

The Review of Politics 80 (2018), 511–532.

© University of Notre Dame

doi:10.1017/S0034670518000189

A Symposium on Teresa M. Bejan's *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*

Jacob T. Levy, Melissa S. Williams, Zachariah Black, Paul Downes, Simone Chambers, Marc Hanvelt, with a Response by Teresa M. Bejan

Teresa M. Bejan: *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 272.)

Introduction

Taylor Putnam

University of Toronto

Civility finds itself once again a topic of pressing interest. Its resurgence, however, should come as no surprise. In her recent book *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, Teresa Bejan reminds us that difference and disagreement remain insoluble facts of human coexistence that invite, but do not always require, renegotiation. On her account, our present frustration with the problems these divisions engender can be largely explained by the dichotomy between persecution and toleration that contemporary political theorists maintain. In that framework, civility is made to require either silence on controversial topics to avoid the charge of persecution or the practice of sincere respect for the expressed commitments of others in the name of toleration. Although these two options may for a time lead dissenters to bite their tongues or practice a form of pernicious approval, disagreement and the charge of incivility that follows will inevitably reappear.

To bring these challenges into sharper focus, Bejan structures the book around three competing conceptions of civility from the seventeenth century: civil silence, civil charity, and mere civility, which she associates with Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Roger Williams, respectively. It is this third option that Bejan assiduously promotes throughout the book. While Hobbes's account suppresses all public disagreement in the service of the peaceful accommodation of difference, and Locke censures those deemed "uncivil" for the sake of productive disagreement and social concord, Williams only requires that individuals be free to continue a

conversation no matter how acrimonious. By premising his argument on mutual contempt, as opposed to the more coercive practices that civil silence and civil charity require, Williams brazenly advocates for a merely “unmurderous coexistence.” “Robust conceptions of civility,” Bejan writes, “often end up exacerbating the problems they purport to solve by imposing partial judgments as to what counts as ‘uncivil’ on others” (174), and it is for this reason that one must engage in a serious appraisal of Williams’s thought.

Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who are shown to largely map onto opposite sides of the contemporary dichotomy between persecution and toleration, Williams resists easy categorization in today’s intellectual landscape. Although minimal, Williams’s approach is far from easy, for it demands that we accept that we are both going to get as good as we give in the public sphere and that we may be seen as contemptible by our interlocutors. We must be prepared to be hated. Given these risks, the desire to ban speech that we do not approve of, for instance by means of modern-day hate-speech laws or the antiblasphemy laws that preceded them, is understandably ever present. And yet, although these measures are tempting and difficult to resist, Bejan implores us to remain resolute free-speech absolutists. In this regard, her book is an ambitious and admirable defense of the status quo.

In this symposium, six thoughtful reviewers—Jacob T. Levy, Melissa S. Williams, Zachariah Black, Paul Downes, Marc Hanvelt, and Simone Chambers—scrutinize Bejan’s promotion of “mere” civility. While Jacob Levy encourages Bejan to push her normative argument even further, Melissa S. Williams invites Bejan to consider the consequences of her argument more fully. Zachariah Black interrogates Bejan’s treatment of Roger Williams as a political philosopher and Paul Downes questions the extent of Hobbes’s influence over the book’s conclusion. Simone Chambers and Marc Hanvelt raise competing challenges about the mediating role of social context. Bejan offers a lively, if civil, response.

“Less than We Think”: Politics without Guarantees

Jacob T. Levy

McGill University

Teresa Bejan’s *Mere Civility* is a deeply admirable book: original, persuasive, witty, and eloquent. It is also admirably, bracingly, skeptical, in the best