Civility in Crisis: Navigating Contested Norms and Contentious Politics

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Abstract: In this paper, we address some of the issues raised by Sune Lægaard, Suzanne Whitten and Derek Edyvane in their thoughtful commentaries on our book *Recovering Civility during COVID-19*. We also identify potential avenues for future research on civility.

Keywords: Civility, Covid-19, Politeness, Public-mindedness.

We are extremely grateful to Sune Lægaard, Suzanne Whitten and Derek Edyvane for their thoughtful comments on our book *Recovering Civility during COVID-19*. In this paper, we address some of the issues they raise about key aspects of the book, while also identifying potential avenues for future research on civility.

In his insightful analysis, Lægaard emphasizes two main issues which, in his view, merit further discussion. The first relates to what he calls "the paradox of civility" – situations in which there is the greatest need for civility (such as the Covid-19 crisis) are precisely those in which civil interactions are least likely to occur. We acknowledge Lægaard's observation but would like to stress that civility should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing issue. Communities often have a shared civility vocabulary – e.g. ready-made norms of politeness and etiquette their members can draw on. However, in times of crisis, these norms may suddenly become less clear or more contentious. In such cases, various paths can facilitate adjustment and help people to learn to be civil together, including education tools and public awareness campaigns. And these are precisely the kinds of tools that were employed in many societies across the world to restore shared norms of civility as politeness during the pandemic. Of course, sometimes disagreements may run deeper and affect not only civility as politeness but also civility as public-mindedness – we believe that this was indeed the case with the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy discussed by Lægaard (e.g. see Bonotti and Seglow, 2019). In such cases, other tools can be employed to (re)establish shared civility norms, such as deliberative democracy forums. But the point remains the same. People can (re)learn to be civil, even in times of crisis, if they are provided with the right tools and forums to do so.

Lægaard's second observation concerns our account of justificatory civility. More specifically, he argues, whether a political decision complies with norms of

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justificatory civility may sometimes depend not only on the presence of a reasonable balance of political values but also on the kind of actor who makes the decision – e.g. public health authorities as opposed to politicians. Lægaard's point highlights some interesting complexities related to justificatory civility. In response, we would like to offer a few observations. First, it is not clear from Lægaard's analysis in what sense the Danish government made decisions "against the advice of the public health authorities" (p. 96). It may be more plausible to argue that politicians in Denmark decided to act against the advice of public health authorities *after having considered all the values at stake,* in light of the empirical evidence available. If that is the case, this was compatible with justificatory civility. Likewise, it is unclear in what sense Swedish "public health authorities took these decisions, apparently without any real involvement of or responsibility by political actors" (p. 96). It is more likely that the Swedish government decided to follow the advice of public health authorities closely (and perhaps uncritically), but this is different from arguing that those authorities were actually in charge. Second, it is inevitable that the role-obligations associated with different public functions will affect the way in which those who hold those functions will strike a balance between different political values – e.g. a public health authority is likely to assign much more weight to public health than to economic growth compared to a government economist. But this is precisely why it is politicians (e.g. MPs, cabinet ministers, etc.) who should (and normally do) make policy decisions in liberal democracies, rather than those other actors. The task of politicians is to gather relevant information regarding the policy issue at hand and, based on a reasonable balance of political values and empirical evidence, make a policy decision. If this is what Lægaard means, we of course agree with him.

It should also be noted that in standard Rawlsian accounts of public reason (e.g. Rawls, 2005), *all citizens* ought to comply with the norms of justificatory civility, at least when deciding about or advocating for laws and policies concerning constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. If one embraces that ideal, then public health authorities who fail to assign sufficient weight to non-public-health goals when advocating for certain policies are simply being uncivil, regardless of whether they or someone else are in charge. But if one adopts a less idealized account of public reason, which considers the possible motivations that may underlie some actors' justifications for policies, then it may become important to stress that political decisions should be made by those actors whose role-obligations are more likely (though by no means certain) to result in a reasonable balancing of political values.

In her commentary, Suzanne Whitten also offers very insightful observations regarding our analysis. We would like to focus on two in particular. The first is her point that civility cannot depend simply on individual moral agency but also often depends on structural factors. Indeed, institutions can facilitate civility by creating new codified norms when previous norms have become unstable, as during the Covid-19 crisis. Institutions can also affect a society's broader public culture, which is guided by norms, and which can in turn help sustain those institutions over time. We believe that scholarship on civility should pay greater attention to this institutional dimension, e.g. by investigating whether different systems of government and the distribution of power within a polity may facilitate or hinder compliance with civility norms. For example, in polities where there is a distribution of responsibilities between different levels of government – as in the US and Australian federal systems, or in the UK's devolved system – it may be the case that compliance with civility norms is lower, given potentially conflicting messages that citizens might receive from different governing authorities. This hypothesis suggests that there may be space for fruitful, theoretically-informed empirical research concerning the relationship between institutions and (in)civility.

Whitten also raises some interesting points regarding the tension that may emerge, especially in times of crisis, between pre-crisis norms of civility (e.g. not confronting others) and new norms of civility that demand, for example, acting in public-minded ways which may require confrontation with others. These tensions are real and we provide extensive examples in our book. And we welcome Whitten's call for more interdisciplinary work in this area. We believe three avenues of research are especially important. First, there should be more social psychology research into the motivations for people's (non)compliance with norms of civility. Second, this research might inform the emerging normative literature on public shaming (Billingham and Parr, 2020a; 2020b), which aims to establish when public shaming is morally justifiable in view of its target's motivations for non-compliance. And third, we believe that there should be more research into the effectiveness of different forms of civility norms enforcement, including self-, social and legal enforcement.

Finally, we would like to engage with Derek Edyvane's astute analysis of our book. We agree with Edyvane that the pandemic resulted in a transition from an old set of norms to a new one, especially when it comes to civility as politeness. Agents had to (re)negotiate politeness norms given the changing environmental (structural) circumstances. We are also glad to see that Edyvane acknowledges the growing presence of "misfiring" polite signals (e.g. in mask wearing) during the pandemic. We would like to respond to three of his other observations.

First, Edyvane argues that civility "is also a way of building and reinforcing social hierarchies, of marginalising the 'rude' undesirables, and of channeling misanthropy" (p. 103). We acknowledge this point (e.g. see also Bardon et al., forthcoming). However, we view civility as an aspirational normative ideal rather than a sociological fact. To the extent that real-world norms of civility are employed, for example, to establish and reinforce various types of social hierarchies, we consider them in tension with that aspirational ideal, especially with the idea of civility as public-mindedness and its underlying conception of persons as free and equal.

Edyvane also observes that sometimes civility traditionally understood (with its non-egalitarian aspects) may help prevent violence. While we acknowledge this point, we would also like to stress that it mistakenly seems to assume that violence is unrelated to civility. But violent behaviour is, among other things, an instance of incivility, more precisely of moral incivility. This is not a way of challenging Edyvane's observation. We simply want to point out that civility is a multi-dimensional concept, and that there can be different types of congruence and incongruence between its different dimensions. For example, civility as politeness can sometimes be used to foster civility as public-mindedness. But other times, it is impoliteness that can foster public-mindedness, whereas politeness can be employed to advance non-public-minded goals (Bardon et al., forthcoming).

Finally, we would like to address Edyvane's distinction between the *communicative* and the *expressive* functions of civility. According to Edyvane, sometimes politeness rituals, such as "rituals of hygiene theatre", do not aim to foster social cooperation but rather "to impose a shape and a pattern on human life" (p. 104). This is a fascinating point, and certainly a plausible explanation for many types of ceremonial behaviour. However, civility (including its politeness dimension) is ultimately a communicative virtue (Buss, 1999; Calhoun, 2000). To the extent that certain expressive rituals are only aimed at imposing a shape and a pattern on the life of the person who performs them, then we do not think that they constitute an instance of civility. One cannot be civil to oneself, so to speak – civility is inherently relational. And it is less likely that the meaning of these self-regarding expressive acts will become more uncertain in times of crisis, since it is plausible that one will have a clear understanding of what they are trying to express through them – the expressive meaning of those self-regarding acts, in other words, will not need to be (re)negotiated with others. However, insofar as such expressive rituals and acts are (also) aimed at communicating some kind of respect towards others, they are (also) acts of civility, and they are likely to encounter the challenges that we highlight in our book.

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