

Title: Teresa Bejan, Mere Civility
Episode: 57
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Professors and politicians warn that we face a crisis of civility today. But is civility really a virtue and how much civility do we really need? That question is addressed by my guest today Teresa Bejan in her book *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, published in 2017. Teresa is an associate professor of political theory at the University of Oxford. Her book *Mere Civility* critiques early modern debates about civility and how much disagreement we should tolerate, analyzing the views of two well-known thinkers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as well as the relatively obscure Roger Williams, founder of the colony of Rhode Island.

She encourages us to follow Roger Williams in allowing all kinds of disagreement, including expressions of contempt, but avoiding physical violence.

So your book is titled "Mere Civility". How would you describe mere civility and how it differs from things like respect and agreeableness?

Teresa Bejan: Right. So in the book, I'm focusing on the concept of civility and I understand that concept pretty narrowly. So I'm interested in civility as a conversational virtue that's meant to govern disagreement in particular. So just from the beginning then, civility would have to be something different than agreeableness because agreeableness is the willingness to agree in order to get along and so that can't be civility on my account. It has to be something that can accommodate disagreement.

So I take a lot of pains in the book to distinguish what I call mere civility from – as you mentioned, from respect, which I think is really what a lot of people have in mind when they're talking about civility or more precisely when they're complaining about a lack of civility.

They're complaining about a lack of respectfulness in public debate. But my argument is that civility, understood as mere civility, is something less than the respect we have in mind. So I end up defining it in the book as a sort of a minimal conformity to norms of respectful behavior that is compatible with and even sometimes expressive of contempt. So, you know, that's a long definition. But the really important point there is that we can distinguish the performance of respectful behaviors from any actual opinion of respect on the first hand.

On the second hand, civility is meant to be a kind of conversational floor and not a ceiling. So I'm really taking – one of my main points in the book is to argue that civility is the virtue that needs to come in and fill the breach precisely when we're disagreeing with those – we find it difficult or maybe even impossible to respect.

So the general conflation of civility with respect – in common political discourse but also – you know, I’m a political theorist and historian of political thought. So especially in the academy, this idea that well, civility somehow equals respect in some way. I’m really adamant that no, no, no. If we really care about civility as the virtue that’s going to keep us together when we disagree, we need to understand the ways in which it’s different from respect.

Chris Martin: You chose three figures from the early modern era in your discussion of this issue. You talk about Roger Williams, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. What made you choose those three people?

Teresa Bejan: Well, the answer I shouldn’t give is that – I was doing a PhD in political theory and wanted to write on early modern thought. So I was sort of destined to write on Hobbes and Locke, two of the really big guys in that field.

So that’s – I would say that what drew me to early modern English political thought in the first instance and then to civility in the second was the sense that political theorists like Hobbes and Locke in the 17th century have a kind of psychological realism, informing their theories that you don’t necessarily find in other places in time.

So they’re sort of taking it as a – they’re taking it as read that human beings as such have a certain psychology and in particular it’s a psychology that makes disagreement feel particularly threatening. Hobbes puts it in his book *De Cive*, the mere act of disagreement is offensive.

So human beings experience disagreement as a kind of disrespect and given that psychological fact, how can they nevertheless live together. So that was what drew me to Hobbes and Locke as sort of, you know, the big political philosophers of this period in the first place. But then Roger Williams was a bit more out of left field. I’m sure that for most of your listeners, he’s fairly obscure. But I would even say for specialists of the 17th century like me, he’s also pretty obscure.

He’s famous as the founder of the colony of Rhode Island in the 1630s and he was himself a religious dissenter and also a pamphleteer during the English revolution.

But what really attracted me to Williams was his writings on the culture and customs of the American Indians. So he writes this book in 1643 called “A Key into the Language of America”. It’s the first handbook of Algonquian language in English and it’s massively successful in London where it’s published.

So I got interested in Williams as someone who was actually practicing religious toleration and civility at the same time that these demigods of the Western political tradition. Hobbes and Locke were theorizing it. So I got really excited about bringing Williams’ practice and these theories, kind of intent dialogue and seeing the different pictures of civility and toleration that emerge.

Chris Martin: Right. Yeah. I think he's a pretty obscure for most Americans even on the East Coast. My wife happened to go to Brown University. So she said, "I've seen a statue of him in Providence."

Teresa Bejan: Well, it's funny. I'm from North Carolina. So I had never heard of him before I encountered him in a seminar during graduate school at Yale. So I really think it's a kind of New England thing at best.

Chris Martin: Being from Carolina, you're probably more familiar with John Locke.

Teresa Bejan: Yeah, that's right. Absolutely.

Chris Martin: So when you comment on Roger Williams, you point out there one issue really is that he thought that everyone is a potential convert to Jesus Christ and to his particular flavor of Christianity. He had a very, very strict definition of it. So in a sense, he was not really respectful. He really wanted just mere civility so that someone who was not a follower of Jesus Christ in his terms could potentially be one. Is that fair?

Teresa Bejan: I think that's fair. I mean for Williams, civility as mere civility is absolutely crucial because he wants his tolerant society to be one where people can evangelize. They can proselytize and compete for converts and as you mentioned, he's not only a puritan Christian. He is an evangelical puritan Christian and even from – even by the standards of the day which are – you know, may be different than our standards today, he was understood to be quite obnoxious in the way that he proselytized for his particular persuasion, his particular understanding of Christianity.

Chris Martin: And when you're commenting on him, you say that perhaps civility requires much less common ground than we think. Do you think most people in the West have now come to this realization at least in the area of religion? I ask this because relative to the other parts of the world, there is less religious violence in the US and the West now.

Teresa Bejan: It's a really great question and I suppose one thing to just mention for your listeners in case this hasn't been clear is that what's fascinating about Williams is that he's this – you know, he's what we would call a religious fundamentalist. He really does think that people who do not subscribe to true Christianity on his particularly narrow definition are damned. They are going to hell.

It has been an assumption I think of a lot of people but certainly in Western political philosophy for a long time. You can't coexist with those that you regard as damned. I mean Rousseau says this in *The Social Contract*.

But what's fascinating about Williams is that despite his religious fundamentalism and his theological intolerance, he ends up founding the most tolerant society the world had ever seen. I mean Rhode Island you have not only every flavor of Christian. You have Catholics formerly tolerated. You have Jews. You have Muslims and you also have American Indians, right? Or those he describes as pagans.

So this is what's really fascinating about Williams just in this sort of case. But recognizing that, this combination of a tolerant society with unprecedented religious diversity and theologic – what we would describe as religious fundamentalism or theological intolerance on the other, I am really interested and reminding Americans of their peculiar history and just the strangeness and utter improbability of the colonial experiments in places like Rhode Island where we learned – experiments were tried that never should have worked in theory. But nevertheless, they worked in practice.

So to answer your question, I think that that's right. I think that – I mean broadly speaking in the West – maybe I will speak more specifically about America right now. Americans learned the hard way that life, a common life required less common ground than they thought.

I worry slightly and one of the reasons I wrote the book is that I think that we learned that lesson and then we forgot it. We sort of take for granted again that a common life requires a kind of common culture. It requires a kind of strong bond of perhaps civic virtue or mutual respect, again that language of respect. Partly what I want to do through writing a book like this is just to remind us of this history that doesn't conform to our expectations of what a common life requires.

That says that, you know, precisely the hope of a tolerant society is that you can rub along together and rub shoulders with those you disrespect and truly regard as damned.

Chris Martin: I mean I think in America today, there are definitely evangelical Christians. I mean I know some who probably believe that – I mean he definitely believed that people who were not evangelical Christians are damned. But part of the culture now is not being violent about that, which is – I mean I'm from India and so there are two points during my life in India. There were riots between Hindus and Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims and it was not like the wars in Europe during the reformation. But it was very violent. So the contrast to me was noticeable.

Teresa Bejan: Yeah. I think it is something we really take for granted. It's one of those things where we – there's the phrase the “narcissism of small differences”.

Chris Martin: Right.

Teresa Bejan: So we become really obsessed with this sort of really small differences that divide us, perhaps the United States. We've lost sight of these really, really deep, probably fundamental differences that certainly would be obstacles to coexist somewhere else.

Chris Martin: One issue that I've thought of, I've talked to Jon Haidt about this, is the difference between religious tolerance and political tolerance because at first I thought, well, we could go about both of these things in the same way. But religion has now gone into these semi-private institutions, at least where you typically do in Western societies, and now as you bracket out your religious life and you tend to not talk about it at the workplace and keep it out of the public sphere to some degree.

But politics is by definition part of the public's fear. So you can't take politics into a semi-private sphere. So do you think there's always going to be this difference there where political contention will just be different from religious tension?

Teresa Bejan: No. So the short answer to that is no. One of the – one of my points in writing the book was to challenge that sort of hard and fast distinction between religion on the one hand and politics on the other. That tends to inform a lot of contemporary liberal thinking and Western thinking about these questions. You say, oh, well the Western liberal secularist solution wants to kick religion into the private sphere and that solved that problem.

There's some truth to this but it's – the story I tell, that result is more of a – that was an unintended consequence, not the proposed solution to the problem.

Firstly politics was religious. Religion was political in the 17th century, which is the time that we're – that I'm writing about the time where we think a lot of these solutions began to be hatched out. But also the solution that I'm fascinated by, which is the one I associate with Roger Williams and then with the kind of American experiment more broadly was this idea that no, we can let religion become public in this really strange way.

So in the States and in Rhode Island, it's that we have disestablishment. There's no established church. The institutions of church and state are separated. That goes hand in hand with a kind of publicity and public expression of religiosity. That can strike Europeans certainly as very, very strange. So it's this idea that you have a kind of evangelical – an evangelicalism, a kind of public faith and public religious conflict. At the same time, it's having this formal separation.

So just recovering that historically I think is a way of kind of challenging how we tend to think about that division. But just from the perspective of modern politics, I mean I'm really interested in religion and politics as examples of – or sights of what I call fundamental disagreement and here, I'm – you know, my work is very much in line with Jon Haidt's work where I'm interested in the psychology of disagreement.

I think that religion and politics both lead to the same kind of sort of fraught psychological response where disagreement is experienced as a kind of identity threat.

So if that's true, if there's a kind of fundamental similarity in the underlying psychology, you're not – the idea that you can deal with it by banishing one to a private sphere, one – that solution is not really going to get you so far because the psychology remains the same and that's why I think that thinking about civility, focusing on the virtue of civility as a way into the question brings us back to the sort of first person, just everyday experience of what it's like to get along with people you really – you disagree with as opposed to just staying on the – you know, on the grand scale of secularism or institutional responses of, you know, we can separate religion and politics, we can separate church and state.

I think that in terms of our first person experience of the world, that separation is never really going to be so complete.

Chris Martin: And you talk about this contrast between the three figures in the book, speaking of psychology. Part of my background is in personality psychology. One of the big five traits is agreeableness and people who tend to be agreeable or tend to be polite and easygoing and compliant, averse to debating things, averse to conflict and that seems nicer and indeed agreeable people are happier.

But disagreeable people generally are more likely to bring up issues that need to be debated. They tend to defend their rights. They tend to defend the rights of other people. They make good lawyers and then part of this variation is something you see around the world. So do you feel like part of this boils down to personality and the problem of some people everywhere you go wanting more politeness on the surface and some people just enjoying debate some more.

Teresa Bejan: Absolutely and I think that one of the things that attracted me to my – you know, into the particular thinkers I discuss in the book is the fact that they do have very different personalities and Roger Williams is just a person that we would describe of as – describe as highly disagreeable. That's a condition of his practice of toleration.

So I find it really fascinating. I think that noticing the sort of personality differences, people have different responses to disagreement. People just have a different tolerance for disagreement. Reminds us of this whole other terrain of differences that are going to have to be accommodated in a tolerant society, i.e. the members of a tolerant society are going to have different tolerances or disagreement.

So one of the things that I point out in the book is that when we're discussing questions of toleration generally, we're really discussing sort of three issues. The first issue is how much difference can we really bear. The second one is well, if we're going to bear this difference, how much do we need to sense that we share in order to make that difference non-threatening? So what do we need to have in common?

Then the third one is where do we draw the line, right? So where's the line of the intolerable that we would – we do not permit in our society and I point out that what ends up happening is very often people want to bring the second and the third question together. So they're going to say, OK, well we need to share this much in order to make difference non-threatening. So everyone who doesn't share that with us is presumptively intolerable.

But actually it doesn't follow the question of the intolerable needs to be held apart from the question of what I think – what I personally think I need to share with you, to live with you, because my response to that question is inevitably partial.

When you try to extrapolate from your own personal, partial and indeed your own partial psychological response to the agreements, to the disagreements you find particularly sort of beyond the pale are threatening and you're going to get an inevitably partial political theory and one of the advantages of thinking about the problem of toleration through the perspective of these three different, very different people is just to show the importance of individual psychology to one's answers and I think Williams' theory of toleration then in turn is the one

that best accommodates this inevitable partiality precisely because it tries to keep very separate the question of what we need to share and where we're going to draw the line.

Chris Martin: And in the US, we have this unique issue of the transformation of the Republican Party from about 1980 to the present by Newt Gingrich mostly and people from his cohort of incoming congressmen.

He quite famously said in the 1978 speech to college republicans one of the great problems we have in the Republican Party is that we don't encourage you to be nasty and he demonstrated quite a bit of nastiness and right after C-SPAN cameras were introduced to the house, he accused democrats of distributing communist propaganda and he did this in a house where the cameras were just focused on him, so there actually was almost no one else in the house at the time, but it looked like democrats were not responding to this accusation. You can see this transformation of the Republican Party by him.

In fact in the 1980s, most republicans thought he was quite abhorrent. But then the party itself transformed to be more like him and so now we have a party in the US where nastiness is part of the ethos of that party. So do you think mere civility is a sustainable solution to this problem?

Teresa Bejan: Well, I mean one interesting thing about Gingrich too was that his, his insistence that partisan conflict in the United States was essentially a kind of submerged civil war. So I think he really saw himself as making explicit something, a kind of agonism or even antagonism that was implicit in partisan conflict.

So I mean on the question of nastiness, I mean I'm not – I will forbear on answering the question of whether or not nastiness is the particular province of one American political party or the other and just simply observe that one of the virtues of mere civility is precisely the fact that it can – not only can. It tolerates nastiness. It doesn't – it doesn't enjoy nastiness. I think mere civility doesn't say, "Oh, we should be nasty to each other." But it nevertheless says look, a kind of nastiness is going to – intentional and not is going to be inevitable in a certain kind of society, which accommodates the expression of fundamental disagreements.

One of the most important things I think I can say about civility and I – one of the nice things about having written this book when I did was that I then subsequently got invited to talk about civility a lot, which is not something that I've really been expecting, but just to remind people that civility is not the same as niceness. It can't be because being nice means not saying to people all the things that we actually think about them and their views, right?

Mere civility accommodates a kind of witnessing against injustice and a witnessing against error that can be experienced as quite nasty, quite impolite, but nevertheless is I think essential if we're going to share this common life and share a civil society together.

So I think that a lot of the kind of rhetoric that you pointed out is uncivil. But mere civility still dictates that in a tolerant society. We've got to tolerate incivility too and nevertheless be better.

Chris Martin: And there's a related issue of lying and so mere civility does involve respecting opinions that you believe to be wrong. But then they're facts, like the rate at which jobs are created or the rate at which unemployment is going up or down and we now see lots of lies about that in the public sphere.

So three reporters in the Washington Post have been keeping a tally of Donald Trump's lies and falsehoods and it just – we're recording this in the first week of May. So I think about four days ago, that tally crossed 10,000. So there's a civility aspect of not being violent. But what obligations do people have if there are these objective lies in the public sphere?

Teresa Bejan: Yes, good. So I mean this moves really nicely from what I – what we were just talking about. I mean mere civility is precisely the virtue of which we're in need in such a case because mere civility dictates in that case that we – you know, what one calls a spade to spade to say witnessing against error means not only naming that error but also sort of naming the sin if you will.

So if someone is a liar, mere civility says you call them a liar. This is another reason why I think it's important to distinguish mere civility from respect in the kind of very moralized way that we tend to speak of it in contemporary moral and political philosophy where respect is a kind of recognition of other status as moral or equal.

It has a kind of presumptive sort of positive recognition whether in the recognition of their rights but also sort of the – you know, the sort of intrinsic value that they have as a person and it's not – so mere – a lot of things that I think a *respect account* [0:25:52] [Phonetic] would want to say are just insults. I think are really permissible on a mere civility account because they're essential to this program of witnessing against error and actually naming the sin and calling people to account.

That's a mode of political engagement and disagreement that I think often gets kind of missed out as we tend to think of religion and politics as very different things and thinking of, you know, well of course what we're doing is a kind of secular business here. I mean one of the things that struck me so much is just how much political debate in the United States begins to look more and more like proselytism and witnessing.

So I think that by actually thinking then about what that activity or witnessing is, we can then become more responsible as political agents and political disagreeers.

Chris Martin: I want to move on to the academic side of this debate now because you do talk a bit about in the book about campus climate and you've responded to some of your critics in a symposium on the book in the Journal of Politics.

One of the things you say there is my fellow elitists and I – by fellow elitists, I think you're partly referring to other academics. My fellow elitists and I are often less capable of mere civility than those we condemn, which is why it seems to me most civility talk is bullshit. You cite Harry Frankfurt's bullshit book here. So can you elaborate on why you refer to it as mostly bullshit? I feel like I maybe understand but I would like to hear you elaborate on it.

Teresa Bejan: Right. Well, I think I should – you know, in that symposium, I was accused by a dear friend of mine and one of the foremost theories deliberative democracy, Simone Chambers, of being an elitist. So I – so in that response, I was embracing the charge. But when I say that civility is bullshit, I mean that both in kind of the vernacular and also the technical sense. It's a way of talking that's meant to shut down a kind of debate without actually having the debate.

So I mean partly the point is simply to observe that most civility talk – and that means you're complaining about a loss of civility. Fretting about the instability of our political components comes from self-styled elites and there I mean not only academics but also members of the political establishment, cultural establishment, et cetera and I really do – I am quite – I mean after working on civility for a long time, I'm quite skeptical of this kind of handwringing because it seems to me that any plausible account of civility as a conversational virtue particularly pertinent to the practice of disagreement has to require then a commitment to actually engaging in disagreement with those people that you really, really fundamentally don't – well, not only don't agree with but also don't see as being respectable.

What strikes me more and more about my ilk, if you will, is this unwillingness to engage, is this determination just to kind of write off this huge swath of the population as being deplorable, unwashed, whatever. It's just being somehow presumptively beyond the pale and so not worth engaging with at all.

That's what I mean by saying that most elite civility talk is bullshit. I mean it's really not about the conditions of having a kind of difficult conversation. It's about coming up with reasons why we don't have to bother having that conversation in the first place.

Chris Martin: So we've got about a minute left. What's your next book going to be about?

Teresa Bejan: Well, thank you for asking. I am now right – I'm in the bowels of working on a new book. It's on equality. So it's on the historical theory and practice of equality, very much in kind of the same period that I worked on in civility and toleration, looking at early modern English political debates but also trying to excavate the long history of thinking of human beings as somehow equal in what that means.

Chris Martin: Well, thank you for joining us on the show. It has been great having you.

Teresa Bejan: Yeah, thanks so much for having me. It's a real pleasure.

[Music]

Chris Martin: The next episode of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* features Angie Maxwell, political scientist and director of Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics and Society. She's one of the authors of the upcoming book *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics*. The book is co-authored by Todd Shields.

If you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show and as always, you can email me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org and you can find me on Twitter at @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

[This podcast is produced by Heterodox Academy. Find us online at HeterodoxAcademy.org, on Twitter @HdxAcademy and on Facebook.]

[End of transcript]

Transcription by Prexie Magallanes as [Trans-Expert](#) at Fiverr.com