

I have focused my attention on some critical remarks Bejan introduces at the very end of the book. They in no way detract from the whole book which is indisputably a tour de force. I only wish I had more space to sing its praises.

A Reply to My Readers

Teresa M. Bejan

University of Oxford

It is an honor and privilege to engage with this estimable group of close and careful readers. Timely though it may be, *Mere Civility* began eight years ago as an untimely dissertation. That people have found it helpful in making sense of current events is, I hope, evidence of the soundness of the conceptual and historical analyses at its heart.

That civility is a conversational virtue essential to governing disagreement in tolerant societies is generally accepted by political theorists, including my commentators. Still, a fatal fuzziness has plagued our discussions when it comes to what civility *is*, let alone what it entails, beyond an attempt to silence or exclude whomever the speaker happens to disagree with most. Accordingly, a growing and ideologically diverse chorus of critics has come to suspect that most civility-talk is “bullshit,” in both the vernacular and technical sense.¹ *Mere Civility*’s reconstruction of seventeenth-century toleration debates attests to the myriad ways (including eirenic colloquy, adverbial redefinitions of heresy, and laws against religious insult) in which appeals to in/civility have served to suppress dissent. As an answer to what I call the *second* question of toleration—“How much must we share in order to make the differences that characterize our tolerant society bearable?” (152)—civility is (and always has been) part and parcel of a civilizing discourse. Still, I argue that this is a problem only if we conclude that a tolerant society cannot tolerate incivility and so mistake our inevitably partial answer to the second question of toleration for an answer to the *third*: “Where should we draw the line?”

As Jacob Levy notes, a tolerant society on my view must keep these two questions and answers separate. The fundamental disagreements that characterize religiously and politically plural societies just *are* disagreeable. Civility helps manage this problem, but cannot solve it without putting an end to

¹Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

disagreement entirely—usually by silencing and excluding those we deem uncivil. Yet such “tolerant” societies are anything but, and I argue that the *mere civility* I associate with Roger Williams—a particularly obstreperous evangelical Puritan and founder of Rhode Island, the so-called latrine of New England—alone avoids this trap. This minimal conformity to social norms of respectful behavior sustains disagreement, despite our distaste for our opponents. It demands that we stay in the room and keep on talking—and fighting—but with words, not swords, and that we choose our words accordingly.

My commentators seem to find the conceptual argument persuasive, yet they take issue variously with my characterization of mere civility and my elevation of Roger Williams as an exemplar over his more familiar (and appealing) contemporaries, Hobbes and Locke. While these penetrating critiques speak for themselves as invitations to further reflection, I will clarify and expand upon a few points in response, and push back (albeit civilly) where appropriate.

First, I should clear up an understandable misimpression. Mere civility, as theorized by me and practiced by Williams, does not amount to a defense of insult and ad hominem indifferent to the differential status or vulnerability of one’s interlocutors. Melissa Williams rightly worries that such “civility” would say little about the real harms hate speech poses to those whose position in our tolerant society is not even physically secure. This is not the place to get into the semantics of different kinds of “offensive” speech—beyond noting that when Williams called Catholics “Antichristians” or Americans “devil-worshippers,” he was making a theological point. Such speech was insulting, but it was not simply an insult. Mere civility aims to get and keep a disagreement going, in a way that ad hominem attacks or racial slurs do not. The latter *are* uncivil on my account because they shut down debate by defining others out of the argument. Still, the disagreeableness of disagreement makes distinguishing reliably between ad hominem and cutting criticism impossible; hence, I argue that a tolerant society should tolerate such incivility.

Melissa Williams dislikes this civil libertarian conclusion. Nevertheless, mere civility does impose real constraints on insult by insisting that when we use strong or offensive language, we do so *to* our opponents’ faces and not behind their backs. This is not nothing, for reasons Marc Hanvelt points out. It is much easier (and much more enjoyable) to say what we *really* think to those we feel confident are on our side already. But for Williams, the point was to witness against error to the erroneous themselves. Zak Black worries that this ethic cannot do without Puritan theology and an unerring faith in redemption. I am not so sure. We might commit ourselves to engaging civilly with those we know to be irredeemable for our own sake, or for those in the audience who are not yet persuaded, on moral, political, or prudential grounds.

Clearly then, mere civility may be minimal, but it is not easy. Like any virtue, it is acquired and perfected over time, through the practice of disagreement in which we come to know—and care to know—our interlocutors. We should not pull our punches, yet we know equally well that we must not try to land them all at once if we want the conversation to continue. The judgment required is practical, as well as theoretical. I rely on Williams as an ethical exemplar for this reason.

Melissa Williams suggests that this choice leads me to downplay the *first* question of toleration (“How much difference can we bear?”) and the prior problem of religious violence. If I do, it is because I thought it went without saying that violent responses to difference or disagreement are evil, as well as uncivil. Sadly, the examples she cites show that this is not the case. Still, she goes farther, intimating that to take the problem of religious violence seriously requires adopting Hobbesian civil silence over mere civility. This rests, however, on a mischaracterization of Williams’s social context. Massachusetts Bay may not have executed Williams, but they started hanging Quakers not long after, and they had been killing Native Americans for a long time. I do not underestimate the horrors of the English Civil War, but Williams had a front-row seat to the bloody Pequot War and led the Providence militia against Metacom himself in what remains the deadliest conflict in American history, killing thirty percent of the English population and twice as many Americans. If Williams was willing to tolerate a bit of “brawling” in Rhode Island, in addition to uncivil speech, it was not because he was sanguine but rather clear-eyed about the costs of freedom in a tolerant society. This clarity was a product of a *proximity* to violence that Hobbes and Locke, for all their genius, did not share owing to their long periods of (ingeniously self-imposed) exile.

Nevertheless (and contra Paul Downes), mere civility shares more with Hobbes’s own emphasis on discretion, as the judgment of places, persons, and times in speaking, than the Quakers’ indiscriminate offense. As I suggest in the conclusion (159–60), Williams’s position is much closer to Hobbes’s than to Locke’s, precisely in its embrace of the need for some hypocrisy and a conformable, status-quo bias in civil life. Only for Williams, that conformability was justified (and so constrained) by the demands of conscience and our duty to witness against injustice. And so mere civility requires another decidedly *un-Hobbesian* virtue, too: courage. This, Roger Williams had in spades. Zak Black worries that Williams frustrates our expectations of what a political theorist should look like, but that is precisely the point. He was the *rara avis* who practiced what he preached—and offered a practical refutation of many of our favored theories in the process.

But what of the point made so powerfully by Simone Chambers? Clearly, the behavioral demands of even *mere* civility are highly contextual, and the norms governing a cocktail party, the British Parliament, Twitter, or a philosophy seminar are very different. Scrupulously civil behavior in one can cause crippling offense or upset in another. If mere civility reduces to speaking

forcefully while staying “in the room,” we need to know which room we are in and not mistakenly impose the standards appropriate to one on another. Still, I want to hold the conceptual line here and distinguish between *decorum*, which describes a standard of propriety specific to a conversational context, and civility proper, which applies to one context in particular: the *civitas*. As I say in the book, mere civility describes the standard of conversational behavior expected from members of a tolerant society *as such*. We may stand in any number of different relations to each other that shape its practical demands, as will the nature and purpose of the forum in which the encounter takes place. Still, our commitment to mere civility will shape how we observe (and sometimes break) the rules of decorum appropriate to each when it comes to our fundamental disagreements.

Imagine an extended family at Thanksgiving dinner, the purpose of which (I submit) is not to resolve the fundamental questions of the day. The merely civil person, qua pious niece, may not bring up religion or politics at the table; but if they *do* come up, she will speak her mind to Uncle Ernest, then stay put and pass the potatoes (contemptuously, perhaps) if he threatens to leave in a huff.

A consequence here is that there may be differential expectations of members of the *civitas* depending on their degree of enfranchisement or alienation. This is one way of accommodating the concerns raised by Melissa Williams, but it also raises the vexed question of civility beyond national boundaries in an increasingly wired world. While mere civility would be a universal virtue in a universe of tolerant societies, it cannot be a cosmopolitan one. Which brings me to Marc Hanvelt’s important point. In the book, I argue that we have overplayed the significance of technological shifts in discussions of civility, but I may have downplayed them in one crucial respect. The exercise of discretion in the judgment of places, persons, and times becomes much, much more difficult when a merely civil interaction in one context is one Tweet away from a wider (and potentially global) audience. Little wonder that so many of us opt for civil silence on prudential as well as moral grounds. But this cowardice also has costs.

Still, pace Chambers, I am *not* offering a theory of justice or democracy, but merely of civility. Jacob Levy faults me for a lack of ambition, an unfamiliar charge to which I am eager to plead guilty. Like every good navel-gazing elite, I care deeply about the modern university, which despite its egalitarian aspirations functions much as early modern universities did: as the primary credentialing body for our society’s political, intellectual, and economic elites. These elites often justify their rule, in turn, by claiming moral expertise. As Chambers notes, a university is *not* a *civitas*. But its role in tolerant and (aspirationally liberal) democratic societies makes it incumbent on us to train our students in merely civil disagreement with those with whom they really, fundamentally disagree—and not to suggest to them (wrongly) that this difficult work is somehow optional or immoral.

Chambers is right: mere civility is plenty aspirational and demanding, and I would not recommend a society of Roger Williamses (I would certainly want some Melissa Williamses in mine). But her charge of elitism, while true, misses the mark. My fellow elitists and I are often less capable of mere civility than those we condemn—which is why, it seems to me, most civility-talk is “bullshit.” University-educated cosmopolitans are just as partial (and occasionally tribal) as anyone else, with our own *explicit* biases as well as implicit ones.

Whence arises the other, key ethical implication of my argument. What Levy calls “skepticism,” I call epistemic humility. We need it not only as human beings and citizens, but as political theorists, too. While *Mere Civility* offers a normative argument and makes clear which “side” I am on, I strive in all of my work to provide conceptual clarity and historical background that will be useful to all of my readers, including those who reject my conclusions. Even so, as Levy suspects, I am modestly evangelical for a particular brand of historically informed and practice-oriented political theory I also associate with Williams. I believe that it is politically and ethically attractive, as well as *right*. We may not want to add him to the canon. Still, political theorists must reckon with the fact that Williams gives the lie to many of our assumptions about what tolerant, liberal, and democratic societies should look like that have shaped political theory at least since Rousseau—who, it must be said, was *not* a good judge of places, persons, and times, and whose lack of judgment has become weirdly foundational to our discipline.

Still, in the precious *latrina* that is academic political theory, as in Roger Williams’s Rhode Island and the disagreeable disagreements of contemporary politics, I believe we should tolerate the tares as well as the wheat—and let a hundred flowers bloom.