Civility, Tact, and the Joy of Communication

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> Politeness is the first virtue, and the origin perhaps of all the others.
> —André Comte-Sponville[1]

My purpose in this essay is to develop a robust concept of civility that establishes civility's aesthetic-ethical significance, while addressing some recent critiques. Synonyms for civility include etiquette, politeness, decorum, courtesy, social grace, and manners. Civility rarely appears in contemporary philosophical literature, perhaps because philosophers view it as too conventional and inconsequential to warrant serious philosophical consideration. They would not be alone in assuming that there are more important and pressing issues with which to concern themselves than the social graces. Are the social graces worthy of philosophical inquiry? Are they superficial? Or, is this a false dichotomy? I argue for the latter. The engagement in civility can be seen as superficial, in the sense that it betrays an interest in surfaces; civility involves deliberately cultivating behavioral responses that serve as a communicative membrane that is responsible for mediating between individuals. However, the engagement in civility is *not* superficial, if superficiality means that the individual lacks depth or meaning. I argue that it is possible for the behavioral responses that are characteristic of civility to imply depth — knowledge, understanding, feelings, aspirations, and judgments — and thereby establish meaningful human connection. For these reasons, civility has an aesthetic-ethical significance that makes it worthy of attention and cultivation.

For many educators, civility will seem like an old-fashioned virtue and, if it does have a role, it is in mediating intercultural communication. Individuals learn about the social conventions of other cultures in order to distill them into a set of non-offensive communicative strategies.[2] Enlightened by the civil rights movement, and other social critiques, educators recognize that some proprieties serve to institutionalize ageism, sexism, classicism, and racism — they are socially discriminatory.[3] Other proprieties are described as "political correctness," implying that manners mandate "being nice no matter what."[4] "Being nice no matter what" effectively combines three directives, all of which are commonly associated with civility. These are as follows: it is imperative to be inoffensive; it is imperative to be respectful and tolerant to everyone, irrespective of to whom we are being respectful and tolerant; and it is imperative to be categorically civil, prohibiting occasions of irreverence, bawdiness, mockery, and irascibility, for example. Reservations about these directives focus on the perceived artificiality of civility, and that it reflects an inappropriate valuation of social aesthetics over truth and morality.[5] As a "pretense, or semblance" of respect and goodwill, civility makes despicable individuals appear likable, and it conceals uninterested, unflattering, and even contemptuous appraisals of others. For these reasons, civility is something not to be "taken in by."[6]

In recent years, political theorists have defended the value of civility for promoting civil society. They argue that civility smoothes over social interactions, minimizing violent conflict by bringing individuals together around issues of common concern in a way that is mutually respectful. The value of civility for a just democracy has caused it to acquire a certain hegemonic status. Cris Mayo, and others, however, argue that civility privatizes questions of identity, but this view is problematic because the recognition of identity is both subjectively, and politically, important.[7] As Mayo claims, "one person's babble is another's central political concern."[8] She argues that "the practice of civility will necessarily leave out those whose presence disrupts the bias that presumes their absence," and illustrates her point by commenting on the experiences of some sexual minority youth.[9] In her view, civility protects, and actually condones, privileged ignorance of structural and social identity positions by assuaging personal discomfort through the promotion of personal relationship and understanding.

In Mayo's view, civility is initiated exclusively by those in positions of privilege. It works by creating a sense of indebtedness, and by repressing the hostilities that arise from social discrimination and injustice. Civility effectively provides a *therapeutic* solution to the problem of social and political distance by giving individuals a *felt* connection to others, while leaving structural relationships unaffected. It covers the discrimination and oppression of marginalized groups with a thin veneer of respectfulness and goodwill. Mayo concludes, therefore, that an important strategy for overcoming structural discrimination and injustice is to promote *in*civility. Incivility aims to make structural inequalities conspicuous, and thereby facilitate knowledge, social reform, and genuine human connection. Admittedly, incivility creates a corresponding need for tolerance and humility, as individuals must seek to be receptive to the revelation of unpleasant judgments and truths. According to this view, then, the communicative virtues should include being politically, socially, and historically informed; a willingness to be provoked and to "talk about sexism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism"; a disposition to listen, receive criticism, and self-correct; and a commitment to social and political action.[10]

I think it is possible to offer a defense of civility that addresses some of these concerns. As Nancy Sherman reminds us, critiques of civility frequently exclude the expressive dimension of civility, and overlook the ways in which civility facilitates communication, promotes sociability, and ultimately builds community.[11] Such a defense will require a more robust sense of civility, which I develop in this essay by drawing upon the philosophical tradition of Aristotle, David Hume, and John Dewey. Following them, I argue that civility is an aesthetic-ethical good, irrespective of whether it secures ethical character or a just democracy. Civility is a source of companionability, creating and sustaining the sort of ethos in which people can cultivate character and justice. This is not intended to imply that civility escapes questions of social hierarchy and identity politics; rather, civility provides a hospitable context for individuals to navigate communicatively the complexity, ambiguity, and significance of these designations. Focusing on the aesthetic-ethical

dimensions of civility reveals that there is more to civility than its conventional sense of "being nice no matter what."

CIVILITY REVISITED

Politeness originates from the French verb *polir*, which means "to polish," but the French word *politesse* is not readily translatable into English.[12] The verb "to polish," however, is suggestive. We only polish surfaces of objects that are suitably resistant: cars, gemstones, furniture, jewelry, and teeth, for example. The effect is to make the surface smooth and lustrous. A surface that shines is likely to catch, and hold, the attention of a passerby or admirer; both children and adults find themselves transfixed by the appearance of their own reflection in a luminous surface. While polishing is hard work — menial, repetitive, and arduous — the final sheen eclipses the work involved, appearing to the viewer as if it were an act of nature or, alternatively, effortlessly natural. It is similarly the case with civility.

Manners make us agreeable to one another. The disposition to be agreeable motivates an individual to engage in deliberately crafted behavioral responses that are intended to be well-received by others. These behavioral responses enact cheerfulness, affability, concordance, gentleness, clemency, honesty, graciousness, and cordiality. They come to represent an individual's "overall demeanor and bearing."[13] The individual intends for her deportment to reflect the particular individual with whom he or she is engaging. While civility involves the individual in complex deliberations about his or her behavior, it remains other-directed because the self is trying to work out how to honor the other individual(s) in the context of their engagement by means of word, tone, and gesture. For this reason, engaging in civility is like choosing a "garment" that the individual "puts on" or "dresses up in" in order to honor the occasion and the company. To "dress" appropriately, the individual must have knowledge of social convention, the situation, and the unique individual with whom he or she is interacting. This knowledge is brought to bear in the communication while remaining provisional and tacit.

Deciding when and what to say requires creativity, discipline, and judgment. The civil individual strives for equanimity by tempering the extreme responses of enthusiasm and nonchalance, self-abnegation and hostility, and belligerence and acquiescence. This equanimity is reflected in the individual's behavioral responses, and can come to light in just about any encounter: a political debate; a classroom discussion; friends chattering in the hallway; a professor's lecture; giving money to someone who is homeless; and people sitting across from one another in a subway car. Ironically, it is the facility, and ease, with which the civil individual adapts to individuals and situations that casts his or her demeanor as having a certain constancy and moderation. While civility requires a commitment, on the part of individuals, to self-discipline and intelligent trial and error, the result must appear effortless and graceful. Philosophers repeatedly use grace in the context of civility. Immanuel Kant refers to manners as "graces" and claims that: "Forsaken by the graces, they [the virtues] can make no claim on humanity."[14] Hume writes that: "There is a manner, a grace, an ease, a genteelness, an I-know-not-what, which some men possess above others"; it captures our attention "suddenly and powerfully."[15]

Dewey attributes to Aristotle an "an acute estimate of grace, rhythm, and harmony as dominant traits of good conduct" to which, he claims, "the modern mind has been much less sensitive."[16]

How are we to interpret this philosophical focus on the grace of communication? In contemporary terms, grace acts as an aesthetic concept that is used to describe individuals whose engagement in principally artistic and athletic endeavors gives the effect of supernatural beauty. Grace inspires wonderment, and even love, at the mysteriousness of the artist's or athlete's "achievement." In these instances, human intention seems to have dropped away, and the activity appears to be animated by a spirit that transcends, and yet accords with, our humanity. To partake in a communication that is graceful is to have the sense of participating in translucent and unqualified perfection; individuals feel themselves flowing with one another; they imagine themselves freed from the world, only to find themselves more firmly rooted in it. It is as if all of the worldly reasons for communicating — acknowledging, negotiating, persuading, explaining, instructing, chastising, commenting, challenging, criticizing, commenting, and disputing, for example — are present, but no longer paramount. The simple joy of communicating — sometimes quiet and sometimes exuberant — overwhelms any sense of purposefulness.

It is important to be clear about what the joy of communication consists of — particularly if, as noted already, civility does not automatically secure ethical character or just democracy. Hume warns against pretensions to any such analysis, writing that there is just "something mysterious and inexplicable, which conveys an immediate satisfaction to the spectator, but how, or why, or for what reasons, he cannot pretend to determine."[17] Kant's aesthetic philosophy, however, is more fruitful. He distinguishes the beautiful and the sublime: whereas beauty inspires the pleasurable harmonizing of the faculties, the sublime inspires respect by calling to mind our transcendence and moral destiny. Borrowing from Kant's aesthetics, it is possible to implicate communication in *both* beauty and sublimity.[18] Communication is beautiful when it is experienced as a pleasurable harmonizing within, and between, individuals. The intrapersonal harmonizing of feeling and thinking produces speech and behavior that engenders harmonious interpersonal communication and vice versa — hence the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction associated with it. But beauty alone does not do justice to the joy of communication. For this, we require reference to its sublimity or ethical significance.

Communication is sublime when it reminds us of our transcendence and connection, against all the odds. In the case of Kant, individuals, surprisingly, do not feel overwhelmed by fear and inadequacy when they witness the magnitude of a mountain or a violent storm; instead, they feel exhilarated and invigorated, as they reconnect with their own transcendence. It is similarly the case with communication: if you consider the human realities — our individual differences complemented by the fact that we can never fully share in one another's perspectives — it is amazing that it occurs at all. Occasionally, however, graceful communication does occur, and when it does, it feels joyous. The reason for this joy is that we feel connected to a shared transcendence that is a necessary, not just contingent, feature of our

humanity. We are reminded that no single individual is wholly circumscribed by the contours of his or her contingent identity.

Reference to a shared transcendence corrects a common error in our thinking about civility, namely, that to be pleasant is to pander to another's ego. It is important to recognize that joyful communication is capable of involving psychic pain. A familiar example in academia is that of being in the company of a trusted and respected colleague who is criticizing our scholarship. Obviously, it is deflationary to discover imperfections in our work. However, if the colleague is invested enough to cast his criticisms in a way that is sensitive to the individual, the process of inquiry, and standards of scholarly excellence, then modest joy can surface. The joy does not eclipse or detract from the feelings of disappointment and frustration; instead, it reflects the individual's recognition of his or herself in the colleague's criticism, and the feeling of being acknowledged by and connected to the colleague. The colleague is making an appeal to the individual's present self in the interests of a self which is not there yet; a self that may, or may not, come into being. This appeal happens so frequently in human communication that we are inclined to overlook it, and the role of civility is to ensure that such appeals are never dogmatic, coercive, imperialistic, or demeaning. That is, the appeal should be informed by the recognition that the other individual can, and may indeed choose to, reject it as part of his or her transcendence.

This is why civility is such an ambiguous value, and its ambiguity is only heightened by our confusion about its promise. Civility cannot guarantee either ethical character or a just democracy, although it does sometimes contribute to one, or the other, or both. Although it engenders graceful communication, individuals cannot set out to be graceful or, for that matter, to teach others to communicate gracefully — although they can set out to be civil, and to teach others civility, as a condition for the possibility of grace — which is why graceful communication is distinct from merely refined, formal, or elegant relations. The contract that civility makes is to itself, for its constant renewal in each new moment in the interests of human companionability. It makes possible joyful communication in which we glimpse our affinity and realize a sense of ourselves, and others, as forever in excess of any number of determinations that we may happen to realize. For this reason, Hume thought that the social graces "must be considered as a part of ethics left by nature to baffle all the pride of philosophy, and make sensible of her narrow boundaries and slender acquisitions."[19]

Dewey's expansive idea of morality, and his notion of manners as "minor morals," is more helpful here. He identifies the moral quality of conduct with the social quality, arguing that "morals are as broad as acts which concern our relationship with others."[20] Dewey argues that recognizably moral qualities, like courage or honesty, are a very small subset of a much larger constellation of moral qualities. The mistake has been to isolate and privilege these qualities as in some sense uniquely moral when, in reality, they are "intimately connected with thousands of other attitudes which we do not explicitly recognize — which perhaps we have not even names for."[21] Dewey makes an analogy with the human body to

explain the mistake. He says that isolating moral virtues is like "taking the skeleton for the living body"; that is, failing to appreciate how the underlying structure, the skeleton, relates to the larger living organism: it integrates the other organs, and thereby supports their active functioning. Dewey concludes that it is the same for the virtues. He writes:

> Morals concern nothing less than the whole character, and the whole character is identical with the man in all his concrete make-up and manifestations. To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few nameable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all offices of life.[22]

Dewey argues that manners do not constitute a pretense to morality, or social justice, for that matter, but that they are themselves "minor morals."[23] They are minor in the sense of being less consequential, but they are no less significant, because they teach us "one of the most important lessons of life," namely "that of mutual accommodation and adaptation," which allows for "easy and ready contact and communication with others."[24]

TACTFUL COMMUNICATION

In order to better determine the character and significance of these "minor morals," I now turn to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work, Aristotle identifies three communicative virtues: an unnamable virtue that is a mean between obsequiousness and churlishness; an unnamable virtue that is a mean between boastfulness and mock-modesty; and tastefulness, or tact. Aristotle believes that all human interactions involve an aesthetic-ethical dimension that is significant for the constitution of good human communication. It is also worthwhile noting that, for Aristotle, the three communicative virtues are unified, so that an individual cannot possess one without the others. Whereas Kristján Kristjánsson approaches "them collectively as a single virtue: the virtue of agreeableness in social intercourse, or simply agreeableness,"[25] I see this as an unnecessarily restrictive reading. I aim to move from identifying different communicative virtues toward a consideration of their unity as expressed in different modes of civility.

Aristotle's first communicative virtue is an unnamed mean between the vices of obsequiousness and churlishness. The vices are easier to grasp than the unnamed virtue; they represent what we are most tempted to do in human communication. There is the temptation to be obsequious, pleasing one's interlocutor by flattery and indulgence, for example. When an individual is being obsequious, she exaggerates the other person's beauty, intelligence, status, or charm, and often her admiration, respect, or liking for that person, in the hope of appealing to that person's desire to think well of him or herself. Generally speaking, obsequiousness is motivated by self-interest, and it is directed at individuals in positions of power, although, as Paulo Freire points out, it may also be symptomatic of internalized power relations.[26] A student may be obsequious to a professor, not because she intends to manipulate the professor in the interest of getting a better grade, but because she believes in the professor's academic superiority. In either case, obsequiousness inflates the worth of the person in power.

The polar extreme of obsequiousness is churlishness. Churlishness represents a general disregard for another person's feelings, time, or interests. An individual is churlish when she is unthinkingly combative, or dismissive of others. Churlishness is associated with insensitivity, because the individual is unwilling to take responsibility for the other in the context of her interactions with him or her. Churlishness can be reactive, but it is generally motivated by a belief that one is above the requirement to be considerate. Professors can have a reputation for churlishness, particularly when their academic superiority is endorsed by a position within an institution that values academic excellence over other qualities.

Aristotle holds that the mean between obsequiousness and churlishness is an unnamed virtue: "a man will put up with, and will resent, the right things in the right way."[27] He or she consistently reacts in a way that is "befitting." This involves being sensitive enough to the salient features of a situation — the responsibilities and feelings of the people involved, as well as their purpose in being there — so as to respond appropriately. Responding appropriately, a person knows when to let an offense slide, and when to confront it. Aristotle claims that this unnamed virtue most resembles friendship. The individual responds in the spirit of friendship, even though she may feel no affection for the person. To respond in the spirit of friendship is to care enough about another's feelings that you would want to be found pleasant and agreeable; it is to care enough about another's well-being that you would risk inflicting offense in order to protect the person from future humiliation or harm. As Aristotle states: "For the sake of a great future pleasure, too, he will inflict small pains" (*NE*, 1778). The other person may not accept the criticism in the spirit that it is offered, either because he expected obsequiousness or because the person is himself being churlish. It is difficult to know with certainty whether an individual has behaved befittingly; for this, we must turn to the other communicative virtues.

Aristotle's second communicative virtue is also an unnamable mean, that between boastfulness and mock-modesty. Whereas Aristotle's first virtue is other-directed, this one is self-directed. The vices of boastfulness and mock-modesty refer to dishonest representations of the self. To boast is to exaggerate one's achievements or their importance. Mock-modesty is the inverse. It is to engage in disingenuous and excessive self-deprecation. The motivations for boastfulness and mock-modesty include habit, self-deception, self-interest, and a desire to aggrandize another. The individual who observes the unnamable mean is, in Aristotle's terms, "one who calls a thing by its own name, being truthful both in life and in word, owning to what he has, and neither more nor less" (*NE*, 1779). This individual has a realistic sense of himself, and his own achievements, *relative to others*. He knows which of his achievements matter, and when it is appropriate to acknowledge and make mention of them to others.

Aristotle's third communicative virtue refers to a "kind of intercourse which is tasteful" (*NE*, 1779). There is, he writes, "such a thing as saying — and again listening to — what one should as one should" (*NE*, 1780). Saying and listening as one should is the mark of a tactful individual. Here, tact involves keeping the

elements of a conversation in a harmonious balance, and judging correctly when, and in what manner, to be pleasant, truthful, and humorous. Tact is a more significant concept than Aristotle acknowledges, and it has a discernible presence in the first two, unnamed, communicative virtues. As Alphonso Lingis writes, tact involves "finding the right touch, the right words, the right tone, or the right silences when speaking with someone whose complex situation and confusion we touch."[28] According to Lingis, tact is the linguistic equivalent of a lover's caress, and the comparison is not just metaphorical. Tactful language is a form of speaking that from "a distance makes contact" with another. It makes contact by allowing one individual's perspective to acquire meaning in the context of another's perspective, and vice versa. Tact is made possible by a concern for another's well-being; a sensitivity for the particularities of situation; and a commitment to speaking, and acting, truthfully. It is for this reason that tactfulness requires exposure to different individuals and communities, time spent together, listening, experimentation, and practice.

Aristotle concludes his analysis of the communicative virtues with a short discussion of shame. He argues that shame is not an excellence, but a passion, and one that is only becoming in young people because "they live by passion and therefore commit many errors, but are restrained by shame" (*NE*, 1781). This is an important coda. Aristotle's analysis of the communicative virtues reveals that the purpose of civility is not to compromise truthfulness and human flourishing in the interests of appearances; rather, it is the effort to maintain a spirit of truthfulness and well-being in the context of amiable sociable relations. The civil community establishes a mean between the extremes of homogeneity and heterogeneity, binding individuals together while keeping open the possibility of their moving closer together or further apart.

Conclusion

This essay is an initial step in developing a robust concept of civility, one that can account for both civility's aesthetic-ethical significance and its unique role in human companionability. The philosophies of Aristotle, Hume, and Dewey reveal that civility is more than its conventional sense of "being nice no matter what." Civility is the closest we come to friendship; it comprises tactful communication that is graceful, which sometimes culminates in joy and companionability. Civility balances self-directed thinking with other-directed thinking; it balances concern for another's feelings with concern for his or her well-being; it balances a commitment to being truthful with sensitivity for the situation and individual. While it is true that even robust civility cannot automatically assure ethical personhood or a just democracy, it can, unlike conventional civility, provide the kind of ethos in which people can cultivate character and justice. It is pertinent for educators to address civility because civility is a learned behavior — individuals develop civility by habitually practicing civil interactions — and educators are entrusted with the cultivation of civility, at least within the context of their classrooms.

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1. André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* (New York: Metropolitan, 2001), 7.

2. See Cris Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 83.

3. See Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 264–275.

4. Ibid., 267.

5. See Kristján Kristjánsson, "Agreeableness," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2006), 33.

6. Comte-Sponville, *Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, 8–12; and Calhoun, "Virtue of Civility," 260.

7. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents."

8. Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents," 82.

9. Ibid., 79.

10. Audrey Thompson, "Agent Provocateuse," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2001*, ed. Rice, 91.

11. See Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63; and Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999), 800.

12. Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 26.

13. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, 43.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Louden (1798; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 182, quoted in Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, 59.

15. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (1751; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 71, quoted in Christopher Cordner, *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 122. My thinking about grace has been shaped by his remarks.

16. John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (1932), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 271, quoted in Jim Garrison, "Dewey's Theory of Experience" (unpublished manuscript).

17. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, 71, quoted in Cordner, *Ethical Encounter*, 122.

18. See Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1997); Cordner, *Ethical Encounter*, 137–138; and Megan Laverty, *Iris Murdoch: A Consideration of Her Romantic Vision* (London: Continuum, 2007).

19. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, 71, quoted in Cordner, *Ethical Encounter*, 122.

20. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1944), 358

21. Ibid., 357.

22. Ibid., 357–8.

23. Ibid., 18.

24. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 60.

25. Kristjánsson, "Agreeableness," 33.

26. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; repr., New York: Continuum, 2003).

27. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1778. This work will be cited as *NE* in the text for all subsequent references.

28. Alphonso Lingis, "Contact: Tact and Caress," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2007), 5.