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How Civility Works

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Overview

Is civility dead? Americans ask this question every election season, but their concern is hardly limited to political campaigns. Doubts about civility regularly arise in just about every aspect of American public life. Rudeness runs rampant. Our news media is saturated with aggressive bluster and vitriol. Our digital platforms teem with expressions of disrespect and trolls. Reflecting these conditions, surveys show that a significant majority of Americans believe we are living in an age of unusual anger and discord. Everywhere we look, there seems to be conflict and hostility, with shared respect and consideration nowhere to be found. In a country that encourages thick skins and speaking one's mind, is civility even possible, let alone desirable?

In *How Civility Works*, Keith J. Bybee explores the “crisis” in civility, looking closely at how civility intertwines with our long history of boorish behavior and the ongoing quest for pleasant company. Bybee argues that the very features that make civility ineffective and undesirable also point to civility's power and appeal. Can we all get along? If we live by the contradictions on which civility depends, then yes, we can, and yes, we should.

Book Keywords: civility, good manners, rudeness, free speech, paradox, hypocrisy, United States, politics, public affairs

Chapter 1: The of Promise of Civility

This chapter first outlines the standard argument for returning civility to American public life, and then raises key questions that any advocate of civility must confront. Given the long history of rudeness in the United States, why should we think that civility is possible? Given the strong American tradition of free speech, why should we want to be civil? Why not instead encourage people to speak their minds and to develop thick skins? The chapter concludes by suggesting that we can only understand how civility works if we learn to see that, paradoxically, civility's strengths are in its weaknesses.

Chapter keywords: civility, rudeness, conflict, United States, free speech, First Amendment, paradox

Chapter 2: Civility Defined

This chapter defines civility as a form of good manners and as a code of public conduct. Civility is distinguished from other types of good manners, including politeness, courtesy, chivalry, and gallantry. The chapter then surveys the competition between different varieties of civility in the United States, dating from the ratification of the Constitution to the presidential election of 2016. The possibility of enforcing civil etiquette through law is considered. The chapter concludes by observing that the profusion of different beliefs about civility creates an environment in which common courtesies do not seem very common.

Chapter keywords: civility, politeness, courtesy, chivalry, gallantry, good manners, Constitution, Federalists, Anti-Federalists, abolitionists, suffragettes, civil rights, presidential election, Donald Trump, law

Chapter 3: The Excellence of Free Expression

This chapter examines the argument against civility's repressive use made by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*. Contemporary examples of repressive civility in the context of AIDS activism, hip-hop music, and on-campus free speech are discussed. The chapter argues that even though civility can obstruct free speech, civility also underwrites free speech by creating an accessible, easily employed means of communicating good character and personal decency. The importance of civility as a means of communication is illustrated through discussion of Aristotle, Erasmus, table manners, and decorum in the United States Congress.

Chapter keywords: civility, Mill, AIDS activism, hip-hop music, free speech, table manners, United States Congress, Erasmus, Aristotle, hierarchy, repression

Chapter 4: Are You Just Being Polite?

This chapter begins by arguing that even though civility has the great virtue of giving people a method for publicizing their good character, civility also has a glaring vice: the messages that civility communicates can easily be faked. The disadvantages of hypocritically exploiting civility are detailed, and the possibility of controlling such hypocrisy by treating civility as a form of morality is discussed. The chapter then argues that the inauthenticity of civil behavior has the advantage of allowing flawed people appear to be better than they actually are. This positive use of hypocrisy is examined through discussion of Lord Chesterfield, Edmund Burke, Dale Carnegie, Judith Shklar, Ruth Grant, and Miss Manners.

Chapter keywords: civility, good manners, hypocrisy, Chesterfield, Burke, Dale Carnegie, Miss Manners, Judith Shklar, Ruth Grant

Chapter 5: Strength in Weakness

This chapter summarizes how civility relies on a series of paradoxes. We feel civility's absence as a result of its abundance. We see civility as an impediment to free expression, and at the same time we demand civility to sustain the free exchange of ideas. We encounter civility as a bulwark of hierarchy and domination, and we also enlist civility to level social relations and promote inclusion. We condemn civility's inauthenticity, yet we depend on the many opportunities for hypocrisy that civility affords. The chapter concludes by arguing that the work of enacting better and more acceptable means of getting along requires us to embrace the paradoxes on which civility depends.

Chapter keywords: civility, good manners, paradox, free speech, diversity, hierarchy, hypocrisy