Tact: Sense, Sensitivity, and Virtue*

David Heyd
The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

The concept of tact has so far received only little theoretical attention. The present article suggests three levels on which the idea of tact may be approached: (1) The epistemological problem: the etymology of the term ‘tact’ is taken seriously, namely its relation to the sense of touch and tactility. An analysis of the position of touch in the ranking of the five senses according to various parameters is shown to be highly relevant to the understanding of the idea of tact. (2) The logical problem: tact is described as a skill which cannot be exhausted in the knowledge of principles or general rules. Like ‘judgment’ it is concerned with the particular, with sensitivity (analogical to that of the sense of touch) to the uniqueness of a human situation. (3) The ethical problem: tact is shown to lie between ethics and etiquette, that is to say it is more than just a rule of politeness or good manners, but it is ‘less’ than a fully fledged moral duty or principle. Its position between the obligatory and the merely conventional opens the way to characterize it as supererogatory.

The story goes that Paul Kruger, dining at Queen Victoria’s table, picked up his finger bowl and innocently drank the rose water from it. The Queen, having noticed the Afrikaner-president’s ill-mannered behavior and the astonished looks of her other guests, instantly proceeded to drink from her own rose water. This compelled all the rest to follow suit. Kruger’s act was uncivilized. The Queen showed tact. His conduct was embarrassing. Hers saved him from embarrassment.

We praise tact and condemn tactlessness. But on what basis? On the one hand, tact does not seem to be a moral virtue, since it is not considered a duty and its absence does not give rise to formal accusation nor justify punishment. It is therefore hardly surprising that tact is never included in the various lists of the moral virtues and has not found its way to the agenda of ethical theory. On the other hand, tact is not simply a virtue of etiquette, although, as in our story, it often makes itself manifest in response to the violation of a code of decorum. The Queen would not have broken any rule of table manners had she dipped her fingers in the rose water (rather than drink it). On the contrary, that would have been the right way to stick to the rules broken by the uncultivated guest.

So what makes the Queen’s reaction, which we are considering as the epitome of tact, so special and praiseworthy? What kind of virtue is

* I am grateful to John Landau, who first introduced me to the subject of tact, to Immanuel Linder, who directed my attention to some important references, and to Gilead Bar-elli, whose incisive critical comments forced me to rethink and to revise some of my views.
expressed by tactful behavior, and in what sense can we say that it lies somewhere between ethics and etiquette despite its distinction from both? A key feature in the Queen’s response is sensitivity, namely particular attention to the unique situation, the considerate effort to save her guest from shame, and the special skill involved in achieving this purpose. As a first approximation we might consequently say that tact, in contradistinction to both morals and manners, deals with concrete situations in a way guided not by rules but rather by sensitive perception and intuitive response. This sensitivity has both a cognitive or perceptual dimension and an emotive or sympathetic one. It combines attentiveness (a skill) and considerateness (a motive). The aim of this article is to analyze the perceptual aspect of tactful sensitivity in terms of its relation to the sense of touch, and then to discuss the value of the emotive aspect that characterizes it.

The concept of tact, which at first sight seems quite marginal and of little philosophical interest, will emerge as an interesting point of intersection between the epistemological problem of the ranking of the senses (touch), the logical problem of the general versus the particular (sensitivity), and the normative problem of the intermediate ground between ethics and etiquette (the virtue of tact). However, in the attempt to bridge the gap between these three dimensions, a word of methodological caution is called for. The concept of tact is typically fuzzy, and its use in natural language not always clear and agreed. In the absence of previous theoretical treatment of the concept of tact, one can only rely on generalizations from common usage and concentrate on paradigm cases in the attempt to form the core of the idea of tact.

I. Tact and Touch

The Latin word ‘tact’ (‘tactus’, ‘tangere’) simply means the sense of touch, and this was its only meaning in the various European languages till the end of the eighteenth century. The word first appears in its modern figurative meaning in a letter written by Voltaire in 1769.1 According to the OED, the word in its non-literal meaning first appears in English in 1793. The concept of tact gained popularity in literary contexts in England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Germans, particularly Helmholtz and Gadamer, put it to use in the distinction between the Naturwissenschaften and the Geisteswissenschaften. B. F. Skinner made tact a central theoretical term in his behavioristic psychology and defined it as any verbal response to a stimulus from the physical environment. But beyond these technical and quasi-technical uses, tact has become a key notion in our approach to an elusive aspect of interpersonal behavior. The OED describes it as ‘a keen faculty of perception or discrimination likened to the sense of touch’, and a ‘ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others, so as to avoid offence, or win good will; skill and judgement in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations; the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time’.

Our analysis will take the etymology of the word ‘tact’ seriously, i.e. its connection with the sense of touch. Tactfulness and touch have in common a fundamental kind of immediacy which will provide the axis of our discussion. In a way, this is one of the principal criteria for the ranking of the five senses, which has preoccupied philosophers since Aristotle as well as linguists and psychologists in more recent times. The distance between the sensing subject and the sensed object naturally determines a hierarchy of the senses in the following order: sight – sound – smell – taste – touch. The distant senses require a medium (light waves, sound waves, or the air carrying particles to our nostrils). The immediate senses operate by unmediated touch (of the palate or the fingertips). Tact is created by contact. But distance is a condition of objectivity, since it allows different subjects to experience the ‘same’ object. This distance is also the basis of the conceptualization of the sensory experience and its processing in scientific or philosophical theory. It is thus hardly surprising that the sense of sight is the prototype of abstract perception, or perception, intellectual understanding and intelligibility. Metaphors borrowed from the senses connote less and less intellectual articulation as we go down the hierarchy. This phenomenon is manifested in both natural language and the languages of art: The higher we go in the order of the senses, the richer is the linguistic expression and the level of artistic sophistication. Thus:

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<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
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<tr>
<td>sight</td>
<td>‘I see what you mean’</td>
<td>painting</td>
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<tr>
<td>hearing</td>
<td>‘The voice of conscience’</td>
<td>music</td>
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<td>smell</td>
<td>‘He smelled danger’</td>
<td>perfumery</td>
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<tr>
<td>taste</td>
<td>‘A taste of victory’</td>
<td>gastronomy</td>
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<td>touch</td>
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The distinction between the ‘higher’ arts (such as painting and music) and the ‘lower’ ones (such as perfumery and gastronomy) is based on the proximity of the sensing subject to the sensed object. To have ‘meaning’, art (i.e. ‘high’ art) must be embodied in a medium which allows for representation, and representation becomes possible only given sufficient distance and discrimination, expressed in a vivid and supple language. Not only is the language of smell and taste much duller and poorer than that of vision and sound; we can hardly imagine their having an ‘artistic’ expression. Food and perfumes are typically matters of ‘taste’, i.e. do not lend themselves to principled discourse and evaluation, as do musical works and paintings. Aesthetic predicates of beauty and ugliness apply almost
exclusively to visual and auditory objects. It is highly doubtful whether smells and tastes can be beautiful. It is even harder to refer to a tactile experience as beautiful, and the language of touch is not only the poorest in vocabulary but also the least amenable to rational and artistic articulation. Tactile metaphors, however, as well as metaphors of smell and taste, may convey intuition and intimacy, which require proximity. Subjective experience or judgments, which are harder to 'prove' or justify, are expressed by phrases such as 'this deal stinks', 'this is not my cup of tea', or 'the motor mechanic has a magic touch'. Objective knowledge and understanding, in contrast, are expressed by visual metaphors such as 'political views' and 'a clear argument'.

Although taste and smell (unlike sight and sound) are rarely the medium of 'high' art, civilization organizes them in an elaborate system of rules and conventions and creates a class of experts. These experts, such as the connoisseur of wines or a Helena Rubinstein, are said to have a developed sense and a sharp discriminatory power in their respective perceptual fields. But the sense of touch is subject to no art—neither high nor low, and there are no experts in it, no professional training or education. There are no specialists for touch (except for masseurs and textile experts?), no authority. It is the most universal and 'democratic' of the senses. It is the least intellectual, and the most 'sensual'. Thus, 'sensation' means both the sense of touch and sensual perception in general. Some philosophers argue further that touch is the most basic of the senses, since we can imagine human beings lacking any one of the senses except that of touch.2 Similarly, Berkeley claims in his early writings that touch is the only sense which captures reality as it is, rather than images of it, a metaphysical statement which agrees with our commonsense intuitions.3

Moreover, as Aristotle observed, the sense of touch is also in many respects the most sensitive of the five senses, and with its aid human beings get to know their environment in a much more discriminate manner than other animals.4 Tactile experience is primary because of its immediacy. It allows orientation in the world in a way no other sense does precisely because it 'meets' the world in the most concrete and unmediated manner. This is also most clearly exhibited in the rudimentary role of touch in intimate human relations, that is, in erotic contexts in which people get 'to know' each other in the closest and most unhindered way, or in love which is expressed by con-tact more than by the more mediated senses. This intimacy of the sense of touch makes it the most private of the senses and its experience the most difficult to communicate in the public sphere.

Aristotle was also aware of the question whether the body itself is the medium of touch, the mediating factor between the object and the sensing subject. For, unlike the other senses, 'to feel' (or the German 'Gefühl') refers both to the tactile experience we get from external objects through the surface of our body (typically the fingertips), and the inner kinaesthetic sensation, like pressure, pain, heat, or dizziness, as well as the whole repertory of emotions. Furthermore, tactile sensation is itself fundamentally kinaesthetic: we feel our touch (though we never see our sight, or hear our hearing). So although the touch of external objects does not lend itself to artistic formulation, dance may be considered the artistic expression of touch in the kinaesthetic sense. However, the aesthetic value of dancing is associated with its visual impact on the spectator.

These special connections between the sense of touch and sensation in general, on the one hand, and between external touch and inner feeling on the other are illuminating for our discussion of tact. Tact is primarily a form of behavior which indicates sensitivity in the unmediated sense associated with touch. Tact is the response of someone who is typically sympathetic to another, who feels empathy towards the other. The capacity to identify with another person is made possible by close attachment. Thus, in its figurative meaning too, tact is conditioned by contact.4 There is a suggestive analogy between the way we sense an external tactile object through the internal kinaesthetic awareness of our own body and the way we achieve identification and empathy by putting ourselves in the place of the other in a particular situation. Only by transposing an experience to oneself can one become sensitive to the feeling of the other. And as there is no particular organ of touch, the whole body serving as sensor, so is tactful behavior the outcome of an attention to the personality and circumstances of the other, achieved by general openness and sensitivity rather than by any specific skill or faculty, cognitive or emotional.

Metaphorical descriptions of tactful (and untactful) behavior make frequent use of tactile images, such as subtlety, delicacy, coarseness, and roughness. Even the body language used in the context of tact attests to the tactile origins of the concept: we tend to describe tact (feeling or sense) by rubbing our fingertips, drawing attention to the most sensitive tactile organ. Finally, the sense of touch is typically active; it usually operates through the intentional movement of the fingers on the surface of external objects. Probing is the standard way of collecting information by the sense of touch. This active aspect distinguishes touch from the other senses, although there is also a scanning function in vision and even in taste. In tact we find a similar active component which consists of the attentive effort and psychological probing of the uniqueness of a human situation. The term 'to feel one's way', which characterizes tact, is of this typically exploratory and active nature.

II. Unbound by Rules

The phrase 'a touch of salt' suggests a quantity which is hardly measurable (due to its minute size). The sense of touch is on the one hand sensitive
enough to enable orientation in circumstances which do not allow for measurement; on the other hand it does not lend itself to measurement or indeed to any analysis in quantifiable terms, numeric scales, or a system of rules. Touch cannot be 'theorized', because of its concreteness. In contrast with auditory and visual experience, which can be communicated by means of language (in terms of qualitative and quantitative distinctions such as colors, notes, pitch, duration, etc.), tactile experience can only be conveyed in vague terms that appeal to concrete common experience. Unlike colors or tones, tactile sensations cannot be organized on a scale or a score, since there are no rules for translating them to physical concepts such as wave lengths or frequency. It is thus hardly surprising that there is no notation for tactile perceptions, that is to say no special 'language'.

We are getting closer to our first systematic characterization of the concept of tact. It is a mode of behavior which is not constituted by criteria, which has no rules guaranteeing success, and which consists of sensitivity to the contextual and unique dimension of the situation at hand. Thus, mentioning an event in the life of the deceased in a house mourning a death might cause pain or anger, but in a slightly different context might be treated as an expression of sympathy and consideration. In the absence of rules, the person coming to express condolences can only try and understand the unique situation and mood of the mourners.

In certain respects, showing tact resembles the exercise of what Kant called 'judgment', and even more so what Aristotle called 'phronesis'. Tact, judgment, and practical reason all consist of a faculty of responding (practically or cognitively) in a fitting, or an appropriate manner to a particular case. But in contrast to judgment, which concerns the application of general rules and laws (practical or scientific) to particular cases, tact does not relate to any rules whatsoever. And in contrast with ordinary means-end deliberation, tact is not usually directed to any pre-given goal (beyond the overall purpose, or meta-rule, of avoiding offence). Tactful people are, therefore, not necessarily acute in scientific judgment or prudent in practical life, as their virtue is related more to empathy than to the application of rules to particular cases or the selection of optimal means to given ends. Furthermore, prudence in the instrumental sense is self-regarding in nature, while tact is concerned purely with the welfare of the other.

Aristotle's phronesis is much closer to the idea of tact than Kantian judgment or the art of selecting the right means to a given end. Phronesis relates to concrete situations in which choices must be made with regard to both 'goals' and the optimal ways of achieving them. As David Wiggins observes, it denotes 'man's perceptions, concerns, and appreciations', his selection of the most salient features of the situation, and thus applies to the major as well as the minor premises. Although Aristotle does not discuss the modern concept of tact, he is aware of the deep connection between the power of practical reason and sensation, and places 'practical wisdom' halfway between theoretical reason (which operates through procedures of inference and rules) and the senses (which operate in a direct and immediate manner). In contrast to theoretical reason:

practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular, which is the object not of scientific knowledge but of perception – not the perception of qualities particular to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle...7

This tallies with the idea that tact is a matter of 'common' sense. Experience, says Aristotle, is the key to acquiring the eye to see things 'aright' which characterizes the phronimos.

As a mode of behavior which is not guided by rules, tact is also close to diplomacy, to diplomatic skills. Both are characterized by maneuvering, by the talent to improvise ways out of difficult and delicate situations. Both tact and diplomacy are concerned with facilitating and smoothing human relationships, avoiding offence, and overcoming obstacles. They are both typically exercised through restraint, refraining from telling the whole truth, the partial concealment of attitudes and judgments. Neither is governed by rules in the sense that beyond the general principle prohibiting offence there is no specific rule providing particular guidance of how to avoid offence. But again, whereas diplomatic skills (like instrumental, means-end deliberation) are exercised for the benefit of the agent, tact is shown for the sake of the other.

Exemplifying the problem of the relation between the general and the particular, tact is the focus of the German tradition of distinguishing between the human and the natural sciences. Hermann von Helmholtz sees the uniqueness of the 'moral sciences' in Tact or Tactgefühl, which resembles the 'instinctive sense' or the 'artistic insight'. The moral sciences are based on aesthetic induction which is distinguished both from mathematical deduction (in the physical sciences) and from logical induction (in philology or biology). The study of human phenomena requires:

a facility for recognizing real resemblances and a delicate, fully trained insight into the springs of human action. This insight in turn is unattainable without a certain sympathetic warmth and an interest in observing the working of other men's minds.8

Hans-Georg Gadamer, following Helmholtz and Dilthey, argues that tact is the unique feature of the human sciences, which are concerned with the particularity of human situations. Their method is inductive and they are based on 'tact' which can be developed only through the general formation of the personality (Bildung). The natural sciences, on the other hand, are deductive in method and their goal is the understanding of the general laws governing particular phenomena. Their procedure is reasoning (rather than 'sensing'), which can be acquired by learning. Grasping human
behavior, that is, intentional action, requires 'identification', *Verstehen*, which is a kind of unmediated contact with the object of investigation as well as the understanding of an object through self-understanding. In this, the 'tact' of the historian or psychologist resembles touch, where the sensing body is also the medium of sensation. The inductive method of the historian is not a purely logical process (the conscious and systematic collection of data yielding conclusions), but rather psychological, that is to say, the product of an overall sensitivity to a large number of data in a particular situation of which the subject is not necessarily aware. This skill, says Gadamer, following Helmholz, amounts to more than the mere capacity of exercising powerful memory.

But Gadamer also connects the theoretical concept of 'tact', describing the human sciences with the everyday concept which applies to interpersonal behavior.

By 'tact' we understand a special sensitivity and sensiveness to situations, and how to behave in them, for knowledge from general principles does not suffice. Hence an essential part of tact is that it is tacit and unformulable. One can say something tactfully; but that will always mean that one passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid, and it is tactless to express what one can only pass over. But to pass over something does not mean to avert one's gaze from it, but to keep an eye on it in such a way that rather than knock into it, one slips by it. Thus tact helps to preserve distance. It avoids the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person.

In this analysis Gadamer takes seriously the combination of the cognitive and the emotive aspects of tact as characterized by Helmholz, namely, the 'trained insight' together with the 'sympathetic warmth'. Both are constitutive of the everyday notion of tact as well as of the methodological notion of Helmholz.

III. Tact as a Virtue

Insight and warmth, skill and sympathy, sensitivity and good will – these are, then, the combinations of the cognitive and the emotive which lead us to the appreciation of tact as a virtue. In that respect, Gadamer's definition, although it deals neither with the relation to touch nor with the virtue of tact, serves our purpose well. But we should first note that the interpersonal behavior by which tact is shown is usually 'linguistic' (speech-acts) or 'symbolic'. Physical, economic or political acts are not judged as tactful or untactful. Typically untactful acts are performed by saying something ('are you still writing?' to a novelist in a creative crisis) or by a symbolic expression (such as raising the German flag at a Holocaust memorial ceremony). Tact is shown by acts of communication in the context of personal relationships, that is, in the relatively private domain.

The tactful aspect of tact, noted by Gadamer, is also of significance. Tactful behavior is not only unformulable (i.e., un governed by rules), but often 'unutterable', that is to say, it is typically expressed by silence. It is a virtue of restraint and omission. Tactful behavior often involves refraining from saying what one could have, or might have said, or even should have said in a slightly different context. Thus we say 'he had enough tact not to talk about debts in the company of the bankrupt businessman'. This negative characterization of tact makes it more difficult to identify tactful behavior and to specifically distinguish it from sheer indifference. On the other hand, untactful behavior always takes the form of an inappropriate saying, a positive speech-act.

However, following Gadamer we might also add that tactful behavior often consists of a positive comment, but one which distracts the audience's attention from another, potentially embarrassing, comment. Like Queen Victoria's noble act, such a move of diverting the conversation to safer regions is considered particularly tactful, rather than just exercising 'enough' (i.e., minimal) tact, as in the case of the passive restraint of 'not mentioning'. A good host would start a talk about the weather if one of the guests is heard discussing cancer research, not realizing that another guest was suffering from the disease. Tact is a virtue of both silence and silencing, of restraint and diversion.

A morally significant feature of tactlessness, distinguishing it from other forms of insult or injury, is the absence of ill-will or malice. Tactless behavior differs from defamation, libel, cruelty, and other forms of conscious verbal attempts at causing pain and harm to others. Tactlessness is a sin of naiveté, the defect of insensitivity, lack of understanding, sometimes just ignorance. The behavior of small children making comments on the handicaps or ugly faces of other people is often reminiscent of tactlessness. But, whereas certain forms of innocence or ignorance are appropriate, or can at least be forgiven, in the case of children, they are not tolerated in adults. Like negligence, tactlessness is censured due to emotional blindness inattentiveness or lack of awareness of the potential harm involved in certain types of conduct, a deficiency which is not unavoidable.

But what kind of virtue is tact? It is not an Aristotelian arete. First, it is typically other-regarding, its whole purpose being to save another from embarrassment or pain. The value of tact does not derive from the idea of integrity or harmony in the agent's soul. Secondly, it can hardly be explained in terms of the doctrine of the mean, since it is not constituted by a balance of natural opposing forces of excess and deficiency. At most we can describe tact as the middle way between offensive tactlessness and what will be called below 'overtact' (exaggerated forbearance from any comment, bordering on indifference). But these two poles do not belong to the same psychological continuum in the sense of cowardice–confidence–rashness.
or meanness–liberality–prodigality. Actions done from Aristotelian virtues are not themselves rule-governed, but virtue is fixed by the idea of the mean which is derived from a psychological (golden) rule. Tact, however, is not regulated by rules in either of these respects.

The end of tact is the prevention of offence rather than the prevention of physical harm, the violation of a right, or the undermining of an interest. It is concerned with avoiding occasion for insult, mental pain, embarrassment, shame, envy, or adding insult to injury. Gadamer rightly observes that tactlessness often involves the invasion of privacy, e.g. making public information which a person wants to keep private. And again, unlike lying, libel, or defamation, tactlessness consists of statements which are generally true, correct, well-founded, that is to say, in other contexts they would have been absolutely proper. Thus, a tactless saying may be wrong and offensive not due to its content, but rather due to the circumstances of its utterance; not because of its motive or intention, but rather because of lack of sensitivity to its impact on others.

There are people who are considered as lacking in tact (or as having a distinguished measure of tact), but how is this character trait acquired? How can people be brought to act tactfully? Again, in contrast to the Aristotelian model of virtues, habit cannot be the means for the acquisition of tact, mainly because tact is not an innate psychological power which must be molded, balanced, and moderated by routine praxis. It seems that tact is not itself a natural or innate quality at all. As a mode of sensitivity it is more like certain forms of perception which can be learnt. However, it is clear that tact is not something that can be formally taught, primarily since it is not formable in rules and principles and not subject to a system of norms and prescriptions, rights and duties, as are both morality and mores.

The acquisition of tact comes rather through imitation, following role models, or as the German tradition called it, Bildung, that is, the continuous formation of the overall personality. Tact is a virtue of sensitivity in its two senses: discrimination (associated with the sense of touch) and considerateness (associated with the willingness to put the other in a central position). Consequently, the acquisition of tact requires the combination of perceptual skill and altruistic interest. Since there are no experts in tact, neither are there teachers of it, and because tact is not a matter of either habit or instruction, it is hard to instill in someone who lacks it. It is similar to literary sensitivity or to a sense of humor, in that these can be developed only to a limited extent and only by indirect means.

Tact is also distinguished from the standard moral virtues in the way we respond to deviations from it. Sanction – either formal or informal – is only rarely accorded to tactless behavior. We are reluctant to ascribe moral guilt to tactlessness. The emotional response to immoral behavior is resentment on the part of the victim and indignation on the side of third parties. In the case of tactless acts, however, the response is shame or humiliation on the part of the ‘victim’ and embarrassment on the part of third parties. The uneasiness created by tactless comments resembles that created by discordant sounds or interference in the smooth (again a tactile image) course of events; it is not comparable to moral indignation, especially if the ‘negligent’ inattentiveness is not malicious. Witnessing tactless behavior resembles watching an actor on stage forgetting his lines rather than observing a shopkeeper cheating a child. Therefore, no penalty is imposed on tactless persons beyond the reproach we feel towards them. At most we shun them or get away from them.

The difference between tact as a behavioral virtue and the moral (character) virtues also highlights the value basis of tact. Tact is a typically social or interpersonal virtue. Its goodness does not lie in the internal harmony or the excellence of the agent as a human being, but primarily in the smoothing of human relationships, the avoidance of obstacles in delicate and potentially embarrassing situations. But this negative justification is only part of the value of tact. The positive justification is deeper and more important. It concerns the value of intimacy, the expression of personal attention to the uniqueness of a human situation. We are reminded here again of the element of immediacy and contact which defines tact and which is analytically connected with its rule-free nature. Social morality and codes of etiquette are both guided by rules whose application is universal and accordingly directed at human beings as such. But tact is exercised in particular states of affairs and towards a particular individual towards whom the agent is sensitive and sympathetic. And when tact is shown to an ‘anonymous’ person, it may create gratitude and a personal relationship. Tact either expresses a personal relationship or creates one, and in this lies its positive justification.

This value of tact is a necessary complement to the value of the moral code and the code of etiquette, which by their very nature require members of society to ignore, even suppress, the personal and the unique. Human relations are not merely matters of justice and fairness, style, and beauty; the personal dimension, which cannot be universalized, expresses a deep human need, and this becomes evident in the value of friendship and love on the one hand and supererogatory action on the other. In typical cases tact may be a token of friendship transcending the requirements of morality, on the one hand (being the non-obligatory prevention of offence), and of etiquette, on the other (revealing a considerate attitude not required by decorum). The conductor pensioning off an elderly violinist who is getting deaf is morally justified in doing so, but he will act tactfully if he does not mention deafness as the reason in order to avoid injuring the musician’s self-image. Tactful behavior which goes beyond etiquette is half-seriously
illustrated by the story of the man mistakenly entering a bathroom in which
a strange lady is having a bath. The polite person would immediately say
'sorry madam', and close the door. The tactful person would nonchalantly
mutter 'excuse me sir' and walk away!

The supererogatory nature of tact raises the issue of the asymmetry of
tactfulness and tactlessness. Even if tactless conduct is not considered
morally blameworthy, we judge it as 'wrong'. However, the opposite of
such behavior, the 'right' way, is simply the avoidance of tactlessness, which
often requires mere cautious omission of any act or comment. An active
demonstration of tact is something which we particularly value but cannot
universally expect of anyone. In other words, people who are not tactless
are not necessarily tactful in the strong sense of a virtue in which we are
interested here. This is connected to the fact that while tactlessness is
offensive in a way which can be subordinated to rules and over which one
can be held responsible (at least in terms of negligence), tactfulness is
beyond both duty and rules prescribing particular patterns of behavior.

As in actions beyond the call of duty (and here also of etiquette), tactful
behavior can never be bad or wrong, whether from the point of view of
ethics or from that of etiquette. Although it expresses personal interest, it
cannot be considered unjustly biased or partial. But we should note that
although tact is shown in the context of personal relationships, it does not
standardly occur in intimate, that is, very close relationships. The fact that
privacy does not play a role in intimate relations (e.g. of lovers) makes tact
superfluous, at least in times of total and unhindered openness.

Can one exaggerate in tactfulness? We have raised the question whether
tact can be characterized on the Aristotelian model as the mean between
tactlessness and overtact. Although we have seen that excess and deficiency
in tact do not belong to the same scale and do not form two poles of the
same psychological disposition, the fact remains that we often criticize
people for being 'over-tactful'. These people are exceptionally apprehensive
about the potential damage of what they may say (especially in sensitive
and delicate situations), and lacking confidence in their capacity to weed
improper comments from their discourse they prefer to keep silent. This is
the strategy of remaining on the safe side, and in its external manifestation
may remind us of the tactful person who keeps silent in order not to offend.
But not all silence is tact. Sometimes it may indicate indifference or lack of
interest. Tact is an impressive virtue just because it involves a measure
of risk, a selective silence which would not be interpreted as indifference,
a remark which would deflect the conversation without sounding
over-protective or humiliating. The overtactful person too easily avoids this risk
altogether.

Once we leave the solid ground of action according to rules, human
relationships become a risky matter. The way our actions are understood
by the other party can never be fully foreseen, and we cannot always plead
adherence to rules or general prescriptions. In cognitive matters there is a
risk in exercising intuition that does not exist in the derivation of conclusions
from premises by means of rules of inference. Similarly in friendship there
are traps which call for maneuvering and sensitiveness if we want to avoid
them. Avoiding these risks, even if justified by the general wish to avoid
injury, may sometimes amount to a loss to the person as well as a defect
in the personality. Although tactlessness is worse than such total avoidance,
the latter is judged as discreditable, a deficiency in a person's capacity to
relate to others.

Having said all this, the term 'over-tact' appears to be somewhat mis-
leading, since according to our analysis there cannot be an excessive
measure of tact. It is by definition the right measure of sensitivity and the
proper behavior in a given situation. Tact is the virtue of a person who is
sensitive, understanding, and flexible, rather than the virtue of someone
who due to lack of confidence and discrimination tends to evade situations
which might give rise to pain but might also enable one to show personal
interest and empathy. Overtact is not tact but rather indifference or fear
of personal involvement. In the strict Aristotelian sense, the doctrine of
the mean does not suit the analysis of tact as a virtue.

IV. Between Ethics and Etiquette

Ethics and etiquette, morality and mores, are two systems of rules that
guide social behavior. Their validity and justification are derived from
their universality, at least within the society in which they prevail. Is tact
a moral virtue or a virtue of etiquette? It is both alike and different.
Tact, unlike morality and politeness, is not rule-governed, not subject to
codification, not acquired by learning, and lacking in experts. Moral rules
derive their rationality and rationale from the content of the behavior which
they prescribe. Rules of decorum and fashion derive their force from
uniformity in behavior, and their validity is accordingly conventional. Tact,
in contrast to both these systems, is concerned with the particular and the
unique, and its justification includes an element of content (the general
prevention of offence) as well as an element of convention (what is actually
considered as offence).

This explains why moral rules are mostly cross-cultural (e.g. the
prohibition on murder or lying), since they are supported by fundamental
human interests. Rules of etiquette, on the other hand, are culture-relative,
since they are essentially conventional. Tact lies between the two: it crosses
cultures, but gains different interpretations and roles in each culture. And
as for the very value of tact, in contrast to morality and etiquette, which
have an important function in any society and culture and are expressed in some form of a normative system, tact is a virtue which is not equally evaluated in different societies. The fact that tact is a modern concept indicates that many former social cultures did not accord a major role to this virtue. It could be that the source of the central role of tact is the romantic era, with the primacy it puts on individuality and uniqueness. Tact is a typically post-enlightenment, nineteenth-century idea.

The injury caused by a tactless act is similarly 'private'. The violation of rules of etiquette is an offence against an abstract code, a kind of 'victimless crime'. Breaking the moral rules, though usually an offence against an individual person, is also (in Kantian theory as well as in the conception of criminal law) an offence against 'the law', an abstract principle. In tactlessness there is no offence against a general system of rules, but only a personal insult. In its end too tact lies between ethics and etiquette: on the one hand, its function is to smooth interpersonal relations, and as such it is similar to etiquette; on the other hand, like morality, its object is to prevent people from harming and offending others.

Tact is less important than morals, but more important than mores. Morality protects human interests and rights; tact protects 'only' human feelings; and the concern of politeness is merely aesthetic, the style and harmony of everyday life. Therefore the reaction to violation is harsher in the moral case (indignation expressed by punishment), less harsh in the case of tact (embarrassment or disgust leading to disassociation), and light in the case of etiquette (inconvenience giving rise to a reserved attitude). We expect the agent violating the accepted standard to feel guilt in the moral case, embarrassment and regret in the case of tact, and inconvenience in the case of etiquette.

Moral conduct consists of an intentional element: either as a condition for the moral value of actions, or at least as a condition for the immorality of actions. Polite behavior does not require any intention, being completely conventional. Tact again lies in an intermediate position: on the one hand, tactful behavior occurs only with an altruistic intention in the background; on the other hand, tactlessness is essentially unintentional and shown innocently.

Finally, whereas moral virtues are character traits, the virtues of politeness are behavioral. The difference between the two is in the direction of the definition: in the moral case the act is defined in terms of the motive, disposition, or character trait out of which it is done; in the case of politeness, the disposition or character feature is defined through the generalization of the agent's past actions. Tact is on the one hand a behavioral virtue (the diplomatic skill of dealing with delicate situations), but on the other it is a character trait (sensitivity and altruistic empathy with others' distress). This combination makes tact a virtue which is hard to learn or acquire, since behavioral conditioning is not sufficient to safeguard it (it must also express genuine personal concern), and the development of psychological sensitivity is equally insufficient (it calls for a certain diplomatic dexterity).

The special status of tact arises not only from its place between ethics and etiquette, but also from its lying beyond the two, that is, having a special value involved in behavior which is neither morally obligatory nor conventionally expected. Being beyond the rules of morals and mores, tact may look marginal, even superfluous. But, at least in a culture which appreciates the individual, the personal, and the particular, there is in tact something touching (!) and deserving of gratitude. Tact is not a matter of duty or decorum, but a necessary complement to the impersonal norms governing interpersonal relations.

NOTES
1 Voltaire, 'A Madame La Marquise du Deffand', Correspondence, 28 Mars 1769: '... pour le tact de certains nuliques, je serais assez votre homme ...'.
2 B. O'Shaughnessy, 'The Sense of Touch', Australasian Journal of Philosophy 67 (1989), pp. 37-58. This 'democratic' or universal aspect of touch should be qualified in the light of the massive evidence concerning the pathological cases of hyper- and hyper-tactile sensitivity, syndromes which have grave psychological effects on the capacity of patients to interact with other people.
4 Aristotle, De Anima, Book II, ch. 11.
7 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1142a.

Received 9 March 1995

David Heyd, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel