

# Hygiene Ceremonies: Politeness in a Crisis

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*Abstract:* This commentary examines the value of civility-as-politeness in a crisis. It questions Bonotti and Zech's (2021) defence of politeness on two grounds. First, it considers potential costs of displacing traditional, hierarchical constructions of civility in favour of pluralistic and egalitarian alternatives. Secondly, it differentiates between the consequentialist and expressive value of politeness, and contends that over-concentrating on the former may unhelpfully obscure or undermine the latter.

*Keywords:* Civility, Politeness, Covid-19, Ritual.

It is easy to find something a bit foolish, even irresponsible, in fretting about civility of all things in the midst of a global pandemic (especially 'civility-as-politeness', which is what I will focus on in this commentary). This worry is neatly encapsulated in the flurry of media pieces that emerged over the summer of 2021 on the topic of 'hygiene theatre'. The expression was first coined by Derek Thompson in an article for *The Atlantic* in which he criticised the obsession over "risk reduction rituals that make us *feel* safer but don't actually do much to reduce risk" – deep cleaning, repeated hand-washing, perhaps masking outdoors: this is all 'hygiene theatre', at best a waste of time, at worst a dangerous distraction (Thompson, 2021). But then what follows in Thompson's article is an extended discussion of the scientific evidence (or lack thereof) for these sorts of measures as ways of preventing transmission of Covid-19. There is no consideration of these practices as practices of civility.

It is a key merit of the empirically rich and theoretically informed discussion that Matteo Bonotti and Steve Zech have produced to demonstrate that the value of 'hygiene theatre' does not reside exclusively in its public health benefit narrowly construed: upholding the new etiquette of the pandemic is a form of 'civility-as-politeness'. And, as Bonotti and Zech suggest, civility as politeness serves an important social function in communicating respect, toleration and considerateness, thereby reinforcing social cooperation both in everyday life and in politics (2021, pp. 45-47). And this is especially important in times of crisis. So even if the norms of sanitising and masking do nothing to prevent disease transmission (and of course that is a big 'if'), they nevertheless have value as practices of politeness that can help to support social interaction in challenging times.

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However, and as Bonotti and Zech suggest, this appeal to the communicative function of politeness seems especially likely to run into trouble in times of crisis. This is partly, they argue, because the new circumstances render the norms unclear and harder to navigate and partly because the communicative value of civility is compromised by the potential for polite conduct to send mixed messages (2021, pp. 66-86). I think we have to be rather careful with the former claim; one might say that in fact the civility norms have never been clearer. For those who neurotically agonise over the demands of civility and etiquette, the pandemic could even be experienced as something of a relief: there is literally *writing on the ground* to tell us where we need to stand in order to be polite! And it has been striking just how rapidly the new norms have become deeply engrained and how readily the old hierarchies and resentments have reconfigured themselves around those new norms. It is perhaps not so much the new circumstances that make civility norms hard to navigate, but rather the period of *transition* from one set of norms to a new and quite different set of norms.

But Bonotti and Zech are surely correct in their second contention that times of crisis make it especially likely for attempts at politeness to misfire because of the mixed messages they are liable to send. For instance, the norms of masking have become so heavily politicised in some settings that it is often now impossible clearly to communicate respect by one's decision to wear a mask. It is at least as likely to be read as a kind of 'virtue signaling', a statement of one's political allegiance or one's position in the relevant culture war, or simply as a way of channeling misanthropy and disdain.

For this reason, Bonotti and Zech suggest that we need to find ways of improving the communicative function of civility. This is partly a matter of policymakers working "to remedy the lack of clarity surrounding norms of politeness by disseminating information, including scientific findings, to improve polite behavior" (Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p.106). But also, and more intriguingly, it is a matter of embracing "a more diverse approach to politeness": "scholars of civility (and the public more generally) may need to question the adoption of uniform norms of civility as politeness that disregard the many ways in which individuals and groups differ in terms of identity, personality, and social roles" (Bonotti and Zech, 2021, p.101). In many ways that seems a welcome project, but I want to sound a note of caution and also to highlight an implication of the argument that would seem to merit more careful interrogation.

Bonotti and Zech imply that the virtue-signaling, disrespectful side of civility is a corruption of its proper role and meaning, but historically, this is what civility has always been about: it is to be sure a way of communicating respect and toleration to *certain* others, but it is also a way of building and reinforcing social hierarchies, of marginalising the 'rude' undesirables, and of channeling misanthropy (see Elias, 2000; Zerrilli, 2014). These are certainly less worthy functions, but their historical ubiquity suggests that they may serve socially (or psychologically) important ends. In any case, this is just what civility is. The more egalitarian, pluralistic and inclusive set of social norms envisaged by Bonotti and Zech is certainly appealing, but I am not sure it makes sense any longer to call it 'civility' since its realisation would constitute such a substantial departure from ordinary usage and practice. Moreover, there may be a question of what we lose by displacing civility as we know it. This is speculative, but

it may be a mistake to disregard the significance of civility (in its traditional sense) working as a means of channeling, venting and dispersing misanthropic ill-will that might otherwise find even less appealing expression in acts of violence<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the implication of the argument is that the value of civility is exhausted by its instrumental functions. If these practices have no definite public health benefit and if they fail reliably to reinforce social cooperation, then they really are just pointless rituals of hygiene theatre. But I want to resist that conclusion. I think that politeness may hold a deeper significance and value which is often neglected in the literature. To see this, it can be helpful to differentiate between what politeness *communicates* and what it *expresses*. Politeness can potentially have an expressive value even where communication fails. In other words, there are different layers of value here, beyond the consequentialist layer that primarily occupies Bonotti and Zech. And it is worth teasing those different layers apart<sup>2</sup>.

What is the expressive value of civility? Politeness rituals (and I think the language of ‘ritual’ is significant here) work to impose a shape and a pattern on human life. Now, this is often presented pejoratively, as an expression of desperation. As another journalistic commentary on hygiene theatre puts it, “when events career out of control, humans respond the only way they know how: by attempting to impose order upon chaos, one Dettol wipe at a time” (Kale, 2021). But this may be a misrepresentation of what is in fact a more fundamental tendency of human life: think, for example, of the manner in which the creation of a garden works to humanise the natural world by imposing an artificial shape and pattern on it<sup>3</sup>. This need not be interpreted as a sign of desperation.

Applied to human affairs, the politeness ritual artificially shapes our natural condition in a way that enables us to feel at home in the world, and, in so doing, symbolises a threshold of human decency against a natural state of barbarism. And it does this independently of any health benefit it might generate, or any socially useful messages it might send. This seems especially important in times of crisis where the prospect (and fear) of falling into a state of barbarism can seem only too real. A striking, if admittedly dramatic, illustration of this is provided in Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road*, which tells the story of a man and his son’s apparently pointless journey across a barren, post-apocalyptic territory. At one point in the story, as the man washes and dries his son and prepares his bed (we could call this ‘hygiene theatre’), the narrator is struck by the ritualistic character of the man’s conduct:

All of this [the ritual of washing and drying] like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 77-78)

What I mean to emphasize here is not so much the theatrical aspect, but rather the *ceremonial* aspect of civility, if that is not too grand a way of putting it, and the particular importance of such ceremony, expressive of human civilisation and a source of meaning and motivation, in conditions of uncertainty and fear.

This is why civility as politeness always matters, independently of its pragmatic benefits which may be transient and fragile. I do not think this amounts to a criticism of Bonotti and Zech’s powerful account; I think it potentially complements what they

say. The point at which it might edge into criticism is that I suspect that by over-concentrating on the consequentialist layer of value of politeness, we risk obscuring or displacing what I have called the expressive layer of value. So, for example, just as there is something awkward in asking ‘what are you trying to achieve by giving that gift?’ so, too, there is something potentially awkward in asking ‘what are you trying to achieve by performing that ritual?’, or ‘what are you trying to achieve by your politeness?’<sup>4</sup>. Of course we do aim to communicate respect and so on by observing the norms of politeness, but that is not everything we do, and it may not even be the most important thing we do when it comes to the practice of civility in a time of crisis.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Keane (1996) argues (building on Elias) that it was a central role of emerging civility norms from the sixteenth century onwards to pacify and displace tendencies to uncontrolled violence.

<sup>2</sup> I draw the metaphor of ‘layers’ of value from Jeremy Waldron’s discussion of the value of institutions (Waldron, 2016, pp. 8-15).

<sup>3</sup> See Stuart Hampshire (1983, pp. 162-164) for a discussion of the significance of gardens to our understanding of morality.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Wollheim’s (1993) essay “The Sheep and the Ceremony” for an illuminating discussion of the significance of ritualistic action.

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