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**Asfa-Wossen Asserate**  
**Manners**

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## Discretion & Understatement

“On age, wealth, domestic distress,  
love affairs, secrets and plans,  
personal disgrace and one’s own farts—  
no comment from the sensible man.”

From the *Sukasaptati*, c. 1000 A.D.

Discretion is the social evolution of the sense of shame and as such was, in the revolutionary scene of those universities that were experimenting with the sciences, something quite terrible. All over Europe young protesters were emerging primarily from bourgeois households, where, in terms of shame, they had experienced a pale reflection of the power it had exercised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once the bourgeoisie triumphed over the aristocracy the area covered by the sense of shame stretched to the very limits of the possible. One would have a completely false conception of this era, of course, were one to believe that this hyperextension of the idea of shame hindered anyone at all in doing just what he wanted. But there was a true consensus in the conviction that a multitude of things were to occur in strict secrecy and at any rate were not to be talked about. Even the word “belly” was problematic, in England as well, where one was supposed to say “stomach,” which fortunately was a foreign word with a medical sound to it. Artists and photographers held up to European women, who fearfully covered every square inch of their body, the example of naked natives in their “heathen shamelessness” as models of a paradisiacal innocence (even though these same European women, when attending a court ball, were obliged to reveal more of their breasts in their deep décolleté than risqué evening dresses of today would dare to). In the meantime, ethnologists have taken the magic out of the paradisiacal charm of the tropics—“the sad tropics” is the expression used in view of the multitude of ominous and incriminating taboos of those societies stuck in the “stone age,” which, however, do not necessarily extend to the sexual organs and to needs, or extend to them in a different way. A sense of shame, even in those lacking in upbringing, is acknowledged as a specific human emotion, and one’s upbringing can influence the direction the sense of shame takes. A consideration of one’s own and others’ sense of shame has returned discreetly even to academic circles, picked

up by not a small number of academics at the point where once they had wanted to abandon discretion. But that, too, may correspond to a certain necessity. That which is perceived as too embarrassing, too direct, as all too urgently physical, is always that which we all have in common. This is not an urge you can get at through logic. During my time at Cambridge someone showed me a place on the river that was a bit concealed from view, where professors swam in the nude. One day--this story takes place before the Second World War--a boatful of female students approached the crowded beach, and all of the professors quickly grabbed towels, in order to hide their nakedness. But the professor of logic and mathematics wound his towel around his head and said with a smile, once the danger had passed, "Gentlemen, I, at least, am recognized by my face."

No, the pudenda, the genitals, are not individual but universal. The sense of shame turns against the animal side of existence, this being-born-amidst-feces-and-urine. Anyone who, from the bank of a river, has observed poor Indian women bathe, watching as they wind and rewind wet towels around themselves with perfectly practiced movements until they sit, fully dried off, without having revealed so much as their bare arms, understands that there must exist a need not to allow one's body to dissolve in the mass of humanity, a need to be separate from others and alone, at least under the tent of one's own garments. Whatever then is covered by the veil is the fruit of the respective culture and ritual.

In Bengal, for example, it is unseemly to call one's own wife "my wife." One speaks of "the niece of my aunt." Turks don't like it when their children see their parents kissing; demonstrations of affection between married people do not take place in the company of family members. We Ethiopian Christians are forbidden to have conjugal relations during the week of Easter; whoever breaks this custom must say during confession, "I fell out of bed." In the United States one casually is asked, "How much do you make?" or "How many units do you have?" (a unit equals 100 million dollars)—a question that in Europe (amazingly) still would be rebuffed more or less in astonishment; in over 35 years I have not heard it asked even once. Is it not significant how close money comes to the privates of bourgeois Europeans? An admission that they can't weigh in with even one single unit gives them the unpleasant feeling that they're standing in the midst of cultivated society without any pants on.

Asking questions in general is one of the most difficult endeavors in the field of discretion. In his amusing way of grabbing the tiger by the tail—or by some other totally unexpected part—Oscar Wilde decreed that questions are never indiscreet—whereas answers sometimes are, but that offers as little comfort as locking the barn door once the horse has bolted. Anyone who puts his conversation partner in the position of having to refuse to answer a question has committed a grave offense against discretion. The general rule is that anything that concerns the lifestyle and habits of another must be communicated voluntarily and without solicitation. We are neither the inquisitor nor the psychoanalyst of our neighbor at table.

Even if the questions are framed discreetly, any conversation that takes on the character of an interview can be very tedious. I count as successful any social engagement during which I am not asked about my profession. Artists love the question: “Can you live off that?” Also nice is: “Oh, that’s your wife? The last time I saw her she was with someone else entirely!” Bartenders, above all, should practice the high art of non-recognition, which ranks above the also useful art of recognition. The confidential question, “The same as yesterday?” can have unfortunate consequences if the constellation in which one finds oneself is not the same as yesterday’s. Don’t ask--no matter what strikes you as peculiar or strange--is the general rule. That there are exceptions to this rule is revealed by a key scene from the founding myth of European chivalry, the quest for the Holy Grail. Young Parzival arrives at the Castle of the Holy Grail during his itinerant journey and is permitted to attend the feast of the Knights of the Holy Grail. During this feast he encounters strange things: a lance is brought in, and a chalice, and the ailing Amfortas, King of the Grail, and his knights break out into lamentations. Parzival, who enjoyed the upbringing of a knight, maintains perfect discretion and is silent in the face of all that he sees. And precisely that is his great error: A question from him would have broken the disastrous spell that lay over the Castle of Munsalvaesche. Discretion was natural, but a mature person would possess something more: sympathy. Sympathy sets a limit on discretion—but sympathy must above all be intelligent if it is to exercise this privilege, for dumb emotion can also do considerable damage.

The bodily excretions that Jesus names so plainly and clearly in his homily on the washing of hands before meals are likewise subject to veiled language in Europe. There is not even one socially and literarily unequivocal, frank name for where these excretions take place. Goethe calls it the “shithouse.” Later the expressions grew ever more contorted. The “toilet,” despite its affectation, has become very popular; named for the dressing rooms in which the laundry, *les toiles*,” was kept and often the commode as well. Today’s young people often don’t know the true meaning of “making one’s toilet,” namely, “to make oneself pretty, to dress up for the evening,” and not “to make in the toilet.” The German word, “Klo,” short for the English expression, “water closet,” is a bit blunt and common, even though it’s a hybrid taken from another language, but for that reason it also is less affected than “toilet.” The usually clearly understood wish, “to be permitted to wash one’s hands” may nevertheless be misunderstood. In England during my student days the question “Where can I powder my nose?” was used only by men and jokingly, and even that joke has fallen by the wayside today. In Italy one seeks “il bagno,” even in sleek trattorias where taking a bath is totally out of the question, In Austria, even among the upper crust, one speaks of the “little house,” a pseudo-rustic but casual and painless solution to the problem, one that has the advantage, above all, of not sounding awkwardly foreign.

Opinions on the extent to which one’s own sexual experiences may be confessed in the company of others have vacillated ever since American psychoanalysts on both coasts assumed, at least among women of society, the role that an amusing and sophisticated abbé played for comparable women of 18<sup>th</sup>-century France. Today the most amazing details may be heard totally unexpectedly preceding and following an evening meal. And it is still so that the others in attendance squirm in embarrassment, unless malice prevails and spurs on the urge to confess. Among the characteristics of the discreet person is that he is capable of being as keenly ashamed of the indiscretions of others as he is of his own. Often, on listening to such peccadilloes, I have secretly prayed that the floor will open up and swallow the entire dining room, or that the chandelier will come crashing down on the table, merely to bring an end to the ill-advised and uninhibited prattle. It may seem greatly unjust, but up until now I have always perceived that in society, the reporting of sexual conquests that in most cases are not at all

implausible, are absolutely disbelieved; the indiscreet raconteur is seen as making the whole thing up, and has no inkling of the nature of his listeners' curiosity. Even Casanova was asked in company to indulge at most in an account of his escape from the lead chambers of the Doge's Palace in Venice; everything else, people preferred to read about. For a long time, a great deal of fear was attached to the genitals, as they, too, are something everyone shares—at core, behind the many fears that we all experience, lurks one in particular, the fear of death, and it, as everyone knows, strikes us all. Overcoming the fear of death has its roots in shame and in discretion, but as a moral achievement it far surpasses these origins. I personally was able to judge the full significance of this gift to others as a 12-year-old boy, observing the coup d'état in Ethiopia in 1960, but that was nothing in comparison to what my brothers endured while incarcerated in the cellars of the Menilek Palace during the Mengistu dictatorship. At regular intervals, and for reasons that were unfathomable, one after another of them was taken away, never to return. The tranquility and calm exhibited by these men, many of whom belonged to the same family and whose blood, in reality, was running cold in their veins, gave them an inexplicable feeling of security. None of the prisoners allowed himself the despair and panic that would have been all too forgivable. It is clear to me that such a reaction can be required of no one; but those who are allowed to witness such a reaction can only admire in the extreme this form that extends to the end of one's existence.

Basically, it's the same with discretion as it is with literature. In a good story, we prefer to be told things that we already know through the use of little hints and synecdoche, because we can fill in the rest for ourselves. What is concealed in discretion is the obvious, the all-too-familiar.

But the most familiar thing of all to us is we ourselves. As opposed to all else, this familiarity is not boring to us in the least, rather, it amuses us no end. Why beat around the bush: We are the sole person in the world of interest to us. Anyone who has the courage to listen to himself knows this about himself, and also knows how acutely this places him in opposition to the simplest moral commandments. Our self-interest knows no limit, but it is also embarrassing to us. We feel the urge to hide it from others, it is, being a common vice, also a pudendum. The principle of understatement in our society developed from our shame concerning our boundless self-love, a principle the British

have claimed for themselves to a degree I find no longer *understated* but, to put it mildly, *exaggerated*. Understatement is an international principle. The English are seldom understated linguistically, by the way. British stories about evenings at the theater, vacations in France, books and business dealings are filled with words that are not exactly understated, such as “brilliant,” “superb,” “splendid,” “magnificent,” “marvelous,” “tremendous” and “terrific.” Only when it is said of certain people that they have “a very nice house” is one given to understand that they live in an English Renaissance palace that was designed by Inigo Jones, with a van Dyck hanging in the drawing room. Without doubt, the Chinese and Japanese are the grandmasters of the transparent and wonderfully pleasant game of downplaying one’s own circumstances, so beneficial to social hygiene. I don’t know if Japanese invitations really resemble those that one experienced Japan correspondent—who had developed no particular love for Japan, however—tried to put over on me: “I permit myself to invite you to my wretched hut, where my wife, the slovenly hag, will prepare a meal for you that more than likely will be unpalatable.” But if he wished to express with this that sweeping gestures of humility are in keeping with such occasions, I would trust him completely.

From 18<sup>th</sup>-century Naples is passed down the following dialogue between two good citizens, who, however, must have indulged in an intoxicating nip of Spanish arrogance and Spanish imagination: “I pay you my respects as the most lowly button on the most lowly coat of your most lowly lackey.” And the response, a lovely example of the direct connection between understatement and an overstatement the exhibitionism of which can be prevented only by force, but which lies ready at hand on the tongue: “Signore, the most lowly button on the most lowly livery of my most lowly lackey is a diamond!”

In today’s understated tones a life-threatening operation one recently has undergone is “an annoying incident,” the drunken party one gave is “a nice evening,” and the great business coup “fairly satisfactory for the present.” Anglo-Saxon taste has succeeded in this to the extent that ordinary people now feel themselves constantly obliged to divulge the comical or even laughable sides of their own experience, and their inglorious and grotesque role in it. Events of a serious nature, such as the coronation of a king, must be presented as “wildly funny.” The social model for this seems to be TV’s

master of ceremonies, who is greeted by overhasty, canned laughter before he even has opened his mouth. Never was understatement so artificial as it is today, when heads of industry give amusing speeches in which they present themselves as the brainless victims of slapstick catastrophes, politicians in baseball caps mime childish pride in breaking their own record in a marathon, bishops allow themselves to be photographed toweling off, and commanders-in-chief are caught throwing sticks to their dogs on the lawn. Understatement today must always be mixed with a proper dose of a guilelessness that is so repellent to some that they find themselves longing for the naïve bluster of Plautus's Boastful Soldier.

In the past, discretion prohibited tears in public, at least from men. As it wasn't fully believed that women could be broken of the habit of shedding tears, they were absolved from participating in funerals, even in those of close relatives, and the unsuppressed tears shed by the widow at graveside were concealed by a thick veil. This transference of aesthetic principles from a small group of Stoic philosophers of antiquity to an entire class, the bourgeoisie, of necessity led to concealment and rigidity—and to the polar opposite of tears, the dreaded *fou rire*, or hysterical laughter, that one hears at funerals and through which suppressed outbursts of emotion find an emergency outlet.

The degree to which the avoidance of tears can become not only a willed suppression of spontaneous emotion, but a true “second nature,” culturally, was revealed to me as a little boy by a Japanese pupil at my school, the son of a diplomat. Even today, when occasionally I all too clearly can discern in European and African children the limits of their education and its opportunities, I am amazed at the feat of impressing upon an eight-year-old boy the Samurai ideal of total self-control. Or could it be that the school of thought that maintains that education effects genetic changes over the centuries is correct after all? When my brother and my friends and I would fight and one of us would fall down and cut his knee, we'd break out in angry sobs. But Toshiaki was different. If he really hurt himself and was bleeding to a degree that would have sent the rest of us into shrill cries of pain, he would sit back on his heels, put his hands on his knees, and literally turn to stone. He was scarcely able to show his wound to the teacher who hurried over to him, and didn't answer any questions put to him. Only when he overcame the pain was he released from the spell he had put himself under; he would stand up and act

as if nothing had happened. The fact that people in Europe cry at funerals today—in moderation—is something that I consider an advance, though all the tears shed will never match those at an Ethiopian funeral, where the bereaved compete with the professional mourners they themselves have hired, and against whom they habitually lose. Even in politics tears have become an increasingly popular means. Bismarck restricted his extortive sobs to the limited forum of the royal study, but modern politicians of late are not ashamed to cry even on camera. Such a public display of weeping is not, however, viewed merely as an easing of discipline, as a softening of the “stiff upper lip.” It serves at the same time as the outward expression of an at any rate new form of understatement: “See what a modest person I am,” such tears seem to say, “the old upper class rigidity is foreign to me; despite the power I enjoy, I have always remained one of you!”

The president of a middle-European country, who can cry quite impressively, asked the head of his cabinet—who related the story to me—following an appearance he had seasoned with a show of tears, “I was good, wasn’t I? They find me most loveable when I cry.” Most worthy, would be the correct response, a most worthy ass-et.

Understatement requires that there be something worth understating. There’s no money in playing the poor man. So weeping and wailing about overdrawn accounts, ruinous taxes, huge boarding school bills and the cost of re-roofing the house--“You can just imagine what the roof costs, more reasonable people would build a house for the same money”—has almost become a mark of prosperity. Wealthy property owners in Germany—and in other countries—behave like those Chinese peasants who, when they have a good rice harvest, cry “Bad rice, bad rice!” so that the evil spirits will be tricked into thinking they’ve succeeded in their destructive deeds. An apparently prosperous man who isn’t complaining should take a good look at the bank official in charge of credit—there’s danger ahead. This form of understatement, however, has left the realm of manners behind. This is no longer a matter of curbing an egomania that is repellent to others and demeaning to oneself, but of averting the envy of others with an admittedly remarkably naïve form of cunning. Modern life is complex—there’s rich and then there’s rich. The means of understatement, however, must be cut to fit exactly the milieu for which it is designed, otherwise the entire humble outlay is of little help. Marcel Proust portrayed such a botched example of understatement in the first volume of his

*Remembrance of Things Past*. The fashionable dandy, Swann, is on the trail of a woman he loves, in the home of a rich but socially insecure couple. He is determined, for the woman's sake, to do everything possible to be received well there. Swann normally travels in the reactionary circles of Faubourg St. Germain, in which the Republic is despised, and so he sees himself as self-abnegating and perfectly humble when he declares to the Verdurins that he is wearing tails because he has just come from dinner with the president at the Élysée Palace. But to the Verdurins, the President of the Republic occupies a high rung on the social ladder; and so Swann receives the worst possible marks during his first visit to their home. He has presented himself as someone whom he least resembles—a braggart. So must one then take a degree in sociology in order to master understatement? I'm afraid the answer is yes.

### **Intoxication**

“I consider anyone totally justified who reacts to the current acquisitive state of the world—fostered by engineers and the experts in industrial productivity—with serious alcoholism, provided that he is able to acquire something to get drunk on. To destroy oneself and others in such a manner is an understandable and thoroughly forgivable reaction. Anyone who isn't drinking himself silly these days is setting a remarkable and voluntary example of increased productivity.”

Heimito von Doderer, *Reportorium*

On the question of whether one may get drunk when invited to a social occasion, opinions are greatly divided. For one thing, it has been noted historically that in ancient times the entire reason that both heathens and Christians got together for social occasions was for everyone to get drunk. It would have significantly spoiled the mood of overindulgence and high spirits if nerve-wracking restrictions had been imposed at the outset of the festivities. In my homeland of Ethiopia, going on a bender is part of any bacchanal worth its name. In Russia, Poland, Ireland and in the Scandinavian countries as well, weddings and funerals, baptisms and anniversaries are all occasions for alcoholic excess; anyone who doesn't accept this must try and get out of the invitation, for slipping away early on is nigh impossible. England is the birthplace of the teetotaler and there's a good reason for that: Any guest who isn't reeling after drinking from the constant flow of

offerings at a British feast must be in league with the devil. It is even said that at Sweden's Midsummer Night's Festival, guests of the king were slurring their words. There's just as much drinking done in Germany, but drunkenness is not as highly appreciated there. And why is it that intoxication is so much less popular in the Mediterranean? They're swimming in wine, but not drinking much of it. I've seen six Italians make do with a single bottle of wine over dinner. In old Spain the reproach, "Senor, you're drunk!" could only be washed away in blood. Montaigne found an explanation for the Germans' love of inebriation and the moderation shown by the French in their differently developed "libidinousness"—an explanation I find particularly sympathetic, because it doesn't operate on the argument of moral superiority.

Manners and drunkenness appear at first to preclude one another. Manners always have to do with self-control and self-possession, and with drunkenness these typically are the first to go, the mental component usually more quickly than the physical: Before one slides under the table one has had ample opportunity to talk oneself to death. The accomplished wine-lover therefore is called upon to make a series of distinctions. First, he should know from his past excesses just how much he can tolerate. If you're going to get drunk, then do so intentionally and not like some schoolboy sneaking into the liquor cabinet for the first time. Secondly, he should assess the occasion: is this the right place and, above all, the right company for getting drunk? To be the only one drunk in sober company is a terrible experience. One never knows exactly how one has conducted oneself, but the others know, and they don't forget it so quickly. Especially unfortunate was one guest of the now deceased Duchess of Windsor who had not yet noticed his inebriated condition. The newly-hatched Duchess affected the mannerism of communicating with her servants only in writing. During her meals she always kept by her plate a small pad of paper with a golden mechanical pencil. She observed with growing displeasure that one of the dinner servants was swaying slightly. She motioned him over and handed him a note with the words: "You are completely drunk—leave the room at once!" In his heightened state the servant apparently decided to locate a safe base for this express displeasure, took the piece of paper and discreetly slipped it to one of the guests, who read it, turned red, murmured his excuses, and fled the table.

The best people to enjoy drinking with are those who have precisely that in mind. At any rate, no one should be forced to drink. Such folklore is best left to Georgian village weddings, in which one, after all, does not participate all that often. The most important rule, however, is that developed by the British, and to an astonishing degree: Whatever occurs during an uninhibited bout of drinking, which, by the way, is called *Mulatschag* [good manners] in Austria, falls victim the next day to an instant and deep forgetfulness. No one would deign to return, even for a moment, to what this or that participant in the evening said or did. No date, no obligation, no commitment made during the bender has the least validity the next day, unless the one who made the commitment himself wishes to uphold it. Confidences shared with those who up until then were strangers are considered null and void. Basically, by the next day the entire celebration simply hadn't taken place. I remember fondly an experience following a particularly wild stag party. The morning after, everyone met up again in church, in top hat and tails if with slightly swollen faces. Another foreigner, who had been present the evening before, attempted to bring up the festivities to the man sitting next to him in the pew, saying, with a wink, "That was a good time last evening..." and perhaps even giving him a chummy poke in the ribs with his elbow. The Englishman's eyes nearly popped out of his head in amazement. "What's that? What are you talking about?" he blurted out in a cloud of port, which neither a hot nor a cold bath that morning had been able to dispel.

### **Equality and Inequality**

An important issue in the observance of manners is their relationship to democracy. We have two hundred years of democracy behind us. The first hundred years marked the heroic era of struggle, which also appealed to the imagination and quite definitely generated an aesthetic enthusiasm. The French Revolution felt the power and the desire to mold the altered balance of power into aesthetically new forms as well. Inspired artists designed new types of clothing for the revolutionaries of democracy, created new republican festivals to replace the former religious ones, and new furnishings

that were intended somehow to be reminiscent of republican Rome and were very beautiful. Though the artistic momentum of these revolutionary years was very great, and though the Caesarian rule of Napoleon gave this aesthetic momentum an enormous base of political power, necessary to the effectiveness of all art—successful art is always the art of a powerful country—one cannot say that this power was sufficient to lend European manners a new type of character, appropriate to the changed circumstances. The establishment of something as complex as manners probably is not at all attainable through the efforts of the will. As long, then, as the memory of the basic elements of European manners has not totally been extinguished in its peoples, the sense of beauty, the sense of what is appropriate and proportionate in human relations will also be oriented—somehow, no matter how inadequately—to what in this book is, for the sake of simplicity, referred to as “manners”. And with this, the modern Western European clearly finds himself in an irresolvable contradiction. Democracy—and this applies to the dictatorships of the century as well, almost all of which had a democratic hue, at least rhetorically and aesthetically--derives from the equality of all people. But manners are marked by the principle of inequality. Any good democrat who submits to the laws of manners is acting paradoxically: when he makes laws, he orients himself to equality, when he receives guests that evening, to inequality. The democracy of the American and French revolutions did not invent equality, however. Equality appeared in the world long before that, as a philosophical-religious theorem of Christianity. This religious equality was a hard cross for the ancient cultures to bear, for there was no evidence of it. The fact that people were unequal was something that was palpable. Equality could exist only according to a totally abstract point of view, one that set aside everything that was directly visible. One had to believe that people were equal--because one couldn't see it. It was not all certain that all those who looked like people were, in fact, people; slaves and barbarians weren't, of course, that goes without saying. Shylock's famous monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*, at any rate, could only have been written after 1600 years of Christian culture (“If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?” etc.), because a pre-Christian Jew definitely would not have allowed himself to be thrown in the same equality pot with heathens. The northern barbarians who accepted Christianity felt it necessary, however, to somehow reconcile the abstractly philosophical

principle of equality with the fact of inequality. And so they created the doctrine of social standing. The social standing to which one belongs is, first, nothing more than the place where he stands, and that place is, of course, not equal to one that others occupy.

People who are equal and of equal value to one another occupy unequal stations. Social stations have nothing to do with achievement or with physical or intellectual excellence, but rather with fate. As opposed to ancient times, one's situation was merely an accident, having nothing to do with one's essence. Strangely, it was the arbitrariness with which the various social lots fell that made inequality tolerable throughout the centuries. Part of this, naturally, was the fact that it was forbidden to the ambitious to cross class lines. Society perceived itself as static. Self-realization was perceived as the perfect fulfillment of one's class obligations. I do not mean here to wax lyrical about a harmony that is no longer. The fact that reality often enough appeared quite unharmonious is quite a different matter, however. If today's enemies of democracy habitually refer with grim disdain to the huge gap between a democratic constitution and democratic reality, this criticism nevertheless can never shake the fact that the outlook of our era is democratic practically the whole world over and that the various deplorable states of democracy have not affected this basic view. Feudal class society, at any rate, found a solution to the fundamental problem that people were simultaneously equal and unequal, a solution that found acceptance for roughly a thousand years. And manners still are rooted in these thousand years. The contradiction between equality and inequality is the source of their power. The great images that gave form to this unsolvable contradiction were obvious to everyone, and one would not be thinking historically were one to underestimate the power of these images and to judge them, as would be appropriate when looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as mere inventions of propaganda. The prince electors who chose the Kaiser had, in all of their Germanic chieftain pride, to serve him at dinner, the Kaiser in turn washed the feet of twelve of the destitute on Holy Thursday (at least until 1918), and led the Pope's horse by the bridle-- a servant's gesture, pure and simple--whereas the Pope in his turn defined himself as the "servus servorum," the servant of servants. Behind all of this stood the words of the founder of the Christian religion: "You call me Lord and Master and rightly so, for I am that, but I have not come to be served, but to serve." One could consider these words the prologue

to European manners. Nicolás Gómez Dávila expressed the consequence of this sentence as follows: “Good manners consist in the transference of the etiquette that one shows to higher-ups to the social relations one enjoys with equals.” From which derives the basic principle: The higher-up is always the other. Manners stand in opposition to the political equality of democracy also in a broader context. Democratic equality gives every person certain rights, and imposes a number of responsibilities. With manners, based as they are on the principle of inequality, one has no rights at all oneself, only responsibilities, whereas the other has only rights and, strictly speaking, no responsibilities at all. One is obliged to approach others with all the forms of respect and cordiality, but from one’s own perspective this results in no responsibilities on the part of others. How the other person intends to proceed from the perspective of his own responsibilities is his decision. The focal point of manners is always first directed at the prerogatives of the other, never at one’s own. One’s own may exist, but they are not important, they are at best preserved in the person of one’s counterpart, who also is subject to the laws of manners. Manners exist in the possibly utopian hope that the other will best protect one’s rights, so that one needn’t worry about them oneself.

He who sues for the observance of social intercourse toward his own person has not understood the spirit of manners. To give an example from the most modest of spheres, one suited perhaps to ground this possibly all too noble-sounding maxim in the everyday: A man has the duty to stand up in the presence of a woman, but a woman doesn’t have the right to demand the observance of this duty. The man who doesn’t stand up in the presence of a woman does the greatest damage to himself; he disgraces himself in his humanity, or, in the words of the archangel Raphael in the Book of Tobias: “He who acts unjustly is the enemy of his own soul.” Not unexpectedly, the angels are the best instructors in manners.