'The value of civility?'

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‘The Value of Civility?’

Richard Boyd

Summary. This essay argues for civility’s vital place in contemporary urban life. Contrary to many critics who see civility as a conservative or nostalgic virtue deployed to repress difference and frustrate social change, it is argued that civility should be understood as democratic, pluralistic and premised on a sense of moral equality. Civility’s most obvious contribution is functional—in easing social conflicts and facilitating social interactions in a complex and diverse market society. However, there is also and maybe more importantly an intrinsic moral value to civility. Observing the formal conditions of civility is one of the ways in which we communicate respect for others and generate habits of moral equality in the everyday life of a democracy.

Introduction

Before considering the value of civility, one must first determine, even if provisionally, what civility means. This may be harder than one would imagine. Like the famous comment by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart about pornography being impossible to define but ‘I know it when I see it’ (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964)), civility has something of this same nebulous moral quality. The fact that civility is most conspicuous in its absence—when, for example, we are confronted by flagrant instances of incivility—does little to help generate a working definition, not to mention a philosophical justification of civility’s value. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that civility and the related concept of civil society have undergone significant transformations in their history.1 The present study will focus on an understanding of civility derived primarily from classic moral philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, aspects of which have been restated compellingly in the 20th century by the sociologist Edward Shils and the philosopher Michael Oakeshott. I want to concentrate on this particular conceptualisation of civility because it seems to me most congenial to making the case for civility’s ‘value’ for contemporary social and political theory. Along the way, however, I hope to point out how this pluralistic, democratic and inclusive understanding of civility may differ from other more exclusionary permutations.

This paper undertakes four major claims. First, by a consideration of representative social and political thinkers, I reconstruct an understanding of civility that clarifies its full range of connotations and makes evident both its functional and intrinsic moral significance. Secondly, given civility’s congenial relationship to pluralism, the division of labour and other features of modern urban life, I argue for its special importance in the context of the contemporary city. Thirdly, I try to respond to some of the very powerful
criticisms of civility as premised on inequality, homogeneity and the repression of difference. Finally, using this article’s working definition of civility, I turn more critically to contemporary arguments for the encouragement of a greater role for civility, civil society and the voluntary associations taken by many to define it.

The Virtue of Civility

Civility is a paradoxical concept because it lies precisely at the interstices of public and private, social norms and moral laws, conservative nostalgia and democratic potentiality. Thus it is fitting to begin with a series of questions. Is civility ultimately a private or a public virtue? Should civility be understood in terms of the social behaviours and interactions of everyday life, what we more commonly refer to as manners or courtesy, or as just another synonym for political life, as its etymology alone might suggest? Is civility necessarily a conservative or elitist disposition connected with the preservation of inequality and the status quo, as critics have alleged, or rather is there a way to see civility as more democratic, critical and imminently inclusive? Finally, if civility is indeed valuable, as I will argue here, is this because of its intrinsic moral significance or because of its functional value in minimising conflict and creating social cohesion? These ambiguities run throughout most discussions of civility, historical and contemporary. In what follows, I want to work through these questions by way of homing in on a more precise definition of civility.

Two distinct connotations of civility have sparked confusion. The first reduces civility to the manners, politeness, courtesies or other formalities of face-to-face interactions in everyday life. In this view, to be ‘civil’ is to speak or interact with others in ways that are mannerly, respectful or sociable. These trappings of civility range from polite forms of address—using correct titles, saying please and thank you, speaking in a sympathetic tone of voice, etc.—to matters of etiquette, table manners and other social norms. What strikes us about these aspects of civility is both their formality and conventionality. They are formal in being well-established norms that one is expected to follow and conventional in the sense that despite their obligatory nature they vary widely from culture to culture and situation to situation. By contrast, the second meaning of civility denotes a sense of standing or membership in the political community with its attendant rights and responsibility. This sense of the term civility is most evident in formulations like ‘civil rights’ or ‘civil disobedience’, where the modifier ‘civil’ refers to the condition of being a member of a political community. It makes sense at the outset to distinguish between these two connotations of civility—what I will call the formal and the substantive—and yet it is also important to consider how they may be related.

One way of envisioning the moral relationship between these two dimensions of civility is to postulate the latter as most fundamental and giving rise to the former. Because we are all members of the same political community, interacting on grounds of civic equality, we have an obligation to be polite in our everyday interactions with our fellow citizens. In the linguistic analogy developed by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott, civility is a kind of ‘adverbial’ restraint on the civic language we speak with one another. In the same way that one is enjoined to speak politely, modestly or temperately, the adverbial condition of civility modifies and qualifies conduct without specifying its content. We can communicate our wishes or injunctions to fellow citizens—whatever those wishes may be—so long as we agree to subscribe to common conditions on the means we may legitimately use in the pursuit of those self-chosen ends (Oakeshott, 1990, pp. 120–121, 126 and 128; see also Boyd, 2004a). Membership is defined in terms of this common moral relationship and it is this relationship that in turn gives rise to our responsibility to be civil to others.

On the other hand, the link between formal and substantive aspects of civility may just as easily run in the other direction. Less attention
has been focused on how civility, understood in terms of manners or courtesy in everyday interactions, may generate and reproduce the very conditions for the civic equality generally taken as primary. Regardless of the stipulations of the law, a sense that we are all part of one moral collectivity or public can only exist when we are in the habit of treating one another in ways that observe the formal conditions of civility. Respect for these formal conditions is communicative. The practice of civility generates a sense of inclusivity and moral equality, both in ourselves and for others. Failure to respect these rules by behaviours such as rudeness, condescension, mockery and other forms of incivility serves to locate others outside a common moral community.

At the margins, these rules are functionally necessary as the minimal condition for social and political life. Absent a respect for the rules that compose this baseline of civility, as Thomas Hobbes famously argued, we are apt to devolve into civil war or barbarism. Civility is a disposition that makes political life possible because it allows those with different and conflicting views of the good to live peacefully side-by-side under conditions where a deeper moral agreement about shared purposes or comprehensive systems would be impossible. Civility clearly presupposes—and therefore is bundled up inextricably with—such liberal dispositions as tolerance for others, moderation in one’s commitment to political principles, an enlightened idea of self-interest that makes one solicitous of the relationship between one’s own rights and the rights of others, and an inclination for the peace and security of private life over and against the vagaries of ceaseless public engagement. All of these dispositions or ‘liberal virtues’ were regarded by 17th- and 18th-century moral philosophers as necessary conditions for civil association. Reflecting an historical appreciation of the sectarian conflicts and pluralism out of which liberalism as a public philosophy was borne, John Rawls has aptly captured this understanding of the functional benefits of civility in his characterisation of civility as a modus vivendi (Rawls, 1993, pp. 147–149, 166 and 168).²

It is tempting to associate civility with these generally negative or aversive dispositions, and Rawls is not alone in doing so, but this discounts civility’s sense of the value of active sociability and a moral responsibility to others. Edward Shils (1957) has argued that civility is not incompatible with a concern for political affairs and a sense of the well-being of the community, even if civility is premised on the assumption that these obligations must be balanced against competing obligations to family, friends and coreligionists. Although it is largely a private virtue, civility should not be understood as inimical to sociability. The reclusive Cyclops of classical times is the antithesis of civility.³ Despite his declaration that “men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company”, even a philosopher as deeply suspicious of human sociability as Thomas Hobbes regarded civility as coeval with life in a political community or, in his terms, a civil association (Hobbes, 1994, ch. 13, p. 75). David Hume, Adam Smith and other 18th-century thinkers explicitly linked civility with sociability or sympathy. For Hume, ‘civility’ includes positive virtues of ‘humanity’, ‘charity’ and ‘generosity’ associated with the condition of ‘manners’ or ‘politeness’ (Hume, 1985, pp. 274 and 280). These contribute not just to keeping the peace and assuaging social conflicts. They also and more importantly give way to the “easy and sociable manner” with which citizens meet and develop the “habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other’s pleasure and entertainment” (Hume, 1985, p. 271). The greater the growth of this refinement or civility “the more sociable men become”. In contrast to “ignorant and barbarous nations”, civil populations flock into cities; love to communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living ... particular clubs and societies are every where formed (Hume, 1985, p. 271).
So one of the things that seems to set civility apart from other liberal virtues like tolerance or moderation is that it supposes an active and positive sociability between the person who is civil and the one to whom this virtue is directed.

Civility, for Hume, is the product of a natural “propensity to company and society” which “makes us enter deeply into each other’s sentiments”. On the one hand, this propensity “causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions” (Hume, 1985, p. 202), which means that this sociability of man is a source of perpetual contention. This very same love or sympathy may be responsible for the “parties of affection” or “personal factions” that Hume (1985, pp. 56 and 63) so laments. And yet at the same time, life in the absence of this civility is reduced to an ingratiating desire to please one’s superiors, on the one hand, or an empty condescension towards subordinates, on the other. This is why civility is best cultivated in a middle-class, commercial society where one has the opportunity to interact with one’s fellow citizens on terms of rough equality, both in public and in private life (Hume, 1985, pp. 546–547).

It may seem peculiar to describe civility in terms of moral equality and the rise of a democratic public sphere. More often today we associate civility with ceremoniousness, elaborate formalities or even haughtiness on the part of the upper classes. This has not always been the case. Thomas Hobbes distinguishes between “points of the small morals” such as “how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth or pick his teeth before company” and those more substantial “qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity” (Hobbes, 1994, ch. 11, p. 57). These civil qualities for Hobbes consisted first and foremost of modesty and humility. Hume also defines civility as a kind of modesty or self-deprecation.

Among the arts of conversation, no one pleases more than mutual deference or civility, which leads us to resign our own inclinations to those of our companion, and to curb and conceal that presumption and arrogance, so natural to the human mind (Hume, 1985, p. 126).

Thinking about civility as a “mutual deference” that “curbs or conceals” self-regard and allows the natural virtues of sympathy and beneficence to express themselves begins to get at the democratic core of what civility actually communicates. Presumably it is not just the “deference” of civility, which as a permanent condition can hardly be satisfying, but its “mutuality” that “pleases” us.

Civility is indeed a moral disposition that derives from the postulate of moral equality. However, it is moral in a very specific and highly qualified sense. It is important to distinguish the new-modern virtue of civility from other more stringent classical or Christian understandings of virtue or morality with which it is commonly confused by defenders and critics alike. One of the most revealing ways to make this distinction is to say that civility is a looser kind of moral obligation we owe to strangers. Civility is uniquely appropriate to a world where our interactions with others have gone beyond the primordial, familial or intimate moral relationships that structured the family, tribe or ethnie. Civility is tied up with a specific kind of political community, premised on the relationship of political equality that obtains between fellow citizens who rule and are ruled in turn in contrast to the patriarchal relationships between fathers and dependents, or the despotical rule of masters over slaves (see, for example, Aristotle’s Politics, book 1; Locke, 1988, p. 268).

Civility is also associated with a uniquely modern socioeconomic order. It is fitting that the practice of civility should have been so closely associated in the minds of 18th-century philosophers with the rise of the extended order of a market economy. Civility is a moral virtue borne out of the intermittent, informal and quasi-public interactions between shopkeeper and customer, between
merchant and producer, or between fellow customers in the coffeehouse or public house. It represents something more than the anonymous self-interest of a Hobbesian world where possessive individuals chase after the next economic increment. And yet it is also something less than the intense moral solidarity dictated by ascribed identities of family, kin or tribe. Oakeshott has nicely characterised this intermediary moral quality of civility, falling somewhere midway between instrumental reason and comradeship or love, as a “somewhat ‘watery’ fidelity called civility” (Oakeshott, 1990, p. 147). Its ostensible “thinness” is hardly something of which to complain, however. Rather, it

is a characteristic (or what, from another point of view, may be called a virtue) of civility that, being independent of both rivalry and tender concern, it may subsist where the one is present or where the other is absent (Oakeshott, 1990, p. 123).

Thus there is both a functional as well as an intrinsic value to civility. We are civil to others not simply because to fail to do so would endanger peace and order. We also and more importantly have an obligation to subscribe to these moral conditions because other human beings deserve to be treated with a similar respect out of consideration for the sense in which we are no better than they. Shils boils this down to the idea that

Civility is basically respect for the dignity and the desire for dignity of other persons (Shils, 1997, p. 338).

Civility is thereby wedded to the democratic ideal of moral equality in both a positive and a negative way. In the best case, being civil to strangers, treating them with an ‘easy spontaneity’ that demonstrates both a willingness to look past differences and that communicates equal respect, is gratifying to both parties.5 Whereas to fail to be civil to someone—to treat them harshly, rudely or condescendingly—is not only to be guilty of bad manners. It also and more ominously signals disdain or contempt for them as moral beings. Treating someone rudely, brusquely or condescendingly says loudly and clearly that you do not regard her as your equal. Incivility may range from relatively harmless instances of rudeness, disrespect or bad manners all the way down to extreme cases of cruelty and the patent disregard for others as fellow human beings. If, as Shils argues, the good manners of civility serve to locate two otherwise different human beings as equal members of the same inclusive collectivity or public, then maybe the most harmful aspect of incivility is that it serves as a device of hierarchy, difference and exclusion (Shils, 1997, pp. 338–340). To say that someone is not worthy of civil treatment in public life is to say, ipso facto, that they are neither our equals, entitled to moral dignity, nor full-fledged members of the same moral universe.

Judith Shklar (1984, 1998) has importantly distinguished the ‘ordinary vices’ of a democratic society—undemocratic behaviours like condescension, arrogance, snobbery, hypocrisy, etc.—from the more extreme instances of cruelty that liberal democracy rightly ‘puts first’ as the summum malum to be avoided at all cost. However, in moral—if not practical terms—there may be a connection between subtle forms of disrespect and incivility and monstrous political crimes and exclusions. This is not to say categorically that people who are rude are inclined to cruelty; nor even that a surface-level veneer of politeness is incompatible with concealed disdain or outright malevolence.6 It is only to note an affinity between the ways we treat others in everyday life and the kinds of moral relationships these seemingly formal or superficial encounters serve both to communicate (where present) and generate (where absent). Minority groups who are treated day-to-day in demeaning ways, subject to insults, derogatory racial epithets or differential treatment are thereby dehumanised and degraded, even if only in very subtle psychological ways. Likewise, to spit at someone, to call her a cockroach or a dog, lays the groundwork for even greater dehumanisation and cruelty.
For all of these reasons, moral philosophers like Stephen Carter (1998) and Mark Kingwell (1995) have called for a renewed attention to civility in modern public life. This is an admirable goal, but such efforts must be qualified in two ways. First, I think we have to be realistic about the extent to which civility can be encouraged in its absence. Even if civility is a moral obligation rooted in a consideration that other people deserve by virtue of their common humanity, it is unclear how or whether civility can be encouraged externally without nullifying its moral significance (Pippin, 2000). Like ‘Good Samaritan’ laws requiring people to behave altruistically or morally, being civil only out of fear of punishment or hope of reward seems to negate the link between the formal and substantive dimensions of civility I have suggested.

One must also be careful to distinguish calls for a renewed civility from other recent rhetorical arguments on behalf of more stringent understandings of virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1988) and other philosophical critics of modernity have complained that civility does not go far enough. The civility, tolerance and peacefulness upon which modern philosophy is premised represent an unconscionable watering-down of more demanding moral standards derived from classical antiquity or Christianity. In many of the more apocalyptic versions of this argument, liberal societies are poised on the verge of collapse or moral breakdown if this heroic civic or moral virtue is not somehow (re)awakened in the hearts of the citizenry (Taylor, 1985, 1989). I cannot deal here with these criticisms in the detail or depth they deserve. However, three points are worthy of consideration. The first is that these calls for moral rejuvenation, civic commitment and shared virtues must be distinguished from the less exacting and more pluralistic understanding of civility outlined here. Civility is indeed a moral virtue, but 17th- and 18th-century philosophers deliberately conceived of civility as a more realistic and preferable alternative to aristocratic honour, classical virtue or Christian caritas. Secondly, if these critics are indeed correct, and the absence of heroic republican virtues in the modern polity is a legitimate cause for concern, there are far graver dangers in a society where even the minimal baseline of civility has been extinguished. Thirdly, as we will see below, in a modern society characterised by deep moral complexity, civility just may be the thickest virtue one dares to try to encourage.

**Civility and Urban Life**

Civility and urban life have always been linked in the sociological imagination—obviously and maybe less obviously so. Politeness, civility and urbanity—with their etymological connection to the Greek politeia or city-state, or the Latin civitas and urbanus—became virtual synonyms in the minds of Scottish moral philosophers like David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Scottish proponents regarded civility as the crowning achievement of urban and commercial life. With its concentrated population, accumulated wealth made possible by its complex division of labour and the taste for refinement in the arts and sciences that accompanied these material conditions, urban life came to partake of the qualities of a public sphere in which conversation flourished and ideas could be freely exchanged (Langford, 1989; Habermas, 1989).

Eighteenth-century philosophers are not alone in this conviction that urban life is necessary for the growth of civility. Only in cities can politeness, refinement and civilisation take hold and flourish among those cultivated enough to enjoy them. In contrast to the rudeness, ignorance, poverty and lack of manners of the rural provinces, the city is the location of the salon, philosophy, polite conversation and an aesthetic or intellectual appreciation of the arts and sciences. Manners are carried to their perfection in the city, which may explain the cultivated urban disdain for the rudeness of manners and lack of sophistication on the part of those living outside the city. Even in the ancient Greek world it was a knowledge of politike—the art of managing the affairs of the city, ruling and being ruled in turn—that distinguished...
the civilised Greek denizen of the city-state from barbarians living under kings whose despotic rule was only a more developed form of the household dominion of masters over slaves (Aristotle, Politics, bk.1).

Ironically, however, despite these longstanding associations between the city and the moral qualities of civility, urban life has just as often drawn criticism for its conspicuous incivility. Novelists like Émile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, James T. Farrell or Upton Sinclair portray urban life as plagued by violence, rudeness and moral depravity that inevitably corrupt the morals of naïve arrivals from the small town (see, for example, Dreiser, 1907; Zola, 1970; Farrell, 1958; Sinclair, 1985). In contrast to the innocence, forthrightness and compassion characteristic of the rural community or countryside, the city is plagued by terrifying extremes of wealth and poverty; by sundry vices such as alcoholism, gambling, prostitution and chicane; by rampant, sometimes even random, public violence; and by fanatical or revolutionary social movements. Countless literary, sociological and philosophical critics in the 19th and early 20th centuries are impressed by the city's 'realism'. Even today, this image of the city as the abyss of human degradation and barbarism persists in contemporary fiction, film and moral philosophy.

Undoubtedly, these more polemical characterisations of urban life are exaggerated. It is not as if villages or small towns lack squalour, violence or moral depravity. Even so, there does seem to be something qualitatively distinct about modern urban life. In his celebrated essay “The metropolis and mental life” (1903/1971), the sociological theorist Georg Simmel describes the urban mindset as deeply suffused by the “calculating” mentality of the market economy, by a kind of “reserve”, “intellectuality”, “blasé attitude” or “coolness” borne out of the “impersonality” and “unrelenting hardness” of the urban economy where the division of labour is carried to extremes. We find there an anonymity or generalised suspicion such that “we do not know by sight neighbours of years standing”, an anomaly that makes urban dwellers appear “so often as cold and ungenial” in the eyes of “small-town folk” (Simmel, 1903/1971, p. 331).

For Simmel, the city exemplifies the modern struggle between the objectivity of culture and the subjectivity of individual personality

In buildings and in educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it (Simmel, 1903/1971, p. 338).

Under these conditions, not surprisingly, the uniqueness of the individual must be asserted or exaggerated, sometimes even in violent and anti-social ways. Thus it is something about the nature of urban life itself—with its requirements of “punctuality, calculability, and exactness”—that breeds precisely the opposite in the form of “irrational, instinctive, and sovereign human traits and impulses” that revolt against the rationalising and homogenising tendencies of modern urban life (Simmel, 1903/1971, pp. 328–329).

But what is the relationship between this urban mentality described by Simmel and what I have characterised as civility? On the one hand, civility may be interpreted as part of this objective mechanism of social control that institutes the regularity, predictability and sameness that makes society possible under conditions beyond the level of the primary group. Civility can plausibly be interpreted as just such an instrument of social control. Whether that control is to be achieved by constructing differences (for example, Norbert Elias’ invidious courtly standards of politeness that work to distinguish élites from the masses and to exclude the impolite or unmannerly) or by reproducing sameness and regularity (the bourgeois rationality critiqued by Michel Foucault), civility undoubtedly serves in some respects as a
constraint on our freedom (Elias, 2000; Foucault, 1977). This further suggests that incivility in the city need not always take the colourful form of riots, coups d’état, unruly crowds and violent political demonstrations that captivated early sociological critics of collective behaviour like Tocqueville, Tarde or Le Bon in the 19th century (see Ryan, 1997). Individuality, subjectivity and other romantic revolts against the objective forces of culture more often, if less dramatically, play themselves out in everyday face-to-face interactions. Lewdness, graffiti, vandalism or other low-level uncivil behaviours are assertions of freedom and individuality in the face of the objective or disciplining force of urban life.

Paradoxically, however, Simmel’s analysis also suggests that civility might serve quite the opposite function as a facilitator of freedom and individuality. Civility—in contrast to the more intense and intimate sociability of the family, kinship network or village community—entails a kind of wilful distancing from the intimacy and obligations otherwise forced upon us by the all-encompassing nature of rural life. Insofar as civility represents a way of retaining some element of privacy or self-containment in an urban environment, it leads in the direction of that freedom and individuality Simmel regards as possible only in the absence of the intense moral solidarity of the primary group. This explains the coolness or reserve so often associated with civility by its critics and defenders alike. Absent this social distancing

The individual has only a very slight area for the development of his own qualities and for free activity for which he himself is responsible (Simmel, 1903/1971, p. 332).

And yet, as Simmel brilliantly grasps, this behaviour is not the asociality, atomisation or ‘dissociation’ often attributed to urban life by critics of a mass society. Rather, civility is itself a form of sociability, if not “one of the elementary forms of socialisation” (Simmel, 1903/1971, pp. 331–332). “The entire inner organisation of such a type of extended commercial life rests on an extremely varied structure of sympathies, indifference, and aversions of the briefest as well as the most enduring sort”. Without the kind of reserve, or even antipathy, associated with this way of life, there is the danger of real “hatred and conflict”. We are saved from this open conflict, however, by “the latent adumbration of actual antagonism” which makes possible “the sort of distancing and deflection without which this type of life could not be carried on at all” (Simmel, 1903/1971, p. 331). Civility is part of the answer to Simmel’s question: “How is society possible?” (Simmel, 1903/1971).

Civility and Pluralism

Above and beyond the magnified scale and accelerated pace of urban life, another reason why civility is so important is the impossibility of cultivating more intense attachments or shared purposes among those who are so different. That is to say that pluralism and civility go hand-in-hand. The world’s great cities—Paris, London, New York, etc.—have for centuries served as the locus of domestic and international migrations, bringing those with different religions, ethnic heritages and traditions into close proximity. Immigrants tend to segregate themselves into ethnic neighbourhoods or enclaves, which often replace or superimpose themselves upon previous communities. Urban life is a palimpsest of identities and traditions. Where cultural diversity is amplified by close physical proximity, some social norm is required in order for diverse populations to live side-by-side in mutual peace and accommodation. The heterogeneity and even outright conflict between different populations suggests the futility of expecting deep moral agreement. What is necessary for civil life is less some fundamental moral consensus about the rightness or wrongness of abortion, cloning, stem cell research, etc. than a way for different groups to minimise the conflicts and maximise the co-operation that this project of collective life entails.
F. A. Hayek has observed of modern pluralistic societies that

What makes agreement and peace in such a society possible is that the individuals are not required to agree on ends but only on means which are capable of serving a great variety of purposes and which each hopes will assist him in the pursuit of his own purposes (Hayek, 1976, p. 3).

The discovery of such a “method of collaboration which requires agreement only on means and not on ends” is characteristic of what he and others have termed “civility” (Hayek, 1976, p. 3). Indeed, if agreement about ends or shared purposes were required for our everyday dealing with others—in the sense that we expected to live, trade or otherwise socialise only with those who were like us religiously, ethnically or culturally—modern society as we know it would cease to exist. What struck Hayek—following many of the 18th-century moral philosophers—was the extent to which social co-operation was possible in the absence of any of these deeper moral agreements. This, to him and other commentators, was one of the most distinctive and admirable features of the extended order of a commercial society and, by association, of the city.

The city embodies the most profound articulation of the division of labour and, along with this, come specialisation and dependency. One thinks of the kinds of specialty shops that thrive in the metropolis. ‘Just Lamps’ or ‘Reptiles Only’ hardly begins to capture the extremes to which the social and economic division of labour can be taken. Simmel cites the example of the profession of the ‘quatorzième’, an entire class of persons in Paris who are dressed and on call should a dinner party find itself short of one person and plagued by the unlucky number of 13 guests (Simmel, 1903/1971, p. 335). Our desires—not to mention our very lives—are in the hands of a multitude of strangers with whom we share little in common. Its complex division of labour—the hyperspecialisation of the urban economy—means that we are entirely dependent for the satisfaction of even our most basic needs on a multitude of individuals who are necessarily strangers to us. As Smith, Hume, Hayek and others have noted, these needs are not satisfied because these others share the intense solidarity of the family or kinship group, or even because we know them personally. As Adam Smith famously observed

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we can expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest (Smith, 1976, vol. 1, book 1, ch. 2, p. 18; see also Ignatieff, 1984).

More familiar than unadulterated self-regard but less intimate than love or friendship, civility is the only moral relationship suited for such conditions.

The close association in 18th-century philosophy between civility and tolerance is especially instructive in this regard. Part (although by no means the whole) of learning to be civil is a training in suspending judgement about others who are different from ourselves. To be sure, the virtue of tolerance did not arise in modern commercial cities and urban life can often be the scene of ethnic antagonism and racial intolerance. However, the constant and intense proximity of difference under modern urban conditions makes civility a press ing moral and sociological requirement. Absent the habits and moral dispositions of civility, an already-emotional and sometimes explosive urban environment might devolve into rioting or collective violence at any moment. Civility in this most basic sense is the lubricant that makes modern urban life possible. Indeed, one of the most surprising features of urban life is that instances of overt incivility—public violence—are the exception rather than the rule. Under the strained, cramped conditions of modern apartment living or public transport it is remarkable that the fabric of society does not unravel more often. Speaking of precisely these pressures unique to modern urban conditions, Shils notes that
Civility in manners holds anger in check; it has a calming, pacifying effect on the sentiments (Shils, 1997, p. 339). Insofar as a pluralistic and adversarial democracy is distinguished by the degree to which it allows potential conflicts to come to the surface—encouraging their emergence, rather than repressing or ignoring them—civility is an important ingredient in diminishing the intensity of these conflicts (Shils, 1997, pp. 342–343).

As trivial as they may seem, then, casual signifiers of human respect such as ‘please’ or ‘thank you’, ‘excuse me’ or ‘how’s it going’, serve to awaken a sense of sympathy and to breed an easy spontaneity among urban-dwellers whose primary interactions with others are both fleeting and superficial. Despite their evanescence, however, they are not devoid of moral significance. Insofar as they communicate to others a basic and elemental respect, these ritualised practices and everyday formalities are the cement that makes modern society possible.

All of this pertains to civility’s value as a way of coping with social pluralism—with the plurality of different beliefs, cultures and identities found in the contemporary city. However, civility’s most prominent defenders simply took it for granted that civility is promised on an even more fundamental kind of philosophical pluralism. Liberal dispositions like tolerance, open-mindedness, moderation in one’s commitment to principles and a willingness to partake in conversation in the presence of disagreement are responses to an underlying plurality of qualitatively distinct modes, spheres or orientations of human conduct. As Shils notes

Above all, civil politics requires an understanding of the complexity of virtue, that no virtue stands alone, that every virtuous act costs something in terms of other virtuous acts, that virtues are intertwined with evils, and that no theoretical system of a hierarchy of virtue is ever realizable in practice (Shils, 1997, p. 52).

Civility and Exclusion

To this point, I have emphasised the democratic, inclusionary and pluralistic dimensions of civility. One would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge that ideas of civility have a chequered past. The notion that certain populations—immigrants, ethnic minorities, the poor, etc.—need to be ‘civilised’ in order to make them into responsible liberal citizens is an exclusionary trope running throughout modern social and political thought. John Keane, Norbert Elias, John Kasson and other critics have argued that civility is a construct of society’s élites, who use these standards as a deliberate means to exclude others, control social disorder and establish their own social pre-eminence (Keane, 1998; Elias, 2000; Kasson, 1990). Complaints about the exclusionary permutations of civility are not new. Civility has appeared to many distinguished critics as a kind of vacuous hypocrisy (Wollestonecraft) or distorting inauthenticity (Rousseau). It can also serve as a tool of exclusion and social control. As the novelist Stendhal observes in The Red and the Black, the salons of Restoration Paris operated according to almost inscrutable standards of manners, politeness and refinement that effectively functioned to block the mobility of those young men of new wealth or talent like the novel’s protagonist, Julien Sorel (Boyd, 2005a). Particularly in the wake of the rise of modern democracy and social mobility, the downwardly mobile aristocratic classes were more in need than ever of some way to distinguish themselves and maintain their social pre-eminence. In a more directly political sense, the proliferation of World’s Fairs, museums, libraries, public education and other tutelary institutions in the 19th century were in many cases domestic analogues of the colonising mission of Western nations who sought to remake the world in the image of science, rationality and a homogenising mass culture (Bennett, 1994; Rydell, 1984).

Mrs Frances Trollope’s Domestic Manners of the Americans is an illuminating example of how manners can serve this invidious or
exclusionary work (Trollope, 1949). During her visit to the US in the mid-19th century, Mrs Trollope is famously appalled at the abysmal lack of manners among the democratic Americans. Unlike the roughly contemporaneous observer Alexis de Tocqueville, who is begrudgingly impressed by the democratic equality of the Americans, for Mrs Trollope the lack of formal manners in America exemplifies everything that is morally abhorrent about democracy—its coarse familiarity, its lack of refinement and the polite arts of conversation, its transgressive blurring of higher and lower elements. Mrs Trollope is compelled to acknowledge the variability of manners, the fact that what is appropriate in one context may be inappropriate in another (Trollope, 1949, especially pp. 135–138). However, despite her concession that manners vary from time to time and place to place, her treatment suggests that the formal aspects of civility may be connected with a certain substantive moral content. Democratic manners communicate democratic values, for better or worse. What Mrs Trollope fails to appreciate about the democratic civility of the Americans—in contrast to the aristocratic politeness she prefers—is that the Americans’ spontaneity and authenticity, their utter indifference to social class or identity, can be seen as one of the primary virtues of democratic equality.

I do not want to minimise the historical fact that standards of civility and politeness have indeed served this function of stifling heterogeneity and difference, particularly among the lower classes, immigrant populations and the indigenous subjects of colonial powers. 19th-century ideas of civilisational progress—including the distinction between ‘civilisation’ and ‘barbarism’—condemned many colonial subjects around the world to tutelage and exploitation (see, for example, Mehta, 1999; Parekh, 1995). However, it is also important to note that not all articulations of civility saw it as an instrument of social control or homogenisation.

In contrast to elitists like Edmund Burke, for whom the “servile employments” of hairdresser or candlemaker could never be a subject of honour, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Adam Smith in particular are concerned to emphasise the similarities between all human beings and the moral obligations of humility, decency and respect to which this natural equality gives rise (Burke, 1987, pp. 35–44). As Smith famously notes, “by nature a philosopher is not in genius and disposition half so different from a street porter”, even if “the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance” (Smith, 1976, vol. 1, book 1, ch. 2, p. 20). Hume admonishes that “a good-natured man, who is well-educated, practices this civility to every mortal, without premeditation or interest” (Hume, 1985, p. 126). And perhaps Hobbes is most adamant in his insistence that “if nature therefore have made men equal that equality is to be acknowledged” (Hobbes, 1994, ch. 15, p. 97). Civility is not just a formality to which people must subscribe in order to be taken seriously or to cultivate the appearance of manners or refinement. It is a positive moral obligation that we owe to others in our everyday interactions. We have an obligation to be civil to others out of a deference to the respect in which we are no better than they. To fail to do so is to be guilty of what Hobbes characterised as the unconscionable political sins of “pride”, “arrogance”, “vain-glory” and “contumely” that renders one not only a threat to the civil order but also in violation of the laws of nature (Hobbes, 1994, ch. 15, pp. 95–97).

This all sounds innocuous enough. But it may be objected that the otherwise laudable requirement to treat others civilly may place a disproportionate burden on groups in society who have to shout or behave in ways that are deemed uncivil in order to be heard (see especially, Sparks, 1997). Life in a political community, or in the public sphere more generally, brings together individuals and groups with different identities, access to power and standing in the eyes of others. By virtue of the sameness and uniformity it imposes on difference, the claim is that civility excludes or dilutes those voices already most likely to be lost in the conversation.7
This is to say that politics may not be analogous to the polite conversation of the gentleman’s club or the debating society.8 There is great force to these criticisms. Nonetheless, they rest on several debatable assumptions. The first is the empirical claim that it is prudentially necessary to speak loudly or even offensively in order to be heard. Although the squeaky wheel quite often does get the grease, there is also something to be said on behalf of the fact that we appreciate—and take the side of—politeness and good manners in public life. Not just entrenched reactionaries but noncommittal bystanders are often alienated by strident, aggressive or patently offensive behaviours. Conversely, two of the most successful movements on behalf of greater inclusion and civil rights in modern memory—those led by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King, Jr—were premised on non-violent and civil strategies for protest and resistance. Efficacy cannot be the only justification for incivility.

The second assumption is the idea that inclusion in the public sphere is something that can take place on anything other than terms that communicate and respect moral equality. For an excluded group to communicate its wishes or demands in ways that are disrespectful of others—that disrespect or dehumanise their enemies—is to erode the conditions that make civil life possible. It is to reduce politics to the Schmittian antinomy of friends and enemies that is the very antithesis of the civil condition. Asserting one’s claims uncivilly in a public sphere whose existence is premised on mutual respect and recognition is, if not oxymoronic, then at least to set an unfortunate precedent.

It may seem to add insult to injury to expect groups that are themselves regularly disrespected or ignored to subject themselves to standards of civility. Why should they be obliged to behave with respect and politeness to others when they are regularly treated with contempt and disrespect—oftentimes by the very same people? The answer, I think, is not to depart further from the governing ideal of civility by allowing those who are disenfranchised to partake of incivility. Rather, it is to deploy the democratic potentialities of civility against those who regularly treat others contemptuously. It is they—and not those who feel compelled to shout to be heard—who are most fundamentally in disaccord with the virtue of civility and it is against them that civility needs to be deployed as a critical moral standard. Civility’s amorphous, evolving and politically contested nature is undeniable. But rather than being a cause for alarm, civility’s malleability can also lay the groundwork for democratic possibilities.

Encouraging Civility and a Civil Society?

To this point, I have argued for the value of civility and its special relevance for contemporary urban life. However, it is worthwhile saying a bit more to clarify the grounds of these claims. My discussion of civility has focused predominantly on the functional role of civility in facilitating social order and minimising conflict. In large measure, as I have suggested above, civility is desirable because of the disruptive and socially divisive nature of incivility. Whether incivility takes the form of personal disrespect and low-level antisocial behaviour or rises to the extremes of rioting, looting and the wholesale destruction of personal property, the breakdown of civility bodes poorly for the constitution of society. Recent outbreaks of rioting that began in the suburbs of Paris and spread throughout all of France are dramatic illustrations of the breakdown of civility. As Thomas Hobbes understood so well when he juxtaposed the condition of civil association to the vicissitudes of the state of nature, beyond certain limits incivility may nullify all the enjoyments of a humane and decent society.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to suggest that civility is only valuable for its functional role in keeping the peace and preserving the status quo. It is this unnecessarily conservative view of civility that I have sought to interrogate in this essay. Rather than simply being a negative or aversive disposition like tolerance, moderation or
peacefulness—which ask nothing more from us than to leave other people alone—civility presupposes an active and affirmative moral relationship between persons. Being civil is a way of generating moral respect and democratic equality. Regardless of its functional role in maintaining the peace and order of society, civility is a moral obligation borne out of an appreciation of human equality. As we have seen, Hume, Smith and other thinkers in the Scottish Enlightenment associate civility not only with a sense of sympathy and sociability they saw as natural to human beings. The growth of civility is also co-terminous with positive virtues like charity, magnanimity and humanity that are desirable for their own sake. To see civility only in narrowly functionalist terms is to overlook its moral significance.

If I am correct that civility is a moral obligation that we owe to others—and thus something that others have a right to expect from us—then there may be a connection between the moral and prudential justifications of civility I have just outlined. As we have seen, being civil in everyday life is one of the ways we include others within a common moral universe. Conversely, the habitual disregard of civility makes others feel painfully that they do not belong. When it is regular or institutionalised, this denial of mutual respect and recognition may generate even greater degrees of incivility in response. Minority groups that are geographically or economically isolated, stigmatised or left with a sense that their voices have gone unheard are themselves more likely to become uncivil. The novelist Ralph Ellison captures brilliantly the anger and frustration of African Americans in the 1940s and the individual and collective incivility to which their sense of ‘invisibility’ gives way. As Ellison’s nameless protagonist complains

You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognise you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful (Ellison, 1995, pp. 4–5).

Thus the importance of the active practice of civility that I have characterised is two-fold. Civility is first and foremost a moral obligation and it would be morally desirable regardless of its cumulative effects on society as a whole. And yet the widespread dereliction of this moral duty may lead to that incivility whose effects are so deleterious. The breakdown of civility may be contagious.

Given civility’s value, what ought to be done to encourage its practice? Broadly speaking, there have been two contemporary responses to this question, neither of which is entirely satisfactory in light of the considerations outlined above. The first is the route taken by prominent contemporary advocates of ‘civil society’. Robert Putnam (2001), Benjamin Barber (1998), Jean Elshtain (Elshtain et al., 1998) and Amitai Etzioni (1996) are just a few of the many political scientists, sociologists and moral philosophers who have called for the rebirth of ‘civil society’, understood here as a world of Tocquevillean voluntary associations. One problem with these contemporary invocations of ‘civil society’ is that they focus disproportionately on the structural dimension of civil society at the expense of a more explicit consideration of the moral qualities of civil (as opposed to uncivil) groups. However, as we have seen, civility may exist in the absence of formal groups and not all groups are conducive to the virtue of civility. Ethnic, racial or religious groups among whom relations may often be strained to the point of violence; the proliferation of gated neighbourhoods or other residential community organisations whose internal solidarity is premised on excluding others; as well as ubiquitous street gangs, mafias and other clandestine economies that flourish in urban environments—these are all examples of sub-political groups that at minimum contribute little or nothing to a society’s stock of civility and at maximum are bearers of incivility. Suffice it to say
that more group participation may do little to replenish a given society’s reservoir of civility.

Other thinkers have called more directly and explicitly for a rebirth of the moral practices of civility on the part of individuals. According to Stephen Carter (1998) and other critics of the ‘decline of civility’, civility is on the wane in contemporary society and something must be done to halt its extinction. Not only do these arguments rest on debatable assumptions about whether civility is really quite so absent from modern society and urban life as critics may wish to imagine,9 but there are at least two broader difficulties with calls to rejuvenate civility. First, morally speaking, it is unclear how civility can be legislated or enforced without destroying the sentiments that originally lent it moral force. Being civil may not be a moral choice in the sense that we deliberate each time we act civilly—it is a habit after all—but neither is it a habit that can easily be taught in any deliberate fashion. At a more practical level, as Michael Oakeshott worried, there is always the danger that systematic efforts to recreate civility may succeed only in hastening its departure. Such projects of moral regeneration are constrained by the resources of a given political tradition. No amount of hortatory rhetoric or abstract intellectual justification will ever lead to a renewed commitment to the practice of civility once the traditions that sustain it have been exhausted. Indeed, by making individuals more self-conscious of those moral habits they have learned to practise unthinkingly, the risk is that whatever remains of these moral sediments will be lost or destroyed (Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 40–41, 59–60 and 128–129).

In conclusion, then, this essay is intended as an invitation to consider more explicitly civility’s importance for urban life and contemporary democratic theory. By raising these questions about civility’s nature, sources and cultivation, we are in a better position to understand its function in contemporary urban society and to distinguish its considerable moral virtues from its lamentable historical abuses.

Notes

1. I cannot in this context explore these changes as fully as they deserve, but others have ably tackled these genealogical questions of the nature of civility and the companion idea of civil society (see, for example, Keane, 1988; Seligman, 1992; Kumar, 1993; Gellner, 1994; Ehrenberg, 1999; Oz-Salzberger, 2001; Berry, 2003; Boyd, 2004b).

2. Even so, for Rawls there is something necessarily remedial, indeed third-best, about this modus vivendi compromise, which he contrasts to the more secure and morally satisfactory arrangements of a constitutional or overlapping consensus.

3. The example is Oakeshott’s (1990, p. 123).

4. On the democratisation of ideas of manners and civility in the 18th century, see especially Klein (1997, pp. 30–51; and 1994). On how that democratic and inclusionary moment in civility’s history was overshadowed by exclusion in the 19th century and afterwards, see Kingwell (1993) and Kasson (1990).


6. Edward Shils (1997, p. 326) thought that Nazis and Communists were also rude, but I think the connection is implicit rather than necessary.

7. For related argument critical of the idea of the public sphere more generally, see especially Young (1995).

8. On this point, see Benjamin Barber’s (1988) critique of Michael Oakeshott.

9. See, for example, Wolfe (2000). An exemplary case study of this empirical question is Lee (2002) who brilliantly captures the extent to which civility pervades the everyday life of urban groups who are stereotypically portrayed as living on the verge of violent conflict.

References


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