

# The Polite Facade of Society: Is It More Than Just Etiquette?



In the realm of human interaction, politeness is often hailed as a virtue, a cornerstone of civilized society. It manifests itself in a myriad of forms, from courteous gestures to respectful language. However, beneath this veneer of civility, lies a more complex reality. In her thought-provoking book, "Is Polite Society Polite And Other Essays," esteemed sociologist Erving Goffman delves into the intricate interplay of politeness and power, revealing the ways in which it both upholds and undermines social Free Download.

**Is Polite Society Polite? and Other Essays** by Julia Ward Howe



★★★★★ 5 out of 5

Language : English  
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Text-to-Speech : Enabled  
Screen Reader : Supported  
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## The Performance of Politeness

Goffman argues that politeness is not merely a matter of following prescribed rules of etiquette but rather a performance, a strategic enactment that individuals engage in to manage their social interactions. These performances are guided by unspoken social norms, which dictate what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior in different contexts. However, the performance of politeness is not always genuine. Individuals may feign politeness to gain favor, avoid conflict, or maintain their social status.

Goffman illustrates this point through the concept of "face-work," which refers to the actions individuals take to maintain or repair their public image. Politeness, in this sense, becomes a tool for managing face and preserving social harmony. By adhering to social norms and avoiding behaviors that could damage their reputation, individuals protect their own face and the face of others.

## Politeness and Power Relations

Goffman further explores the nexus between politeness and power relations, arguing that politeness is not simply a neutral exchange but rather a subtle form of social control. By conforming to social norms of politeness, individuals reinforce the existing power structures and maintain the status quo.

For example, in a formal setting such as a job interview, candidates are expected to exhibit impeccable politeness towards the interviewer. This politeness serves to uphold the power imbalance between the interviewer and the candidate and reinforces the interviewer's authority. Similarly, in social settings, individuals from marginalized groups may be compelled to be overly polite towards those in positions of power as a way of negotiating their subordinate status.

### **The Limits of Politeness**

While politeness can facilitate social interaction and maintain Free Download, Goffman also acknowledges its limitations. In certain situations, politeness can become a hindrance, preventing individuals from expressing their true feelings or challenging unjust practices.

Goffman cites the example of whistleblowers, who may face ostracism or retaliation for breaking the norms of politeness by speaking out against wrongdoing. Similarly, individuals from marginalized groups may find that politeness constrains their ability to advocate for their rights or challenge discrimination.

### **Rethinking Politeness**

Goffman's analysis of politeness invites us to reconsider its role in society. While politeness can promote civility and social harmony, it can also be a

tool for social control and the perpetuation of inequality. By understanding the complex relationship between politeness and power, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of social interactions and work towards creating a truly just and inclusive society.

In "Is Polite Society Polite And Other Essays," Erving Goffman provides a trenchant critique of the role of politeness in social life. His insights into the performance of politeness, its relationship to power relations, and its limitations challenge us to rethink the nature of civil society. By embracing a more critical understanding of politeness, we can move beyond superficial niceties and work towards creating a society where genuine respect and equality prevail.



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