**301. Civility as a Refuge for Academic Philistinism**

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Mark Mercer

Civility is not an academic value. Professors and students in classrooms, labs and seminars might appear to be treating each other with civility, but they are not—at least they are not if being civil requires intending to be civil. That they listen attentively and do not shout at or mock each other is an artifact of their concern to deal with the issue at hand. What appears to be civil behaviour emerges simply from their tending to the academic task of attempting to get the matter right.

And yet universities are pleased to stress civility in their public statements and to enforce it through rules. This concern for civility is, I think, a product of rank academic philistinism. The university administrators, members of faculty-association executives and others who control the institution's official self-image are unable or unwilling to let teaching and inquiry take care of themselves. Stressing civility in academic contexts puts the academic nature of those contexts under siege and at serious risk of being overwhelmed by extraneous concerns.

Civility is certainly an important virtue, but only in its place. Its central place is in disputes about how to allocate resources. Time, money or energy is scarce, and two or more parties lay claim to some of what's available. Each wants as much of the resource as it believes it needs in order to further its goals (perhaps it wants more than it currently needs, as a hedge against future shortages).

Each party to a dispute over resources has excellent reason to threaten, to bully and to grandstand. After all, lying and cheating are often effective means to one's end. But parties to disputes usually also have a reason to be civil, and this reason could outweigh their reason to try to overpower or manipulate their competitors.

For one, civility is almost always prudent, especially if one will tangle in the future with the same opponent. Civility encourages trust, and trust reduces transaction and insurance costs. Moreover, when you feel under attack, you are prone to strike back recklessly or to accept a bad deal just to get away from the unpleasantness. In your attack or through your retreat, you may well suffer more damage than you cause or prevent. You are prudent to be civil, then, for your civility encourages civility in the other, and the other's civility lets you think more clearly and more circumspectly.

Most importantly, manipulation leads to unfairness. Nothing provokes enmity more than the perception of unfairness. Incivility creates enemies and enemies are prone to try to get back. The fair deal on offer might not be the best deal one can get, but even if the fair deal isn't for the other side a great deal, because it's fair it's a deal they are willing to live with. You come out with less than you could have attained, but the others won't raid or harass you, and you have established good relations for future dealings.

But prudence isn't the only reason one could have to be civil towards competitors. One might be civil on principle. Attaining resources needn't be one's only purpose in dealing with others. One might, that is, value respect for personhood, and value it for its own sake. To manipulate someone is to rank concern for one's own ends above their concerns for their ends. Principled civility expresses one's understanding that the other's projects are as dear to the other as one's projects are to oneself. Decency and fairness give body to one's respect for the personhood of one's competitors.

Wisdom can counsel that we be civil, but only as an aspect of prudence. It cannot counsel that we be civil as an expression of respect for personhood. Wisdom is the capacity of finding efficient means to ends, efficient means that do not put at risk other ends one has. The wise person wants not only to find the quickest route to her destination, but the route that consumes the least gas and offers the most scenery (and, perhaps, that challenges her driving skills). Wisdom begins with ends, and though it might criticize an end on the basis of that end's inconsistency with other ends, wisdom does not generate ends. Respect for personhood, though, is an end it itself. One might value respect for personhood or one might not. The source of one's valuing it is in one's affects, one's emotions. The source cannot be in one's beliefs. Wisdom, then, might help one to determine when to express respect and when not to, but it cannot determine whether one should or shouldn't care intrinsically to treat people with respect.

Wisdom can, though, counsel one never to act on the supposition that competitors are being civil out of respect for one's personhood. Whatever evidence one has that their good behaviour stems from an abhorrence of bad behaviour, one should remain sceptical. One should assume that whatever degree of civility is on offer, it is on offer only out of prudence. Be aware that it is wise for one's competitor to be civil, but only to the point at which civility becomes imprudent. Be prepared at that point to be manipulated. Even if one oneself would rather fail to secure resources than to treat someone with disdain, don't assume the same is true of others.

We can distinguish civility from politeness and good manners. Civility is a virtue in competitions over resources. Civil behaviour might be polite, but not all politeness is civility. Politeness when nothing is at stake is just a preference, not a virtue, and so is not civility. A preference for politeness is commendable; or, at least, a dislike of rudeness is. But the impolite and rude can be dealt with simply by being ignored.

Academic disputes are not disputes over resources. They are conflicts of ideas. There's no personal conflict in an academic disagreement, for no resources are at stake. Professors and students in academic contexts will disagree about observations, implications, theories, interpretations and appreciations. They are not competing for anything.

Let us suppose that professors and students are arguing over whether natural selection is responsible for some aspect of primate behaviour. Let us suppose that the argument is heated. The professors and students have favourite theories, theories that they want to articulate and defend. They want to show where other theories go wrong. But they are all concerned to get the phenomenon under study right. That is why they are there. They want to accept the true theory, the one that accounts for the evidence best and that withstands the criticisms leveled at the others.

They listen to each other and take seriously each other's ideas and criticisms. Why do they not mock those who offer foolish ideas about divine intervention or the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and why do they not try to shame those whose ideas could aid and abet racism? Mockery could forestall wasting time on nonsense and shaming could head off harmful actions or at least assure emotionally vulnerable parties to the discussion that they are welcome in it. Why are they not shouting anyone down or monopolizing the conversation?

The professors and students want to understand the aspects of primate behaviour they are discussing, and so they are focused on the ideas and evidence, not on who proposed them. That is why they do not go for mockery or shaming. An idea might indeed be foolish, but it would be foolish to dismiss it before determining whether it is foolish, and, anyway, it is the idea that is to be examined and dismissed, not the person who offered it. That an idea could aid and abet racism is not a reason for thinking the idea false. Suppressing the expression of racist ideas is not a way of getting at the truth of the matter.

As I've said, people committed in discussion to getting the matter right might look from the outside to be treating each other with civility, but they are not. Their interaction is governed by their academic concerns, not by prudence in securing scarce and guarded resources or by respect for the personhood of others. They are not concerned to be civil or even to be polite.

Actually, they might not always look from the outside to be treating each other with civility or good manners. The concern to understand the phenomenon will occasionally demand that a speaker be interrupted. The speaker is repeating himself, or going off topic, or has failed to grasp the point to which he is responding. The conversation would be diminished by his going on. Good manners can get in the way of the discussion. There are, certainly, better and worse ways to interrupt someone and bring the conversation back on topic, but there is no polite way.

Civility as an expression of respect for personhood enjoins honesty, and perhaps so too does civility in service to prudence. But the latter does not require candour. In fact, withholding information that would be of use to the other could be imprudent. There's no outright lying in civil competition, but civility allows for some forms of dissimulation and concealment. Candour and forthrightness, at any rate, can upset people, cause people to think they've been insulted or maligned. Civility urges against upsetting people, whether wrongfully or not, and against giving people reason to think they've been insulted or maligned. If one suspects a frank and candid remark might cause someone to feel insulted or maligned, even if they haven't been, a civil person will hold his tongue.

In an academic discussion, on the other hand, frankness and candour are always to the point. That someone would be upset at what you have to say is not at all a reason not to say it. Whatever you can do to promote the inquiry is what you should do, for the sake of the inquiry. Now one might note that the inquiry would be best served if no participants to it are alienated from it, and that an upsetting remark could well alienate someone from the inquiry. For the sake of the inquiry, then, hold your tongue.

But this advice presupposes that some party to the inquiry is not actually fully party to it, that other matters or concerns take precedence for him. That presupposition is fatal to academic life. The

presumption must be that everyone assembled for the purpose of inquiry has that purpose forefront in their mind. Suppose a person would in a friendly conversation at the shopping mall be hurt by a particular remark, perhaps a remark he takes to denigrate people of his race or religion. That fact, known to you, should not prevent you from making that remark in his presence in an academic discussion. As an academic in that discussion, your colleague or student will take the remark as a hypothesis to investigate. Either he will not be upset by the thought you have expressed or he will accept being upset by it as a price to pay for engaging in this academic discussion.

My point is that scientists, scholars and intellectuals, both professors and students, will most often appear to be civil in their dealings with each other while pursuing the objects of their inquiry, but that appearance is only a shallow one. What gives rise to the appearance is that these people are engaging the objects of their inquiry in the spirit of trying to understand the world correctly. I make this point to urge that universities, and other institutions that house academic endeavours, look first to protect and promote that which serves the spirit of academic engagement. Universities that would protect or promote civility, though, thereby actively frustrate candour and openness and they encourage academics to avoid offending or upsetting people. A university that valorizes civility holds its academic mission in disdain.

*Mark Mercer (sergechestnut@gmail.com), the president of SAFS, teaches philosophy in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A selection of his articles,* In Praise of Dangerous Universities and Other Essays*, is now available on Amazon.ca.*