that this imperative bears similarities to contemporary political imperatives to secure democratic majorities, or pluralities, we must not overstate the case. In polities where political power can be exercised on the basis of less, sometimes significantly less, than a democratic majority, the incentives to maintain the conventions of mere civility appear far less compelling. The American system, for example, seems to establish incentives precisely against maintaining these conventions. While the image of mutually disdaining, yet nevertheless civil, interlocutors might appeal, precisely because of its low-bar moral obligations, recent American experience suggests otherwise. Members of a polarized and factionalized electorate might determine that their best prospects for solidifying an electoral base, and thereby securing sufficient support to gain political power, lie precisely in treating their adversaries as uncivilly as possible.

Bejan is right, I think, in asserting that we ought to "expect theorists to understand reality, first, before moralizing about how to change it" (161). An important dimension of understanding that reality involves identifying the very real effects that factors such as media, political institutions, norms, and conventions have in structuring the contexts of political discourse and the incentives that political actors face. Mere civility promises an honesty in public discourse and a commitment to conversation that strongly appeal. After all, we know how the story ended after Macbeth pronounced, "false face must hide what the false heart doth know."[4] But the utility of Bejan's Williams for confronting our crisis of civility in public discourse will be greatly enhanced if we can identify the contexts and incentives that will either reinforce or undermine our conventions of mere civility. In other words, Roger Williams becomes much more valuable to us if we turn simultaneously to Lady Macbeth.

Civility within Context

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Mere Civility is a wonderful book. It is insightful, elegant, scholarly, and delightful in its roguish rhetoric. I found much to agree with and have myself worried that we have set the civility bar too high. But in entertaining

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[4]*Macbeth*, 1.7.83.

the idea that there is sometimes something problematic about expecting and requiring stringent compliance with robust civility standards, it is important for us to recognize that sometimes those standards are indeed required and expected. Context matters. My remarks focus on the normative arguments found near the end of the book (just the last eighteen pages of the conclusion) where it seems to me that Bejan is not concerned enough with context in her endorsement of mere civility and her condemnation of more aspirational views of civility.

For the most part Bejan takes society at large as the context in which we should be thinking about civility. Rarely if ever in the book does she acknowledge the variation of institutional or discursive context. In this symposium on her book, we are having a freewheeling philosophical debate about civility where nothing much is at stake. Well not nothing of course, but not the same type of conversation as, for example, if we had been officially tasked with coming up with a civility code for the university and we had until the end of the week to do it; or we are all members of an informal political club and someone has suggested we invite Ann Coulter to campus because that is really going to incite the lefties and show the world their true freedom-denying-intolerant-politically-correct colors; or we are standing outside the Ann Coulter talk holding signs that say uncivil things about Ms. Coulter. These represent four different "conversations" about civility that imply potentially four different standards of civility. For example, in the case of our task force, one would expect and be able to justify relatively high expectations of civility; but in the case of standing outside the Ann Coulter talk with a sign, we are not engaged in making a decision on behalf of an institution and here the bar can sink low. There are many factors that might go into our assessment of the civility bar in these cases, but one has to do with the stakes. Even Roger Williams had a sense of when bringing out the big guns of insult and contempt were what was called for and when not.

One of my arguments against high bars of civility is that these bars are not always called for in the circumstance, context, or situation. Sometimes high bars can even impede the purposes of discourse. Black Lives Matter does not always stay within the bounds of some high bars of civility. Or think of the antiwar activists the Berrigan brothers, pouring blood on draft records. Perhaps in the face of injustice and violence that continually fail to make it onto the public agenda, what is called for is speech and action that do not meet high bars. But it would be totally inappropriate for me to pour blood all over the chair of my department if I lost a hiring vote (all things being equal).

If we want standards of civility that are helpful in figuring out real cases, then we need to go beyond generalization. So although I am completely in agreement with Bejan that in many situations we need to develop thicker skins, I think we should be focused on *identifying* those situations, because it is not in any and every situation that we should let insult and contempt

be like water off a duck's back. Sometimes we should, or can, or are fully permitted to act like Roger Williams. But sometimes, especially in institutionalized settings, we should consider acting like John Rawls. And furthermore, being open and noncondemnatory towards the Roger Williamses of our world (having thick skins in the face of insult) is premised again on contextual factors: (1) that there are not too many of them (imagine a whole society of Roger Williamses) and (2) that the Roger Williamses of this social world are not disproportionately concentrated in one (religious, cultural, or ideological) group, say, a majority directing its missionary zeal toward another group, say, a minority.

But Bejan might respond that I have missed the point. Of course she does not have a problem with institutions and circumstances sometimes requiring more than mere civility. Her complaint is deeper. It is not just about manners but about the underlying level of commonality that these other views assume is a necessary glue for social cooperation. One of Bejan's targets is the Rawlsian glue: the duty of civility. Here there is a high bar of shared common ground that we all have to accept to even get the conversation going. What is wrong with this view? Bejan identifies two problems. First, this view of civility is exclusionary. Here we see Bejan's deep commitment to pluralism, equality, and difference at work. On the Rawlsian view, we are all expected to act and talk like good liberals, and this is to "take an elite, and frankly elitist, standard of civil discourse … as paradigmatic for civility" (149). This high bar then results in silencing or banishing unruly voices, often from dissident, marginalized, and nonelitist milieus.

Second, Bejan thinks high ideals of civility are mismatched with human nature, which is way too contentious and ornery to be able to live up to a duty of civility. Here we see her realism. If we "pay attention to the worst in human nature" (166), we will see that lofty ideals of civility are unrealistic and set us up for failure after failure. Much better to accept human limitation and expect only the minimum that ensures we do not come to blows.

I agree with Bejan that some public-reason-based views of civility can be exclusionary. But I do not agree human frailty should lead us to lower our aspirations regarding civility. Bejan is not wrong to say that humans can be and often are ornery, hubristic, recalcitrant, selfish, and stubbornly tied to their own ideas. She is wrong, it seems to me, to turn these observations into a foundational principle for democracy or civility, or to think that these observations refute Kantian aspirations whether of the Rawlsian or Habermasian kind. Kant, in championing reason and morality, was not describing human behavior; when describing human behavior, he used terms like "crooked timber." I think it is Bejan who is being exclusionary and elitist to think that the capacity to rise above our human frailty and biases (every once in a while) when it is really important is somehow unequally distributed among the population such that a call to engage in such aspirational activity must be a call only to the elite and highly educated and not a call to ordinary people.

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

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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

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