Civility? It wasn’t one of the virtues canvassed by Aristotle in his *Ethics*. Nor was it among the three cardinal theological virtues of Christianity—faith, hope, and charity or love. Times change, however, in virtues as in all else. Under liberal democracy, civility has come to matter greatly.

Among those who acknowledge this is the First Citizen himself, President Barack Obama. Since first assuming his seat in the U.S. Senate in 2005, he has pleaded repeatedly for the renewal of public civility. Nothing so distressed him about his days in the Senate as the incivility that prevailed there, and no theme of his rhetoric has been more insistent since. By civility he means above all the recognition by political partisans that no matter what divides them, they share a common civic enterprise. They are, for example, fellow citizens first, fellow Senators second, Republicans and Democrats only third.

Good luck with that, we might respond. Indeed, Mr. Obama hasn’t had much luck with his plea. Not only has the atmosphere in Washington during his administration remained as partisan as before, but his critics have even blamed him for adding fuel to the fire.

None of which, however, refutes Mr. Obama’s insistence that beneath the partisan sound and fury, there is a stratum of liberal democracy that finds its expression in civility. What he has suggested broadly, rhetorically, and—inevitably—not altogether impartially, we will attempt to state here precisely.

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This essay draws on an earlier one that appeared as “Civility” in *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1991), 553–64, and as “Citizenship and Civility as Components of Liberal Democracy” in Edward C. Banfield, ed., *Civility and Citizenship* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 75–94. The author is grateful to the late Professor Banfield, the late Professor Edward A. Shils, and Joseph Epstein (still very much alive and kicking) for their encouragement of the earlier piece, and to his colleagues on the Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society for their comments on an earlier draft of the present version.
The Meaning of Civility

Civil is a word with a broad range of meanings, and civility participates in most of them. It is good to keep a civil tongue in your mouth, better still to do what you must to prevent civil war. The second and stronger sense of the term reflects its origin in the Latin civis or citizen: in Latin, bellum civile is a war among fellow citizens. So we speak also of the civil magistrate or civil authorities (sometimes as distinct from the religious ones), of civil rights, the civil law, civil marriage.

At the other end of the spectrum, civil as in civil tongue means proper or polite, but still with a suggestion that such decorum is owed to fellow citizens. In the middle of the spectrum lies civil as in civil society. Civil society is public without quite being political, but, as our century of experience with totalitarianism has taught us, it is indispensable to healthy politics. As we will see, moreover, civility as such captures the original (and still soundest) intention of liberal democracy.

Civil as in Civil Democracy

There is no expression “civil democracy,” and I am not proposing to invent it. If, however, you took it as equivalent to liberal democracy, you would have gotten my point. Civil as in civility is indeed synonymous with liberal as in liberal democracy—not, in other words, with liberal as in the late Senator Ted Kennedy, but with liberal in its original and generic sense implying limited government.

If good fences make good neighbors, then liberal democracy promotes neighborliness, and civility is its benchmark virtue. Liberal democracy builds fences, and civility respects and maintains them.

There were earlier senses of civility, but my focus here is on the liberal democratic one. This civility emerges, with liberal democracy itself, against a backdrop of earlier Western regimes, some pagan and either republican or imperial, others Christian and monarchic. It offers an alternative to both citizenship and subjecthood, on the one hand, and to a politics of religious sectarianism, on the other.

That we Americans are not subjects is obvious enough; that we are only doubtfully citizens, much less so. We all hold citizenship, after all, and are proud to do so. Citizenship in the old and fullest sense, however, was at home not in the modern republic but in the ancient one, in Athens, Sparta, and Rome. It implied membership in a community defined by a common substantive end that was more comprehensive,
more dignified, and more authoritative than the particular ends of private individuals. Citizenship in this sense comprised the serious business of life. It demanded of the citizen great rectitude, great dedication, great sacrifices. To foster these it looked to a rigorous civic education that we today might call indoctrination. It required of each citizen that he see himself as a Roman first, as the individual Marcus or Lucius second. Civility, by contrast, is the virtue of a citizen in a new and more relaxed sense. Under liberal democracy, the individual (and we may now properly use this term, for that is how he conceives himself) is guided primarily by his private concerns. Like the older citizenship, civility defines a community. It is, however, one of a looser sort, whose members go their own way, while recognizing each other’s right to do the same and the interest of all in maintaining and defending this right.

Historically speaking, civility and liberal democracy emerged against the backdrop not of pagan citizenship but of Christian sectarianism. The civil was conceived in opposition not so much to the civic and strong notions of citizenship as to the ecclesiastical and the threat of clerical domination. Civility represents the distinctive liberal transformation of (and sole approved liberal heir to) citizenship and Christian charity alike.

Civility marks so great a sea change in matters of both politics and religion that it has become difficult for us even to grasp the premodern version of either. A modern Christian, for example, is precisely one who accepts civility as the baseline of charity. While he may recognize an obligation to rise above civility in his practice of charity, he will surely also recognize an obligation never to fall below it—never to abet intolerance of any sort. He agrees that charity requires us to refrain from all coercion in matters of faith because all such coercion is downright unchristian.

 Premodern Christians, by contrast, almost regardless of sect, were virtually unanimous in holding that charity required coercion in matters of faith. For since salvation was by faith, which is to say by the true faith only, Christians were obliged to try every means necessary to propagate the true faith and uproot false ones. Anything less would have expressed indifference to the fate of our neighbor’s soul, an indifference to his damnation—the most flagrant failure of charity, which was as such itself damnable.

That aspect of civility that we know as “toleration” was the means by which the founders of liberal democracy sought to reconcile the requirements of civil tranquility with the existence of rival religious sects. The classic solution to this problem was Locke’s. It drew a sharp distinction between the respective spheres of church and
state, and forbade each from meddling in the other. The aim was not to stamp out religion, or even to expel it from public life, but to impose certain crucial restrictions on it. Religion was useful and even necessary to the achievement of the goals of the liberal state, but only such religion as had made its peace with the state's secular goals. Civility versus classical citizenship and civility versus Christian sectarianism: common to both these oppositions was the new notion of human virtue as consisting primarily of minding one's own private business. Neither Roman hero nor Christian zealot, the modern citizen pays his taxes and does his civic duty, but he does not live to do it. His life is mostly a private life and civility mostly a private virtue that unites honest men busy minding their own affairs.

Civility, as a contrived dilution of both citizenship and charity, resembles neither friendship nor love nor any other intense attachment. It more resembles a neighborliness that keeps a friendly distance. This brings us back to the issue of helpful fences: the fences that civility respects are rights. If civility supplies the spirit of liberal democracy, rights provide the letter. To treat someone civilly means to respect both his rights and his dignity as a bearer of rights. Civility is the moral glue of a community of a specific kind, a community of equal rights-bearers. The forms and formalities on which it insists are those appropriate to such a community. (Consider, for instance, that through civility, the honorifics Mr., Mrs., and Miss, which originally expressed inequality, now apply to all as a badge of our equality.)

Civility Threatened, Part I: Its Alleged Intellectual Obsolescence
Civility, as we have seen, rests on a distinctively modern worldview. It promotes fundamental human equality: all are equally bearers of universal human rights. In so doing it defines a certain kind of community, a liberal democratic community, united in its practice of civility itself. In all these respects, civility was at one time cutting-edge. Yet if its current critics are to be believed, civility now falls short of the mark in each of them.

The extent to which civility is up to date matters; in modern times there is no prestige that rivals that of modernity itself. Our intellectuals make it their business to see that our ideas are fully modern. Modernity, moreover, is a moving target, for it is not a state but a direction. Not only has later modernity superseded all earlier versions, but, as intellectuals will tell us, we must now slip into something still newer and more fetching, namely “postmodernity.” That’s bad for civility, which remains mired in the thought of early modernity.
The intellectuals have a point. The great names complicit in the establishment of civility were Spinoza, Locke, Pierre Bayle, Montesquieu, David Hume, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and the American founders, including Benjamin Franklin. Later thinkers and schools such as romanticism, Kant, Hegel, socialism both “utopian” and “scientific,” utilitarianism in Britain and pragmatism in America, and the various wings and waves of historicism, have tended to impugn civility. As modern thought has grown more radical, so has modern politics. Civility has come to seem small beer compared with all these ambitions to remake the world from the ground up.

Not all exponents of these newer outlooks have been hostile to civility. The British thinker Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990), for instance, an idiosyncratic sort of neo-Hegelian, was actually quite friendly to it. All of them have shared, however, a conviction of the obsolescence of the original theoretical basis of civility, the presumed existence of inalienable natural rights. In this sense, they have all contributed to undermining it.

Consider the most recent major developments, those stemming from the most radical and influential of modern thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Martin Heidegger (1893–1976). While their ideas are far too complex to deal with in just a few words, a few words are all we have. I will focus on a handful of terms under which these ideas have been domesticated in North America: “values,” “relativism,” “diversity,” and “difference.”

Value relativism, by proclaiming the impossibility of rational knowledge of what is best in political life, consigns all earlier arguments for the superiority of liberal democracy to the museum of outworn misconceptions. It sees the “laws of nature and nature’s God” enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as charming myths, which can claim no more rational evidence than the creation myth of some Stone Age people.

Consider the recent American philosopher most reputed to support liberal democracy, the late Richard Rorty (1931–2007). As a thoroughgoing “pragmatist postmodernist,” he could offer no argument for the American way stronger than that we happened to have practiced it up until now. These fictions were our fictions. To the objection that this was too weak an argument to sustain a firm commitment, he could reply only that no stronger one could be found in support of any way of life. Our reasons for being American were therefore no weaker than any reasons for being anything else.

Practically speaking, Mr. Rorty was, to his credit, a staunch supporter of civility. Unfortunately, however, views like his tend to sap our commitment to it. For if all
political principles are ultimately arbitrary, why should we “privilege” liberal
democratic ones? Shouldn’t we tolerate illiberalism and incivility?

Consider a remark of Michael Dukakis, the 1988 Democratic candidate for President.
He denied that the United States had the right to wage war on the Sandinistas in
El Salvador “just because we happened not to like their government.” There were other
possible objections to that war. What Dukakis meant to suggest, however, was that our
very preference for liberal democracy over Leninism was an arbitrary one. This was
Rortyism turned on its head, but a no less plausible conclusion on the basis of Rorty’s
premises.

Currently, the most powerful adversaries of civility are “diversity” and “difference.”
They presuppose value relativism but represent a new stage of it, politically as well as
theoretically. They are particularly insidious in that many well meaning liberals regard
them as not only compatible with civility but as requirements of it. They see them as
natural and necessary extensions of the religious toleration so central to civility as
originally understood. The danger is that these supposed liberal virtues may be taken
to imply openness to illiberal and uncivil modes of conduct. For what right do liberals
have to “privilege” their own worldview over others? Intellectuals are especially prone
to this excess whose natural home is therefore academia.

On the level of individual behavior, relativism may condone so-called self-expression
even where it is uncivil. Rather than a standard to which all should aspire, to which all
should be educated, and to which all should be held, civility reinterpreted as boundless
tolerance becomes an excuse for permitting any behavior whatsoever.

Civility Threatened, Part II: Big, Bigger, Biggest Government
Civility prefers less government to more, or, more precisely, it prefers citizenship and
the free market to clienthood and a managed economy. It does not imply fanaticism or
even dogmatism on these issues. The defense of civility doesn’t demand libertarianism,
for example, or a Jeffersonian/Tea Party preoccupation with small government. Indeed
the argument of many (including Mr. Obama) that civility itself requires some degree
of economic redistribution enjoys considerable plausibility. Dire poverty (I don’t say
economic inequality as such) inevitably compromises political equality. Nor does civility
tend against unemployment, old age, or health insurance, where each has shouldered
his proportional burden of the costs of these.
Still, the welfare state does pose an inevitable threat to civility. It does so by pursuing social and economic equality in ways that undermine civic equality. The most insidious example is the welfare trap. On the premise that dignity and therefore civility require that every citizen enjoy adequate means of life, we foster a class that lacks dignity and is unlikely either to command civility or practice it. From the point of view of civility, the inequality of civic status that accompanies dependency is far more pernicious than mere inequality of income.

So President Obama has been right in undertaking to promote civility, even though we may regard his understanding of it as imperfect. Unfortunately, we have moved beyond the point where civility need merely be defended. It must now be rebuilt. Obviously those of our institutions that still inculcate it—good families, good schools, and good churches—should continue to do so. But the genies hostile to civility in its broad and fundamental sense will not soon pop themselves back into their bottles. We defenders of civility find ourselves fighting a rear guard action, of all military tasks one of the least rewarding.
Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society

The Virtues of a Free Society Task Force examines the evolution of America’s core values, how they are threatened, and what can be done to preserve them. The task force’s aims are to identify the enduring virtues and values on which liberty depends; chart the changes in how Americans have practiced virtues and values over the course of our nation’s history; assess the ability of contemporary associations and institutions—particularly schools, family, and religion—to sustain the necessary virtues; and discuss how society might nurture the virtues and values on which its liberty depends.

The core membership of this task force includes Peter Berkowitz (cochair), David Brady (cochair), Gerard V. Bradley, James W. Ceaser, William Damon, Robert P. George, Tod Lindberg, Harvey C. Mansfield, Russell Muirhead, Clifford Orwin, and Diana Schaub.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Task Force please visit us online at www.hoover.org/taskforces/virtues.