Civility:
Its Distinctness and Significance

Christopher William Love

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
Philosophy

Daniel Wodak, Committee Chair
James Klagge
Michael Moehler

September 19th, 2017
Blacksburg, Virginia

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Abstract

Civility has many critics. Some challenge its distinctness as a virtue, others its moral significance. In this essay, I attempt to meet both challenges by offering an account of civility that stands distinct from other concepts and holds great value, both intrinsically and instrumentally. I claim that we show civility toward others when we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth. My account pays particular attention to the connections between civility, clarity and reconciliation—connections that make civility vital for modern pluralistic societies. I then consider a recent alternative to this conception of civility advanced by Calhoun (2000), arguing that it secures distinctness at the cost of moral significance.

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General Audience Abstract

In the midst of our contemporary polarization and hostile exchanges, one often hears calls for greater civility. Yet what is civility? Does it name a distinct concept, or is it merely synonymous with other virtues? And why, if at all, should we value it? In this essay, I attempt to answer these questions. Cheshire Calhoun notes that the latter two question pose serious challenges for would-be defenders of civility, challenges of distinctness and significance. I aim to offer an account of civility that meets both of these challenges. I argue that we show civility toward others when we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth. My account pays particular attention to the connections between civility, clarity and reconciliation— connections that make civility particularly important for modern pluralistic societies. I then consider Calhoun's own conception of civility, arguing that it secures distinctness at the cost of moral significance.

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Introduction

In our age of increasing polarization and hostile public exchanges, one often hears calls for greater civility. As Cheshire Calhoun notes in her essay "The Virtue of Civility," these calls raise interesting questions for philosophers. What do we mean by civility in the first place? Are we in fact naming a distinct virtue, or is civility synonymous with one or more pre-existing virtues, such that we could in theory exchange our terms without losing or gaining any unique content? And even if civility does name a distinct concept, is that concept truly a *virtue*, or should we join the ranks of civility's detractors—those, e.g., who see it as an "empty husk," a way of masking one's true intent, which is often to oppress others?[1] These questions raise challenges for civility, ones its proponents should take seriously.

In this essay, I seek to meet these challenges. I will begin, in Part 1, by offering an account of civility that I am calling the *Dispute Thesis*. Put briefly, it claims that we show civility toward others when, given some disagreement, we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth. I shall argue that civility thus construed stands distinct from other virtues and that it does indeed have value, both intrinsically and instrumentally.

In Part 2, I turn my attention to a rival view of civility offered by Calhoun, which I am calling the *Display Thesis*.[2] On her view, civility consists in *displays* of respect, tolerance or considerateness (RTC) toward others, by which we communicate some morally significant fact about them, using signs or behaviors that one's society *associates* with RTC—in other words, a "common language."[3] Calhoun contends that this account of civility meets the challenges of distinctness and moral significance noted above. I will respond to the latter claim, arguing that

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[1] See Mount, p. 38, for an exploration of this charge. Lozano-Reich and Cloud offer a related challenge.
[2] I chose the terms "display" and "dispute" to represent what I see as the *chief characteristic* of their respective theses. I do not mean to suggest that Calhoun's thesis has no bearing on disputes, nor that mine never involves displays. The theses overlap in some areas, while differing in others. (See Part 2 for particulars).
[3] Calhoun, p. 260.

although the display thesis has *some* moral significance, it faces strong setbacks; that these setbacks stem from what, in Calhoun's view, makes civility *distinct* in the first place; and that, for this reason, we ought to look elsewhere for an account of civility.

1. The Dispute Thesis

1.1. What is the Dispute Thesis?

To put the dispute thesis in its most compact form: *we show civility toward others when we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth*. In what follows, I will unpack this account.

First, "what" is civility? Civility refers to respectful disagreement. It governs what we say and what we do in the context of some dispute with our neighbor. The idea that we would "agree civilly" seems to me to make little sense; it is when we are most tempted to defame or attack another—as when disputing our deepest differences—that civility has substance. Sociologist Os Guinness calls civility "the art of living with our deepest differences," which means especially our political, moral and religious differences.[4] It is this concept of civility I wish to defend.

Next, "toward what (or whom) do we show civility?" Is it toward *people*, or else toward what they *believe* or *say* or *do*? The dispute thesis sides with the former. It asserts that *people* are the objects of civility, whereas their ideas (and our disagreement with them) merely supply the context for exercising the virtue. This has important consequences. For one thing, it means that if two people object to each other's views on some subject, civility does *not* require them to say nice things about those views. This should comfort us, especially when one or more of those views may be evidentially—and even morally—problematic. Instead, what civility does is constrain our *manner* of response. It blocks certain avenues, ensuring that we pursue our dispute in the right way.

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[4] Guinness, p. 163.

What is that way? It is the way of *respect* for the people behind our disagreements. As Sarah Buss has argued, "To treat someone 'with respect' is to treat her in a way that acknowledges her intrinsic value, or 'dignity.'" It is "a value tied to what she *is*, not to what she has *done*" or, in our present case, *believed*.[5] Clearly, this invokes deontological assumptions about intrinsic worth. Yet, even if you do not share those assumptions, you need not abandon my definition of civility; one could just as easily say that to be civil involves disputing others' ideas *as if* those with whom you disagree *had* intrinsic worth. This preserves the basic idea that the "way" of civility is one of "respect for worth," whether real or hypothetical. We can respect this worth, even as we vigorously dispute those persons' views or behavior. Civil people refuse to blur the line between opponents and views. They employ their practical reason, alongside their conviction (or pragmatic assumption) about their opponent's worth, to select forms of disagreement that are consistent with that worth.

Thus far, I have considered: what I take civility to be, toward whom we show it, and how. Civility is respectful disagreement. It is something we accord people, not views—or, rather, we accord it to people *in spite of* their views. That said, a key question remains unanswered—namely, "What is civility *for*?" This brings us to the question of its moral significance.

1.2. The Dispute Thesis and the Challenge of Moral Significance

Earlier, I suggested that civility has value both intrinsically and instrumentally. It matters not just as a *means* toward other goods but *for its own sake*. I will begin this section by addressing the intrinsic question, before devoting most of my time to the instrumental one.

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[5] Buss, pp. 796-7.

The case for civility as an end in itself depends on one's assumptions about the worth of the human person.[6] Those who grant that this worth is intrinsic will see civility as a way of respecting that worth, of honoring the claim it puts on us. Indeed, civility simply *is* the act of respecting that worth in the particular context of disputes, especially disputes over our fundamental differences, when we are most tempted to disown or act contrary to others' worth. Such respect matters, regardless of whether it yields any further benefits.

Suppose, however, that you do *not* share this belief in the intrinsic value of all people and, thus, in the idea of civility as a way of honoring the claim it puts on us. What then? You might nevertheless find civility valuable as a means toward other goods. In what follows, I will suggest two such goods: clarity and reconciliation. Civility bears a close—one might say, an *essential*—relationship to these goods; in saying this, I mean that clarity and reconciliation *naturally unfold* from the practice of civility in such a way that it makes sense to pursue civility for those ends.

Take the first of these: clarity. What sort of clarity do I have in mind, and how does civility promote it? Civility promotes clarity about three things:

(C1) What others believe about *p*,

(C2) Why they believe what they do about *p* (i.e., their reasons for belief), and

(C3) What is in fact the case about *p* (whether *p* is good or true or beautiful, affordable or historically accurate or actionable, etc.),

where *p* refers to some matter of real or supposed dispute between persons. It could refer to a policy proposal, an ethical judgment, a scientific hypothesis or anything else that might divide us, especially in modern pluralistic societies. Though different in kind, (C1)-(C3) each matters in important ways. Misunderstandings about *what* others believe may lead to slander; *why* they

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[6] It would take us far afield to pursue arguments for *grounding* in this essay. Suffice it to say that the dispute thesis is inclusive; it allows for those working from various secular and theistic frameworks.

believe it, to false assessments of their character or reasonableness; *what is in fact the case*, to unsound policy or failed and costly ventures. These are but a few examples. We take action and make judgments on the basis of our understandings of (C1)-(C3); those actions and judgments have consequences, for good or ill; we need clarity, therefore, if we are to respond well.

Enter a problem. There are many factors at work in contemporary society, let alone human nature, that challenge our ability to get clarity about (C1)-(C3). These include but are not limited to: deepening polarization, which exacerbates our tendency to segregate into like-minded groups rather than talking across differences; forms of communication (texts, tweets, sound-bites, headlines, etc.) that lend themselves to oversimplification or remove vital context, especially in the hands of interest groups; and an environment of pings, pop-up windows and general busyness that breaks the attention needed to engage in sustained and careful thought. Add to this the fact that we are *already biased* for or against *p*, and what we get is an incubator for misunderstanding.

How does civility address this problem? The answer lies in the relationship between civility and dialogue. By dialogue, I mean a conversation among people (especially perceived opponents) that allows all sides to present their views on a given subject, to ask questions, to provide or receive feedback, and to clarify misconceptions. When we treat others civilly—that is, when we pursue our disputes in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth—we *invite* dialogue. And it is through such dialogue that clarity of the sort captured in (C1)-(C3) becomes possible.[7]

Suppose that Jones feel strongly about *p*. *p* concerns global warming, say, or the ethics of abortion or the right way to handle refugees. Jones' goals, his voting, his finances, even his

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[7] See Kennedy for an example of someone who thinks civility obscures, rather than clarifies, the important issues of the day. What he overlooks, I think, is the connection between civility and (effective) dialogue.

relationships are crucially interwoven with his position on *p*. Based on comments Smith has

made or things others have said about him, Jones infers that Smith does *not* share his position on

p, which makes Jones reluctant to want to discuss *p* with him, given the personal commitments

Jones has at stake. Nevertheless, they have some urgent practical need that requires them to work

through their differences of belief about *p*, since *p* has implications for their common life—

policies to enact or strike down, judgments to affirm or denounce, etc.

Now, suppose that when Jones approaches Smith about *p*, the latter treats him uncivilly.

Smith scoffs or rolls his eyes or cuts Jones off mid-sentence; if the issue in question particularly

upsets Smith, he might even scream or threaten violence—or act on it.[8] If Jones has a low

tolerance for disrespect, he may withdraw altogether, foregoing this important conversation. Yet,

even if he continues, it is likely that Smith's incivility will prejudice Jones against the other's

position in some way. Perhaps it arouses Jones' resentment, which clouds his judgment and/or

inclines him (even unconsciously) to defend his view at all costs. Whatever the case, Smith's

incivility hinders Jones'—and incidentally *Smith's*—chances of clarity, since it either prevents

them from dialogue altogether or else inclines that dialogue toward poor epistemic results.[9]

Some readers may wish to challenge me at this point. After all, how do we *know* that

Smith's incivility will obstruct clarity? Is this mere speculation? Briefly, let me offer three

responses. First, we must ensure that we are talking about the same sorts of behaviors. The

dispute thesis allows for rigorous argument, which *would* foster clarity but which some might

mistake for incivility; what it does *not* allow for are things like picking fun at one's opponents or

calling them names or other demeaning behaviors noted above. Second, if indeed we are talking

about the same sorts of behaviors, then I would simply say that in my experience I have never

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[8] Think here of many a protest gone awry.
[9] Incivility does not just hinder clarity *in the moment*; it may have *lasting* consequences, as when one or more sides harbors a grudge or concludes that their opponent could *never* be reasoned with—and therefore never tries again.

found these to promote clarity—only to hinder it—and I am strongly inclined to think my experience no anomaly. Yet third, it is conceivable that a person of strong character *could* persevere in attempting dialogue despite such circumstances, while maintaining a level head, and therefore that she *could* achieve a measure of clarity about (C1)-(C3). That said, such a person is going strongly against the grain. Moreover, it is not that the opponent's incivility *increased* clarity; for, even in these exceptional cases, the incivility remains an obstacle to overcome.

Returning to my thought experiment, suppose instead that Smith acts civilly. Though he does not share Smith's view (or what he *takes* to be that view), Smith believes that Jones' worth does not *depend* upon his view, and thus he intends to honor Jones' worth in the midst of their disagreement. Smith's civility encourages Jones to overcome his reluctance to dialogue about *p*, and therefore opens the door for increased clarity, in one or more of the above forms.

This brings us to the third and final good under discussion: reconciliation. As we gain clarity about the abovementioned subjects, especially (C1)-(C2), this naturally yields reconciliation. To be clear, I am using the term "reconciliation" in a broad sense, to refer to both *immediate/actual* states as well as *future/possible* ones. The former category includes the following outcomes:

(R1) We discover that we don't actually disagree about *p*;

(R2) We disagree about *p*, but I learn something about your reasons or motivations or background commitments that makes you no longer an enemy (and might even increase my natural respect for you), and thus we call a truce;

(R3) We disagree about *p*, but we find an unforeseen means of compromise; or

(R4) You convince me to abandon my belief about *p* (or vice versa).

These are admittedly *ideal* outcomes; they assume that there is something good (whether epistemically or morally or both) about an opponent's position that, once revealed by dialogue,

enables us to reconcile in one of the above ways. Yet what about *non-ideal* outcomes, where dialogue reveals that others' beliefs about *p* and/or reasons for them are immoral or illogical and therefore seem to rule out (R1)-(R4)? In such cases, has civility led to a dead end?

No, for two reasons. First, if I am correct about the intrinsic value of others, then civility holds value even if our dialogue uncovers "dirt" rather than "gold." Yet, second, a form of future/possible reconciliation still remains open to us: the very act of clarifying others' beliefs about *p* and their reasons for them helps us adjust our arguments so as to more effectively *counter* those beliefs and/or reasons in future debate. Call this (R5). This increases our chance of persuasion (or, at the very least, of public victory); for, only when we have discussed the *same* beliefs and the *same* reasons can we truly claim to have defeated them.

This raises a final problem. How do we know that our interlocutors are engaging in good faith? That is, how do we know that the beliefs about *p* that they *profess*, along with their stated reasons for them, match their *actual* beliefs and/or reasons? Since reasons matter in determining the ethical status of a belief,[10] this provides a perverse incentive for savvy (but immoral) interlocutors to "disguise" their position with false (and seemingly innocent) reasons.

We have no indubitable way of ruling this out. Two strangers who engage in a one-time dispute have limited means at their disposal of detecting insincerity. Yet, when the opponents in question are not strangers but family members or neighbors or co-workers, we stand a better chance. Their *life* will often speak for them. Things they say (or have said) and do (or have done) may validate or invalidate their professed position, especially over time. Since we are not all strangers—at least not yet—this gives us grounds for thinking that the clarity and reconciliation civility promises do in fact hang within our grasp.

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[10] Even in cases where two people hold a belief that is intrinsically evil, it does not follow that each person's belief is equally wrong. If Bill holds his belief out of ignorance yet Anne out of malice, or vice versa, we ought to evaluate those beliefs differently.

1.3. The Dispute Thesis and the Challenge of Distinctness

If my discussion in the previous section is correct, then the dispute thesis meets one of Calhoun's two challenges. Yet what of the second? Is civility, as conceived in the dispute thesis, a *distinct* virtue? Or is it synonymous with, or parasitic on, some more basic virtue(s)—e.g., respect? After all, I invoke respect in my very definition of civility, claiming that we act civilly when we dispute others' ideas in ways that *respect* those persons' intrinsic worth. Now, if by "distinct" we mean that civility can have "no relation" to respect, then I grant that the dispute thesis fails the test. Yet so too would the display thesis. According to the latter, civility is that which closes the gap between *partial* and *full* respect, tolerance or considerateness—at least, in morally-perfect social worlds.[11] Per that account, civility is related to respect as a part is to a whole. Nonetheless, Calhoun does not think this disqualifies civility from registering as a distinct virtue. Therefore, distinctness must mean something else. In what follows, I will suggest two reasons why the dispute thesis also meets the challenge of distinctness.

First and foremost, civility differs from respect (broadly construed) in some of its aims. Respect aims at responding in a fitting way to the value of others. Though civility shares this aim, it does not stop there. As argued in the previous section, civility also aims at clarity and reconciliation in a way that mere respect does not.

This becomes all the more apparent when we consider that unlike respect, civility has a specific context—namely, disputes. This assumes, of course, that we are talking about the dispute thesis. We may contrast this view with that of other thinkers, who apply the word "civil" to a broad range of actions—e.g., how we drive our vehicles or share the sidewalk or stand in line or behave at the theater. Were "civility" to apply to all such interactions, then it would indeed look as if it were parasitic on RTC. I reject such a broad application, however. I can

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[11] Calhoun, p. 263.

"respect" my friends at a dinner party, by honoring their space, not eating all the appetizers, and giving them opportunities to talk; yet, unless they and I dispute some idea, I cannot treat them *civilly*. Thus, though consistent with respect, civility is not co-extensive with it. This, coupled with civility's epistemic and reconciliatory functions, gives us reason to regard it as a distinct virtue.

2. The Display Thesis

If my arguments in Part 2 are correct, then the dispute thesis meets the challenges of distinctness and moral significance. Yet what about its rival, the display thesis? In this part, I turn my attention to Calhoun's account of civility. I begin by filling out that thesis, before noting the main points of disagreement with my own. I conclude by offering a moral critique of that thesis.

2.1. What is the Display Thesis?

Calhoun claims that what distinguishes civility from RTC (broadly construed) are *displays*. She believes it is possible to *be* respectful or tolerant or considerate without overtly displaying these qualities. Calhoun gives an example of "the person who carefully skirts his neighbor's lawn while sarcastically declaring, 'Don't worry, I won't step on your precious grass.'"[12] Such a person succeeds in respecting his neighbor (at least to *some* extent, by honoring his wishes) but fails to treat the neighbor civilly. To do the latter, he would at the very least need to refrain from sarcasm and perhaps even to include some positive verbal or behavioral token. Displays of RTC *communicate* worth. They consist of

> acts the target of civility might reasonably interpret as making it clear that I recognize some morally considerable fact about her that makes her worth treating with respect, tolerance or considerateness.[13]

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[12] Calhoun, p. 261.
[13] Ibid., p. 259.

Thus, on Calhoun's view, civility refers to a way of acting that communicates our awareness that someone is worthy of being treated with RTC.

Yet, in order for the recipient to *understand* this display, it must come via signs he or she recognizes—in other words, via a "common language."[14] This common language consists not in what the *sender* happens to regard as behavior consistent with RTC but rather with what the sender and recipient's *larger society* regards as such. Thus, civility norms are socially determined. They may (or may not) correspond with what you or I, upon reflection, deem *genuinely* respectful, considerate or tolerant. Herein lies a key difference between civility and RTC, in principle if not in practice. Civility involves a different decision procedure. As Calhoun writes, "if I am interested in displaying respect, my task is not to figure out how people *ought* to be treated, but how I can successfully *communicate* moral attitudes."[15]

Before concluding this summary of the display thesis, let me mention three details that will pertain to my assessment of that thesis. The first concerns *in*civility. Like its counterpart, incivility is determined by social consensus about what counts as RTC. It is socially determined.[16] Both civility and incivility represent ways of "communicating moral attitudes in contexts governed by social norms."[17] This has important implications for my second point: the role (or lack thereof) of "intention" in Calhoun's account. The fact that civility and incivility are socially determined means that the sender's intentions play no role in determining whether a given action counts as civil or uncivil. "Because actions have social meanings," Calhoun writes, "what a person does may display disrespect even if he does not intend to do so." [18]

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14 Ibid., 260.
15 Calhoun, p. 264.
16 Ibid., p. 265
17 Ibid., p. 265.
18 Ibid., p. 266 (see footnote).

The third and final point concerns the target or recipient of civility in Calhoun's account. By target, I mean *that to which civility and incivility are a response*. When she first presents her account, Calhoun suggests that civility is a response to other people, an acknowledgment of "some morally considerable fact" about them—e.g., that they are a person, a neighbor or someone in authority, etc.[19] "The civil person," Calhoun writes, "regards such morally considerable facts as placing restrictions not just on how she treats others, but on *the messages about their worth* that she conveys to them."[20] Again, "Civility names a distinctive feature of some actions: displaying that one takes *another* to be worth respecting, tolerating or considering."[21]

Later, however, Calhoun seems to waver from this position. In her discussion of boundaries (something to which we will return in the next section), Calhoun repeatedly presents civility not as a response to people's worth (at least, not straightforwardly) but to their *views* and *behavior*. These bounds provide a "way of specifying *what* is not owed a civil response"—as opposed, one might think, to *whom*. Again, she says that "civility norms must require civil responses to some *views* regardless of what individual reasoners think of them," and "civility norms regulate discussion by requiring all parties equally to respond with respect toward the same *set of positions*."[22]

On the surface, Calhoun's discussion may seem inconsistent on this point, prompting us to ask whether civility is something we show toward others, in light of their worth, or else toward their views and behavior. Yet, as other passages suggest, Calhoun might regard this question as a false dichotomy. For, as she writes, "I think civility is a virtue that we are required

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[19] Ibid., p. 259.
[20] Emphasis added.
[21] Calhoun, p. 265, emphasis added.
[22] Ibid., pp. 271, 269 respectively, emphasis added.

to exercise toward others *only if* they pursue socially acceptable views and behavior."[23] Thus, from first to last, civility refers to displays of RTC toward others—provided those persons believe or do what their larger society deems consistent with RTC.

This view suggests one of two possibilities. First, it may be that human worth is in some way *dependent* on our beliefs and behaviors, or second, it may be that we have intrinsic worth by virtue, e.g., of being persons or neighbors, but that what we believe and do may warrant a *suspension* of others' displays of RTC toward us. According to the latter view, our worth provides only a prima facie obligation to be civil; it can be overridden under the right circumstances.

2.2. The Display Thesis and the Challenge of Moral Significance

Although Calhoun succeeds in distinguishing civility from RTC broadly construed, I believe she does so at the expense of civility's moral significance. I will devote the remainder of this essay to fleshing out that claim. Unfortunately, the problems stem not from peripheral details but from the very heart of her account: defining civility in terms of displays—that is, in terms of a fallible common language about what counts as genuine respect, tolerance or considerateness. I will offer five challenges to that thesis.

Two immediate caveats need mentioning. First, on my view, civility may—and often will—involve displays, but it is neither defined nor constrained by them. Rather, I claim that civility is simply a matter of disputing others' ideas in ways that respect or honor or are consistent with those persons' intrinsic worth, but not necessarily through displays, rooted in social norms the sender cannot appeal. Consequently, there may be times when a genuine act of civility (at least from the sender's standpoint) goes unrecognized as such.

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[23] Ibid., p. 272, emphasis added.

Second, though I am offering a moral critique of the display thesis, I do not wish to suggest that Calhoun's thesis has *no* morally significant qualities. She notes, for example, its role in encouraging others to join us as co-participants in public practices or how it enhances others' self-esteem by communicating our recognition of their value. I agree with her assessment.[24] Yet, even granting these benefits, I remain concerned about various implications of Calhoun's thesis.

This brings me to my first critique. By distinguishing civility on the basis of displays (which are fallible and socially determined), Calhoun creates an undesirable conflict between civility, on the one hand, and genuine RTC, on the other. To be clear, this conflict only arises in morally *imperfect* social worlds—worlds where social understandings about respectfulness bear no necessary connection with the dictates of *genuine* respectfulness. Yet, ours happens to be one such world. Thus, as Calhoun notes, this leave us

> weighing *competing* moral considerations: (1) the value of successfully communicating basic moral attitudes (civility), and (2) the importance of treating people with genuine respect, tolerance and considerateness.[25]

As things stand, we cannot have our cake and eat it too—at least, not when civility parts ways with our beliefs about what genuine respectfulness requires. Those who, like myself, place a high value on treating others in accordance with (what we take to be) genuine respect, viewing this as a matter of conscience, will come to see the display thesis as a *lesser* or *conditional* virtue. Yet even if you do not—even if, like Calhoun, you place great weight on the *communicative* aspect of morality[26]—I think we can agree that this conflict between the virtues is undesirable. All things considered, we would prefer not to have to choose between civility and genuine respect. Therefore, if we could find an alternative conception of civility, one that avoided this conflict, that fact would count in its favor.

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[24] See Calhoun, p. 266, for further morally significant benefits of the display thesis.
[25] Calhoun, p. 264.
[26] Ibid., p. 273.

Yet, if my arguments in Part 2 are correct, then this is in fact our situation. The dispute thesis provides a viable alternative to Calhoun's, and it secures distinctness without pitting us against our own judgment about the dictates of genuine respectfulness. It does not insist that we *communicate* respect according to a practice with which we may deeply disagree, only that we *be* respectful (toward people and in the context of disputes), while leaving room for us to exercise our judgment about what such respect entails. I will return to the importance of personal judgment in my third criticism.

My second point is that the display thesis falls prey to an objection Calhoun explicitly seeks to avoid. She notes how critics have charged traditional accounts of civility with *morally uncritical law-abidingness*. In other words, civility calls for "conforming to whatever the social rules are."[27] If true, then, as in the above case of a conflict between civility and RTC, this might lead us to think "civility is at best a minor virtue, or perhaps not a *moral* virtue at all." Now, by linking civility inseparably with social norms—i.e., with what society *regards* as behavior consistent with RTC rather than what in fact *is*—Calhoun appears to have exposed her account to this very criticism. As she says, "being genuinely civil…requires that we follow *whatever the socially established norms are* for showing people considerateness, tolerance or respect."[28] Thus, at the very least, her account involves conforming to the (social) rules, whatever they are.

Fair enough, we might say, but is the account *morally uncritical*? Yes and no. It is not morally uncritical in the sense that the person who practices the display thesis does so *for the purpose of conveying moral attitudes*. This is a morally motivated action. As Calhoun notes in the passage I just quoted,

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[27]Calhoun, p. 252.
[28] Ibid., p. 260, my emphasis.

Only because there are such generally agreed upon, often codified, social rules for what counts as respectful, considerate, and tolerant behavior can we successfully communicate our moral attitudes toward others.

Nevertheless, the display thesis remains morally uncritical in the sense that its adherents *forfeit their own judgment* about the goodness of particular practices and instead adopt whatever their society happens to approve, even if the practice in question runs against their firmly held moral beliefs. If my society claimed that drinking a certain liquid increased one's health yet I sincerely believed it to be poisonous, I would be acting uncritically (and culpably) if I proceeded to serve it to my guests. Those who believe in an objective moral order, one that society can "get wrong," may find this analogy somewhat apt. It suggests that we really can wrong others by our actions, even if people in that society come to expect those actions or if we do them with good intentions (e.g., to communicate worth using a language they understand). It is in this sense that we may rightly charge the display thesis with morally uncritical law-abidingness.

A third troubling consequence of the display thesis is that it leaves no place for a sender's *intentions* in determining what counts as civil or uncivil. As Calhoun notes,

> One consequence of this view that there is a social language for conveying respect and disrespect is that incivility is not a function of persons' *intentions*. Because actions have social meanings, what a person does may display disrespect even if he does not intend to do so.[29]

Now, on the one hand, I cannot dispute the second sentence: it is simply a fact of human social interactions that we sometimes offend unwittingly or unintentionally—by things we say or do or eat, by what we wear, or how we talk. Yet, it is one thing to say that our actions send unintended signals, quite another to posit an account of civility that leaves *no room* for speakers to clarify the intent behind their actions (and, likewise, their reasons for belief).[30] The latter case would effectively remove "due process" from the public square and pave the way for slander and other

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[29] Calhoun, p. 266.
[30] Recall my discussion of "clarity" in 2.2.

unjust treatment. This becomes especially troubling when we consider (1) that we inhabit

pluralistic societies, where members disagree about one or more fundamental assumptions, yet

(2) our understandings of what counts as respectful (or considerate or tolerant) are to some extent

dependent on those fundamental assumptions.

Charles Taylor makes a point of this kind in his *Sources of the Self*. There, he notes "two

orders of considerations" that are often required before we can understand *why* a particular group

of people values what it does.[31] The first is "the kind of social interchange, the common

purposes, or mutual needs, how things can go well or badly between people in the society where

this term is current." Yet second, we also need "a sense of their *perceptions of the good*," without

which some of their evaluations will be "opaque." It is the second of these that particularly

concerns me, given my reference to pluralism above. Pluralism brings people with different

conceptions of the good into the same space, which makes it likely that they will misunderstand

each other's beliefs or actions on at least some significant point; as such, they need the ability to

clarify their intentions rather than simply being labeled uncivil. What may fall within the

"common language" of RTC for one group within a pluralistic society may not fall within the

common language of other groups within that same, broader society. To be clear, my point is not

simply that some understanding of respectfulness (call it *r*) falls outside another's common

language; rather, it is that *r* is rooted in a particular conception of the good, which may, in certain

circumstances, severely violate the conscience of those who do not share that conception.

Take the case of Mina, a woman who happened to be born in an authoritarian country,

under a dictator whom most of the population practically worships. When one enters another's

house in this country, it is considered a sign of respect to one's host—indeed, a necessity—to

offer a blessing in the dictator's name. Mina, however, has deep-seated philosophical and ethical

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[31] Taylor (1989), pp. 54-56.

reservations about her nation's ruler. (Suppose, e.g., her family was killed during a national purge.) As such, she cannot in good conscience practice this custom. One day, Mina's neighbors invite her to dinner for the first time. She fears exposing her contrary views, yet she loves her neighbors and wishes to express that love. Therefore, Mina accepts their offer, deciding in advance upon some alternate greeting. That night, upon entering the house, rather than turn to the dictator's portrait beside the door, she turns instead to her hosts and, with a trembling smile, bows and thanks them.

What ought we to make of Mina's gesture? On the one hand, it stemmed from love and respect for her neighbors; yet, on the other, it violated the socially established norms for conveying those sentiments in that context. Must we call this a failure to display respect? It seems we must, if we insist that civility and social consensus cannot come apart. Yet why not allow Mina to simply *explain* her actions and then, where possible, to draw upon some *other* form of respect, about which she and her hosts can agree? Such an account would be better suited for pluralism, for settings where misunderstandings abound and, thus, where we need civility most. Yet, adjusting the view in this way would entail rejecting a strong view of social language, one that leaves no room for senders' intentions. That means rejecting the display thesis as it currently stands.

Fourth, Calhoun's understanding of civility leads her to propose a view of "boundaries" that would shield immoral societies from internal criticism. This argument requires some background. By the "bounds of civility," Calhoun means "the point where speech and action are sufficiently disrespectful, inconsiderate, and intolerant *not* to warrant a civil response."[32] She suggests that "We need not respond civilly to a view or behavior once there is *social closure* on

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[32] Calhoun, p. 267.

its intolerability."[33] Why is this the case? Because, she argues, "civility has its point and place precisely with respect to views that are under dispute in a society."[34] Therefore, "All that is relevant [to the question of whether we should be civil in a given case] is the fact of social dispute."[35]

This view of boundaries faces serious setbacks, only two of which I have space to mention here. Societies consist of fallible people; therefore, the mere fact that one's society has reached closure about the tolerability of a given belief or behavior does *not* guarantee that it has done so rightly—i.e., in accordance with moral truth.[36] Societies, past and present, have made mistakes. When they do, these mistakes often stem in part from misconceptions and bad arguments—the very things that civil disagreement helps identify. Those in a given society who have not bought into its error need a "bridge" over which to persuade their neighbors from one position to another. Lesser forms of incivility obstruct this bridge, making it harder for others to cross, while greater forms destroy the bridge altogether. In either case, by licensing incivility, we reduce the chance that a given society will correct itself.

In closing, let me suggest a further reason why we should not license incivility, even in cases of large consensus about the intolerability of some belief or behavior. This reason brings us once again to the subject of worth. If indeed *people* are the targets of civility, as I contend and as some passages in Calhoun's essay suggest, if civility is aimed at conveying (or at least protecting) their *worth*, and if that worth is *intrinsic*—a function of who they are, not of what they believe or do—then there is never a circumstance when we can treat someone uncivilly. We

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[33] Ibid., p. 271, my emphasis.
[34] Ibid., p. 269.
[35] Ibid., p. 271.
[36] If, in the final analysis, moral truth is culturally relative, then this objection does not apply, for social consensus would be the arbiter of moral truth. Yet, in acknowledging a gap between *genuine* respect, tolerance or considerateness and what one's society *takes* to be RTC, Calhoun suggests that she denies cultural relativism. There must be some standard by which to measure what is genuine. If so, then her view remains vulnerable to this objection.

can disagree with them, to be sure. We can tell them plainly that their beliefs are mistaken, and

then set about explaining why. In extreme cases, as when under threat of violence, we can and

should seek help. Yet we must not disrespect them. We must not suggest that because their *views*

belong in the ash heap of history, so too do *they*. In short, the moment we dispute their ideas in

ways that fail to respect those persons' worth as fellow human beings, we cross the line.

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