with, for example, clothing, landscapes and art (see Sibley [1987]; Naukkarinen [2010]).

An associated idea is that tactful behavior cannot be planned in advance, but it is always an art of acting in the here-and-now. The art of tact is a skill that is only realized in spontaneous action. Something that has been carefully planned beforehand may not work in the actual real-life situation, as with Halmesmäki's humorously intended remark. It is a different issue whether this absence of rules can ultimately be extended to apply to aesthetic and ethical activity more generally, but it is certainly commonly associated with tact.

Tact is sometimes linked with restraint and a form of quietness. Just as important as what we do is what we deliberately leave undone and unsaid: "We could sit quietly, too...." It is this aspect of tact that makes it understandable why Simmel's term *Diskretion* was translated into "tact" (or the equivalent word in Finnish). Perhaps because of this aspect, tact is sometimes associated with seriousness and even a lack of humor, even though such characteristics do not necessarily belong to it. In any case, behavior considered to be the opposite of tactful is described as being rude, inconsiderate, barbaric, indelicate, impolite, unrefined, coarse, uncivilized, uneducated, inappropriate, intrusive, over-explicit, insensitive to nuance, noisy and even carnivalesque. We are constantly close to the definitions of good and bad taste and the art of diplomacy and good behavior.

Tactful behavior is also considered to be an indication of situational sensitivity, that is, a person being competent, confident and resourceful. This means a person who can improvise and respond appropriately to situations, even surprising ones, which evidently means a person of imagination. We are talking about a life skill that is so natural that you do not really have to think about it, focus on it, or make a separate effort for it. Or, at least, it is customary to behave in such a way that your behavior seems natural in the eyes of others, as Wouters' studies repeatedly show (see Wouters [2007]: 2). A person behaving tactfully and another person recognizing this can congratulate each other for their accomplishment: they are not boors, and they understand this distinction, although, of course, it does not do to flaunt it! Here, the discourse on taste and tactful behavior share the idea of people genuinely enjoying the choices they make, liking what they do. It is not a question of behaving in a certain way because of external factors, but personally desiring to behave so and appreciat-

ing it. A desire or enjoyment such as this can be understood as a product of Foucaultian biopower, which does not, however, remove the pleasure that people derive from behaving appropriately. Yet, in tact, the emphasis is decidedly on considering others, rather than on building personal status or getting personal pleasure.

When analyzing tact a little further, its corporeality and temporality are highlighted. If we consider an archaic sense of the word “tact”, meaning “a measure or beat in music”, we can find a link to music and dance. There is, as it were, a beat that people with tact can keep in the flow of changes in time. They know how to pace their steps, breathing, keeping their gaze and words in step with something that is constantly emerging and that may change abruptly, like an orchestra switching from tango to bossa nova. It is a physical skill, an art that cannot be replaced by any theoretical knowledge, any more than the art of cycling could be replaced by information gained from reading about cycling. The only way to learn and test tact is in practical situations, in which it emerges or is realized. Being out of step in these situations indicates clumsiness, which can be embarrassing, ridiculous and even downright destructive. Choosing or using the wrong objects in certain situations may also show a lack of tact.

The concept of tact, then, involves our physical beings, not just abstract thinking. It refers to a way of approaching the world that can be felt throughout the body. Having, for some reason, behaved in a tactless manner, a person aiming for tact can experience physical symptoms such as blushing, increased heart rate or stomach churn. We are dealing with behavioral control and evaluation that has strong emotional content and that is based on perceptions in the here-and-now. The success or failure in tactful behavior is ultimately judged based on a feeling, although the emotional judgment may be seamlessly linked to propositional statements and conscious reflections that necessitate cognitive cultural knowledge, and not just to biologically based reactions. Thinking in these terms, we, again, come to highlight issues that have been much discussed in aesthetics. Does a person's behavior *feel* gracious, thoughtful, elegant, stylish? We do not have to think, as the extreme forms of emotivism suggest, that the aesthetic-ethical evaluations would be *just* some kinds of emotional reactions without any truth value, but rather that they are emotional, *too*, and we can truly feel them. Such interpretations of the relationships between emotion, action and thought are most prominently highlighted in pragmatist aesthetics, particularly by John Dewey and his followers (Dewey [1987]; Shusterman [1997]). The pragmatist perspective

highlights the interplay of thought and action. Individuals are not isolated from their environment and other people, but in constant interaction with them. This idea is in harmony with the interactive character of tactful behavior.

Corporeality is also emphasized in the etymology of the word *tact* in different languages. The word is derived from the Latin *tactus* and *tangere*, which refer to touching in the physical sense. Van Manen, who offers a detailed analysis of almost all the characteristics of tactful behavior listed above, draws special attention to this and underlines that the idea is also included in the word *contact*, which is a particularly intense form of interactive touching (van Manen [1991]: 126–127; see also Harvey [2003]).

Tact, or tactlessness, can manifest itself in any area of human interaction, and people produce related behavior through speech, gestures, expressions, touch, clothing, fragrances, the colors and shapes of the objects they choose to use, and countless other ways – and, as mentioned above, for tactful behavior, the ability to leave things undone and unsaid is often equally important to doing or highlighting something. No list can cover all the things that may offend or please people. This means that learning tactful behavior is, then, a process of learning an entire culture, picking things up from what others do and how they respond. One has to gradually learn what is appropriate behavior in specific cultural situations. This is related to self-control at all levels, an extreme example of which is perhaps the image of a traditional English butler, a figure masterfully portrayed by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Most people would say that the protagonist of the book, the butler Stevens, goes too far on his path of self-denial and ends up in a strange state of hypercorrectness, which, due to his over-preoccupation with correct behavior, is no longer tactful – unlike the resourcefulness of P.G. Wodehouse's more comical and always-correct character Jeeves.

Tact involves a relationship between at least two people. This relationship is not always considered to be symmetrical or to involve equal parties. Van Manen emphasizes that in educational situations, tact is expected especially from teachers; it may be too much to ask from children, because they have not yet learned the cultural nuances. In the debate on art, on the other hand, the assumption is sometimes that artists may, or even must, be challengers, critics and troublemakers, while the audience is expected to act tactfully toward and have a sensitive understanding of the artists and their works.

All in all, tact can be regarded as a virtue, that is, a characteristic or behavioral inclination that is commendable and valuable for human life in general, and that is not innate but something that can be learned and developed. In fact, Aristotle briefly discusses something akin to this (*eutrapelia*) in his main work on virtue ethics, that is, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (book IV, chapter 8), although his description is narrower than my description of tact; in the Finnish translation, the word is rendered into “tact”, but also “sociability”, which may be closer to the crux of Aristotle's idea. Yet it combines ethics and aesthetics in a more pronounced manner than the other virtues that Aristotle discusses. The contemporary French philosopher André Comte-Sponville also explores the relationships between various virtues in his popular work *Petit traité des grandes vertus* (1995). He does not directly deal with tact, either, but the things I have highlighted in this text are subsumed under the other virtues he discusses. I would like to emphasize, in particular, that tact should not be considered the same as Comte-Sponville's grace or politeness (*politesse*), which is only a kind of rather primitive, formal and superficial behavior, and which has yet to turn into a virtue proper.

Virtue thinking starts from the idea that people have choices in their behavior. They can make better or worse choices. This is also where the pursuit of tact starts. Of course, tact is not absolutely necessary for carrying out all possible things, and the natural and human laws that also control our actions cannot really be changed even by the most tactful behavior, but, at the very least, tact refines our behavior and makes our coexistence more pleasant. Tact, as it were, adds the finishing touch to our behavior and provides an advantage to the tactful ones among us.

It should be noted that, when seen in this way, tact is largely a conscious activity. That said, it is undoubtedly linked to physical, psychological and social factors that individuals cannot consciously control or even notice. An analysis of these links would, however, require an article of its own.

Tactful in relation to what?

Tact is a relational concept. A tactful person is always tactful in relation to something or someone else. In its basic form, tact is about here-and-now situations between people. Am I being tactful to the person I am encountering at this very moment? Are we in step? Do I

know how to respond appropriately? As mentioned above, this can basically be one-sided or reciprocated: only one or both are aiming for tactful behavior (and achieve it or not).

This emphasis may be what has made tact seem old-fashioned in a world where we are constantly dealing with concurrent, nested and parallel things, and where some form of “telepresence” through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social networks – or, at least, its possibility – is global. What should I be in step with? The people I am meeting right now, face-to-face? Or those who are somewhere else, but with whose lives I am in some way linked through my actions? This is a particularly pressing issue to public figures. A true cosmopolitan would be tactful just about anywhere, but something like this seems like an impossibility in practice. When someone is in a strange culture and does not know its customs, their behavior is almost inevitably clumsy, although they are often forgiven for this precisely because, as foreigners, they do not stand a realistic chance of behaving tactfully, due to their insensitivity to the nuances. And, in the end, is tact only related to people, or should we also be attuned to other creatures, nature as a whole and, for example, to objects, right now and in the future? The principle of sustainable development could perhaps be understood from this perspective.

A person who is tactless here and now, may in principle be tactful toward someone else elsewhere. A tolerant pacifist is tactless toward a group of violent racists, and yet that person is completely in step with their like-minded friends. On the other hand, when reading, for example, Hunter S. Thompson's perplexing *Hell's Angels* (1966), it becomes obvious that a loud-mouthed and thoroughly tattooed biker, who is wolfing down barbecue ribs and washing them down with lukewarm beer, can be tactful when he is among his own, even though he does not seem so in the eyes of a gourmet banker. A motorcycle gang member knows how to choose the right kinds of objects, starting from the bike. Almost any kind of behavior is, therefore, tactful when it is in the appropriate context, and the traditional interpretation of tact as restrained snobbery does not capture all the variations. Good situational sensitivity is more essential. The types of tact one has to choose from and recognize are constantly different. They vary by country and subculture, and to add to that, they keep changing, as Wouters has shown in his analyses of manners. Which of these should we be in step with, and how can they be compared with each other?

Some types of tact are prescribed, and are hard or impossible to change. They are partly maintained by the business hours determined by employers, school schedules, and nature's

annual and daily cycles; they are simple, easy to notice, and it is easy to pace oneself with them. In fact, with these, one cannot really talk about controlling tact as such, as it is more about considering schedules and following collective regularities. Perhaps it is more about a rhythm or adjusting to a rhythm. Tact proper, however, is more about knowing how to pace oneself in the right manner and style in something on which other people also have an opinion.

We should here make a distinction between the types of tact that are imagined or desired and the ones that are real. It is probably quite common that we would like to live in a certain way, hoping that others would end up sharing our values and ways of acting. It is a tricky situation if we find nothing in reality with which we want to pace ourselves and cannot achieve what we are aiming for. It is slightly different if people follow their own idea of tact but remain tactless in the face of others' ideas; Irma, in *Nenäpäivä*, experiences this at times, and members of motorcycle gangs must do so, too, many think. In both scenarios, extreme cases end up with a diagnosis of a mental illness. It is essential that tact, or a lack thereof, is something that others can also recognize and that they respond to, in their own way, which can sometimes be extreme.

Some types of tact can be influenced and changed. Habits within a group can change quickly, if people change; organizations change managers all the time. But can the new manager assume that their arrival changes the idea of what is tactful, so that others have to learn new things? Of course, it is interesting how quickly or slowly people learn tact, whether we are dealing with a long-standing variety or a recently introduced new idea. How soon is an entire group or a new recruit to the group expected to behave in a strictly tactful way? How about an immigrant? A new employee? Halmesmäki's successor? The Kesko management? There is no general answer to this question, because, in the end, it is about becoming attuned to an entire culture and specific areas within it. The process is probably a little different for each individual, and, for some, tact, as far as the specific context of occurrence is concerned, seems to remain rather underdeveloped even after a long time, although, in principle, we could picture a context in which their behavior would be tactful. Providing a precise description of the process would require a portrayal of the entire life of the individual concerned, as in the case of Irma in *Nenäpäivä*.

In any case, we constantly run into various ideas of tact in today's world, and we may want to set a personal goal of mastering an ability to switch between these, to be tactful in

various contexts. This would mean some type of global “multi-tact”. In practice, an ability like this would be very difficult to acquire, but, on top of that, we would need to ask what we would want to achieve with it, even in theory. How far can tactful behavior, even multi-tact, extend? It is not conceivable that it would be possible to be tactful in relation to everything – that would require complete tolerance for everything and becoming adjusted to everything, and ultimately even liking everything. Not everything appears tactful in practice, even for the more flexible among us, at least not simultaneously, and not everything can be analyzed in terms of the distinction between tact and tactlessness, but we need other guiding principles. However, the interesting thing is that, while other guiding principles exist, tact is still *among the ones* that we easily notice. What are the consequences of this?

The inevitable tragedy of tact

The art of tact would seem to be a good human trait. Yet, in this case at least, something good casts a shadow. Although many people evidently cannot help but focus on tact and use it just to pursue good things, acting on this principle will inevitably lead to problems, as happened in the lives of the fated heroes in classical tragedies. The problems are conceptual in the sense that if tact is understood as described above – which I think is justified – one cannot avoid trouble when acting based on the concept. The conflicts that will arise when pursuing tact cannot be fully resolved using tact, and tact itself also generates conflicts.

The core problem with tact and its inadequacy as a guiding principle for ethically valuable action comes from the fact that actual tactful behavior and its evaluation only happen in here-and-now situations. The emphasis is on action that is reactive and local. Of course, you can try to pace yourself with the whole world, but this is impossible in practice. If you are tactful toward someone, you are inevitably tactless toward someone else: a model Christian is a useless Satanist, and Halmesmäki's humor does not sit well with "humorless people". This cannot be resolved, even in principle, by using multi-tact or by constantly switching between ideas of tact, because you can only act in one specific way *at once*, and, at this moment, you are always in conflict with some other way of acting. Like the magpie on a tarred roof in the Finnish proverb; once you get your beak free, your tail will stick. This will hold true as long as there are different values and ways of action, that is, probably as long as there are people. Universal tact would require that everybody would agree on everything

and would have the same feelings about the same things, which does not seem probable in reality. Again, it is another matter whether the problem of conflict is related to moral particularism or the informality of manners as a whole, and whether it can be resolved on some level, but at least this is related to tact.

Another restrictive aspect of emphasizing localness and context-specificity is that you easily end up with the idea that there is, or there can be, no big picture, and that it is not even important. Only action in the here-and-now is within our control, if that. We only react to what we encounter without thought to a more comprehensive understanding of the world, and, at worst, we find ourselves in a state of “obscurity” without vision (*Unübersichtlichkeit*) with regard to both the present and the future (see Habermas [1985]). In this state, we would not even be pursuing an idea of tact that reaches beyond its immediate context.

The claim can be made that this is, in any case, all that we can do. This means that no matter how much information we gather to understand the big picture, for example, on global warming or the political behavior of people, the ultimate reactions to the image thus created will be local and will relate to individual situations, say, in the political decision-making process. The same would apply to the relationships between the conception and practical application of ethical principles that are considered general, such as the Rawlsian veil of ignorance. The general becomes local. In terms of tact, this would mean that other, perhaps more generally oriented guiding principles, can be considered, and attempts can be made to develop them, but they do not override the position of tact at a local level. Or: if tact itself is considered to be a general principle, the ways in which it is actualized vary.

A more serious question, however, is that emphasizing localness specifically from the point of view of tact can be construed as burying one's head in the sand and covering up the potential problem of not even trying to achieve a wider outlook. This, in turn, may mean, for example, that the people who make political decisions about issues that affect very many people, other than themselves, can concentrate on exercising tact when working together with other decision-makers. At any given time, the number of people who make decisions will inevitably be fairly small. In view of this, the decisions will be affected by the collective pursuit of tact within this elite and the facilitation of their everyday aesthetics and ethics, and not the comprehensive and open discussion of issues. It is no coincidence that tact and diplomacy have, over time, become intertwined.

What is particularly problematic is the potentially included avoidance of conflicts. A tactful person is polite, gives room for others, adapts, does not draw attention to other people's sensitive issues, and does not rise to oppose things, but flees rather than fights. For this reason, tact as an attitude is not well suited for the management of confrontational situations, as a focus on it will serve to conceal differences and problems rather than to help face them. Nor does it offer any means of comparing and prioritizing different ideas of tact, because it focuses on reconciliation with the immediate environment. Anything that is different, sensitive and distant will be ignored. This may sound like an exaggerated concern, but it is based on actual opinions that affect actual behavior. For example, in his book *Vallanvaihto (Change of Power; 1992)*, Max Jakobson, a highly influential figure in Finnish politics, bluntly states: "The hard values of American journalism cannot be transplanted as such into a small nation as Finland, where a certain tact is necessary when dealing with personal information. When everyone knows each other, it is not necessary to publicize everything" (cited in Wuori [1993]: 161). A member of the elite is obviously inclined to think that everybody belongs to the same group and knows each other, and behaves in a way that does not disturb the internal harmony of the group. For the outsiders to the elite – which is almost everybody – this phenomenon appears as an act of covering up and keeping quiet about things.

Tact is almost inevitably context-specific conservativeness, or conformity. It supports that which has already been accepted in a specific group or situation. Precisely for this reason, Habermas, an advocate of critical and emancipatory philosophy, considered Gadamer's tradition- and tact-based hermeneutical approach problematic. The requirement to consider change is a risk, because it can raise conflicts and in this way disturb the consensus and good spirit. Even if my general ethical principles say that certain actions are not acceptable, the social situation may lead me in another direction: I do not interfere with insensitive remarks, I personally use coarser language than I would like to, I do not start educating others, but instead I adjust. Conformity is such a strong force that it can make people even deny their own simple perceptions, as, for example, Solomon E. Asch's well-known experiments have proven.

It is obvious that if we look at the state of the world from an even slightly broader perspective, we can see conflict and a need for change everywhere: inequality, whether financial or otherwise, physical violence, and health problems that could be solved. On the other

hand, it is equally obvious that there is great attraction in context-specific, tactful conformity. This is the conflict that we cannot get rid of when pursuing tact. If I behave well here and now, I am at the same time in conflict with someone or something else. Do I, then, recognize disagreement and inequality, highlight it and risk the current harmony? If I do this, do I lose my chance of behaving tactfully? Can I, then, be tactful without being blind to what is wrong in the world? And, at the same time, can I engage in any action without consideration for tact? A confrontational person faces conflicts openly, where a tactful person may try to cover them, but neither can completely eliminate them. A tactful person is guided by socially behavior in the here-and-now, while an active “confrontationist” is guided by some other principle, perhaps a political or religious ideology. Of course, the question is also about what kinds of ideas of tact are allowed to come into view at various times between the conflicts. What kind of behavior and what kinds of opinions – or objects – manage to emerge and generally become subjects of perception, in the spirit of Rancière? Whose idea of tact wins, and what are the issues worthy of starting a conflict, or do we avoid conflicts to the last, by only seeking like-minded company?

Ethics, and practical politics, in particular, cannot be based on tact, but even in connection with them, we cannot get rid of the pursuit of tact. Tact is not enough to guide joint action, and it can give it a problematic bias, but it will still have an inevitable influence on the action. It does seem obvious that a form of joint action in which tact plays no role at all, and which would only focus on endless disagreements without a worry about behaving badly, is not a reasonable option. The tragedy of tact lies in the fact that no matter how tactfully we act, we are at the same time inevitably out of step with someone else, and blind to this as well – in the same way as the heroes of classical tragedies strive to do the right thing, but without realizing it, do deeds that lead them to other realms altogether. In this sense, even the most tactful among us are doomed to fail. If, as in tragedies, we, at some point, awaken to realize this, it may be just the thing to provoke, as in a true Aristotelian tragedy, pity and fear for the entire human existence, because there is no remedy for the situation. Perhaps through the realization and acceptance of the situation, we can experience at least a momentary catharsis: the salty and sweet combination of pleasure and fear. Here, too, Irma from *Nenäpäivä* serves as a good model.

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