As an ethics teacher, I do not see myself as a role model for every sort of ethical behavior. Although I admire Peter Singer’s devotion of one third of his salary to Oxfam and other charitable causes, I cannot see such ethical behavior as a job requirement for ethics teachers any more than it is for every other professor on campus; ethics teachers are not moral saints just because we’re ethics teachers. But there is one area of ethical life where I think it is part of our job to model good behavior: civil discourse. As stewards of the tools of public discourse, academics have an obligation not only to model polite and reasoned interaction in the classroom, but to investigate the ethical reasons behind such behavior. We are all bound to treat students with respect, to demand that they treat each other with respect, to display the discipline of clear reasoning in our classrooms, and to help students to understand why shouting other voices down should not be allowed as a strategy to make one’s point. Because of our discipline’s historical and theoretical commitment to rigorous reasoning about how we ought to live together, it may be that ethicists have an even more stringent duty than other faculty members to model and ground such behavior for students.

There are several societal factors in our current cultural climate which seem to be working against the goal of teaching civility. These include the coarsening of public political discourse, the promotion of selfish disregard for others as an accepted and admired norm, and the detrimental influence of current technology on the tools required for reasoning together. I will exemplify and discuss how each of these factors is impacting our work toward what must be our goal of promoting civil discourse, and suggest some ways in which we can try to counteract these negative influences in the classroom.
WHAT IS CIVILITY?

Commentators on this subject have offered many different definitions of ‘civility’. As Dennis Peck points out, “The terms citizenship, civility, and civilization are derived from the Latin “civi (citizen)” and “civitas (city),” and are the equivalents of the Greek words stemming from “polis (city).”2 Hence, the civilized are those who are fit to live in cities, and civility is the set of behaviors and attitudes that makes such living together possible. Civility will tend to be very high in a crowded city like Hong Kong; it has to be. When people are right on top of each other, they need to maintain a strict sense of public decorum. The alternative is conflict and chaos. Civility allows us to distance ourselves from one another so that we can live together without violence.

Because the city is always ‘ours’ and not just ‘mine’, civility requires that we show respect and consideration for others. Stephen Carter emphasizes that civility is related to the way that we treat those we don’t know, strangers.5 Bryant says that, “Civility bespeaks a common standard within which a multiplicity of ways of living, working, and associating are tolerated. It demands that in life outside the home, we afford each other certain decencies and comforts as fellow citizens, regardless of other differences between us.”4 Civility requires that, when we go out into the public, we need to pay attention to the fact that there are other people around us and restrain the expression of our own emotional reactions. Dennis Peck says that, “This civilizing process requires acceptance of a cultural ethos that emphasizes self-control. To be civil in common ordinary usage means that one is a polite, respectful, decent person. Civility is a quality that requires the restraint of angry emotion directed toward others...[a civil society emphasizes] the values of cooperation as opposed to competition, collectivism as opposed to individualism, and community as opposed to privatism.”5 Thus, civility requires that we behave respectfully towards people who may mean nothing to us, and whom we may never meet again. It involves holding back in the pursuit of one’s own immediate self-interest for the sake of harmonious relations with strangers, displaying “a solicitude for the interest of the whole society, a concern for the common good.”6 Civil citizens learn to think of themselves as members of a society that transcends the individual.7 Aristotle identified civility with the behavior through which citizens, despite their political disagreements, reveal that these disagreements are less important than their commitments to remain fellow citizens.8 We need people to be civil to each other if social life is to function with a
minimum of unnecessary conflict and disruption. In the absence of
civility, we would require laws. As Edmund Burke recognized back in
1791: “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their own
disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites.” Putting all of
this together, we might define ‘civility’ as the set of respectful and
courteous behaviors that we display toward strangers in the public sphere
by which we sacrifice some of our own immediate interests, exercising
forbearance from unpleasant behavior for the sake of public order.

IS CIVILITY DECLINING?

I am not sure how we can answer the question of whether civility is
decreasing in any precise and confirmable way; it’s very difficult to come
up with any objective measure of civility. Since civility is a matter of being
tolerable to others, some commentators want to simply adopt a
subjective measure. And according to all such measures, civility is
decreasing. “In the US, a 1996 poll found that 89% of Americans think
incivility is a serious problem, and 78% think it has worsened in the last
ten years.”

But any historical approach to this question will reveal that people
of many historical epochs have felt that civility was declining. According to Ferriss’ study of the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), civility increases with age and is negatively correlated with both income level and educational attainment. Those who are married are also more
civil than single or divorced people, with widowers exhibiting the highest
levels of civility. My problem with Ferriss’ work in this article is that it
isn’t clear how he thinks he is correcting for generational cohort (if at all). He concludes that older people are more civil than younger people, but
seems to be ignoring the fact that this may be simply a generational
difference, not that older people are more civil, but that people born in
an earlier (more civil) age are more civil.

Billante and Saunders claim that, despite anecdotes and perceptions,
even if civil behavior is declining, the willingness to be civil is not. They
say:

Our working hypothesis (largely confirmed so far by our
focus groups) is that people’s willingness to respect the norms
of civility may not have changed all that much over the last 50
years. What has changed, however, is the clarity of the norms of
civility and the level of consensus about what they mean. Most
of us would be happy to follow the rules if only we knew what they were.

We no longer all agree on what is appropriate behavior in social situations, and norms that used to be clear have now become fuzzy. There are a number of reasons for this. One, undoubtedly, has been the rapid change in the status of women, for this has given rise to much confusion and disagreement about how the sexes should relate to each other in public. The status of women has changed faster than the social norms. New technology has also created problems, for it has opened up novel situations where there are no generally-recognized rules (consider, for example, the use of mobile phones in public places, or the rules governing interaction on the internet or email).13

In the university, faculty often complain about student behaviors that interfere with learning, including threats, verbal attacks, vulgarity, cheating, students taunting or belittling other students, not paying attention in class, private student conversations in class, cell phone use, inappropriate emails, arriving late, being unprepared for class, eating loudly in class, demanding makeup exams, extensions, grade-changes, etc. Following Billante and Saunders, I would prefer to believe that students just don’t know how to write a respectful email or to properly ask for a letter of recommendation. If they only knew the appropriate protocols, I am sure that they would follow them. Hence, rather than a decline in the willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests for public order, I see simply ignorance about what the rules of the road are. Since civil behavior depends upon the rules of formality, perhaps the fact that we are becoming a less formal society is leading us to be a less civil society. And civility does seem to require some formality. If I get an email from a student which reads (in its entirety): “Hey. What’s the reading for tomorrow?” I’m likely to think one of two things:

A) This student has no respect for me, my position, the class, or the norms of polite public communication; she is simply unwilling to take the minimal effort to compose a polite email. We might call this “the attitudinal deficit view.”

B) This student suffers from a certain sort of conceptual blindness. She wouldn’t be treating me disrespectfully if she only knew she was doing so. If she knew the rules of the social
road, she wouldn’t be crashing all the time. We might call this “the cognitive deficit view.”

Of these two explanations, I think there are good reasons to fear the first (which I will outline in the penultimate section), and some hopeful signs to lean toward the second (which I will point to in the final section). But first I just want to highlight my claim that teaching civility is really something that we (academics, and especially ethicists) should be doing.

**OUR OBLIGATION TO TEACH CIVILITY**

Regardless of whether civility is declining or not, I believe that academics in a democratic state have an obligation to promote and defend it. The central presupposition underlying what we do is that reason plays a positive role in human affairs, and that we govern ourselves best when we follow reason, evidence, and good arguments in deciding how we ought to live. When we pass on respect for argument and evidence to our students, we are, in effect, saying that we value the place of reason over force in public discourse. When we contest the claims of our colleagues in scholarly debates, we display respect for their arguments and views, even when we strenuously disagree with them. The life of an academic is a tribute to the idea that the tradition of thinking things through carefully together in a free and open forum where all ideas are allowed to have a voice is more valuable than any particular opinion any one of us might have. Since civility is what allows us to disagree in peace, and hence, perhaps to arrive at more firmly grounded convictions, all of us have a duty to defend it. Dennis Peck does a very nice job of explaining the connections between education, democracy, and civility:

The cornerstone of democracy, according to the founders, is a public education that emphasizes civics. The intent of the founders of our democracy was to forge a process of learning that included knowledge of the constitution and the democratic legislative process. The goal was to pass on to succeeding generations “a deep-seated set of values that would be a foundation for responsible citizenship - values encouraging interest and involvement in large social issues as opposed to mere self-centeredness, values necessary to maintain the health of democracy” (Peck 1993, p. 4). But what more recently evolved, in the words of Ehrenberg (1999, p. xi.), is “that an
overworked, disengaged, acquisitive, and self-absorbed population has allowed its moral connections, social engagements, and political participation to atrophy.”

Citizenship is governed by civility...\(^\text{14}\)

I’m sure that if many of us (academics) look at the “Mission Statement” of our university, we will see the claim that we are supposed to be about the work of creating responsible, productive, creative, thoughtful, well-informed and educated citizens. For example, the first paragraph of Towson University’s Mission Statement says, “The academic programs and services offered through the university provide a core quality environment for students to acquire the intellectual and social preparation to achieve their potential as contributing leaders and citizens...”\(^\text{15}\) And beyond this formal point, I suspect that if we think about it, most of us will conclude that some part of the reason we got into academia in the first place was that we wanted to try to make our fellow citizens more informed and enlightened people (perhaps, to “pay back” our own teachers’ efforts). All of these reasons cause me to believe that teaching civility really is part of my job as an academic.

Beyond my role as an academic, I believe I have an even more stringent obligation to teach civility as a philosopher and an ethicist. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that ethics is a branch of political science because, “though admittedly the good is the same for the city as for an individual, still the good of the city is apparently a greater and more complete good to acquire and preserve...And so, since our investigation aims at these [goods, for an individual and for a city], it is a sort of political science.”\(^\text{16}\) The good that we call civility is required for political life and ethics teachers have an added responsibility to help students to achieve an understanding of the role of this good in our lives together. Although one might argue that a Political Science professor has just as much of a duty to teach civility as an ethicist,\(^\text{17}\) I would point out that insofar as Political Science deals with the techniques of polling the population, winning election campaigns, etc., it is not concerned with the normative question of how we ought to live together. Insofar as a Political Science professor does help students to investigate this central normative question however, I would say that she is doing political philosophy/ethics and therefore does have this added responsibility to help students to see the value of civility. I suppose that there are axiological elements to nearly every course in the university; my point is simply that since ethicists have explicitly taken up the goal of
investigating the normative question of how we ought to live, they bear a special obligation to help students to understand how civility fits into the answer to that question. Hence, as academics, as philosophers, and as ethicists, we must see teaching about civility as part of our goal. If we want our students to become integrated and productive citizens, and to avoid self-destructive crashes, we need to spend some of our time and effort trying to teach them the rules of the social road, and why those rules deserve some respect.

**SOME FACTORS WORKING AGAINST US:**

**The Coarsening of Public Political Discourse**

On June 22, 2004, Vice-President Dick Cheney encountered Senator Pat Leahy of Vermont in the Senate chamber. According to CNN, Cheney “turned to Leahy and scolded the senator over his recent criticism of the vice president for Halliburton’s alleged war profiteering…In response to Cheney, Leahy reminded Cheney that the vice president had once accused him of being a bad Catholic, to which Cheney replied … “go fuck yourself.””¹⁸ Now I am aware that American political speech has probably been as coarse as this or more so on many occasions stretching back to the beginning of our republic. But I still believe that one of the factors working against teaching civility is the demonization of political adversaries in much public political speech.

Why do I begin here? In a list of obstacles to teaching civility in our classrooms, why do I begin with the incivility of politicians and political speech? In response, let me cite some of John Rawls’ remarks about the requirement for citizens in a democratic state to employ what he calls “public reason”:

The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty - the duty of civility - to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made.

Some might say that the limits of public reason apply only in official forums and so only to legislators, say, when they speak on the floor of parliament, or to the executive and the judiciary in their public acts and decisions. If they honor public reason,
then citizens are indeed given public reasons for the laws they are to comply with and for the policies society follows. But this does not go far enough.

Democracy involves, as I have said, a political relationship between citizens within the basic structure of the society into which they are born and within which they normally lead a complete life; it implies further an equal share in the coercive political power that citizens exercise over one another by voting and in other ways. As reasonable and rational, and knowing that they assert a diversity of reasonable religious and philosophical doctrines, they should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality. Trying to meet this condition is one of the tasks that this ideal of democratic politics asks of us. Understanding how to conduct oneself as a democratic citizen includes understanding an ideal of public reason.19

Rawls’ idea is that, in arguing for the policies they advocate, citizens (and especially citizen-legislators) in a pluralistic democratic state have a duty to refrain from appealing to their own personal religious or ideological views. For example, since we don’t all agree on which is the true God of the universe (or even on whether there is a God), my arguments for policy proposals should not appeal to my own personal religious views, but rather to common standards and values that we all accept (those spelled out, for example, in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution). But engagement in debates grounded in public reason requires that we display civility toward one another. Political speech is supposed to be the archetype of arguing from public reason; the entire political arena is built upon the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

By measuring the use of name-calling, aspersion, hyperbole, synonyms for ‘lie’, non-cooperation, vulgarity, etc., Jamieson20 found that incivility in Congress is increasing. Civility in Congress requires that members display courtesy toward one another and that they (at least publicly) adhere to the position that the differences between them are philosophical, not personal, and that that their political opponents are persons of goodwill and integrity, motivated by their own convictions about what is really best for the country. Civility requires being willing to restrain oneself for the good of the social order, and elected public officials are people who have sworn an oath to do just that. If elected
public officials are not willing or able to restrain themselves, to keep their anger, mistrust, and even hatred from spilling out into the public political discourse, then we are all lost.\textsuperscript{21} Political speech should be the model of civility, but it seems to me that if students follow some of what is currently passing for political speech, they will never learn how to engage in civil discourse.

One major example of the lack of civility in political speech that I want to point to are the shouting matches parading as political discussion shows on many of the cable news channels. When I watched a current events discussion show as a kid (for example, “Firing Line” with William F. Buckley), I never saw Americans yelling at each other. Although Buckley was a staunch conservative and disagreed vehemently with many of the guests on his show, he always allowed them to speak, to state their case as clearly as they could before he would offer (often quite harsh, but polite) criticisms of their ideas. Where has that gone? Today’s “discussion” shows are often so heated and rude that they make the participants look like third graders in their conversational styles, sometimes leading to a simple screamed command from the “moderator” to “Just shut up!” As Alleen Nilson notes:

In teaching students to keep from rushing to judgment and to look for the good in what their opponents are saying, we will be going against many of the models that students see, especially on television where instead of being praised for assessing new evidence and analyzing different options, politicians who change their minds are ridiculed as flip-floppers. A gotcha mentality encourages people to listen for mistakes. It is discouraging that after a presidential debate what gets quoted are the zingers. The “winners” are not the ones who make the most thoughtful suggestions but the ones who interrupt others, talk the loudest, make the quickest comebacks or insults, and compete to keep the attention on themselves.\textsuperscript{22}

Since psychological research shows that television images are one of the biggest influences on attitudes and behaviors,\textsuperscript{23} the failure to model civil discourse on these programs watched by millions of Americans presents political discourse (which ought to be the embodiment of public reason) as no more than the ruthless bullying displayed by a pack of hyenas at the kill. This can only be harming our attempts to encourage civility in public discussion.
In addition, the apparent feelings of contempt that those on opposite sides of the political spectrum feel for each other is harmful. I recently attended a “Town Hall Meeting” on health care reform hosted by Senator Ben Cardin in my state. As soon as I arrived at the venue for the event, I saw that the street was lined with protestors on both sides of the issue. Indeed, they had arranged themselves on opposite sides of the street and were chanting slogans back and forth across the street at each other. In no time at all, this chanting gave way to yelling individual insults back and forth across the street: “You’re all a bunch of losers!” “You’re a fucking fascist!” I have no problem with expressing political views, but the emotions displayed at this event disturbed me. Not only did the people yelling back and forth across the street at each other display contempt for each other’s positions; they displayed real hatred for each other. It became clear to me within a few minutes that they did not see each other as national comrades who held different views about this issue; they saw each other as enemies, the demonized antithesis of fellow countrymen. Columnist Pat Buchanan recently observed that “we seem not only to disagree with each other more than ever, but to have come almost to detest one another. Politically, culturally, racially, we seem ever ready to go for each other’s throats.” Images of Barack Obama with a Hitler mustache, or George W. Bush laughing as the World Trade Center towers fell are among the myriad examples of what seems to me to be an increasing incivility in American political discourse.

The Promotion of Selfish Disregard for Others as an Accepted and Admired Norm

Since civility requires respect for others and a commitment to the norms of cooperative life, the danger of the promotion of attitudes of narcissistic self-importance to civility is obvious. It seems to me that there are three sources from which the growth of such attitudes is coming: parents, education, and television. As Jean Twenge documents in her 2006 book, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and More Miserable than Ever Before*:

Reliable birth control, legalized abortion, and a cultural shift toward parenthood as a choice made [the millennial generation] the most wanted generation of children in American history. Television, movies, and school programs have told us we were special from toddlerhood to high school, and we believe it with a self-confidence that approaches boredom: why talk about it? It’s just the way things are. This blasé attitude is very different
Stephen Scales: Teaching Civility in the Age of Jerry Springer

from the Boomer focus on introspection and self-absorption: GenMe is not self-absorbed; we’re self-important.25

Twenge illustrates that the avowed goals of parenting shifted sometime around the 1960’s. In 1924, when sociologists asked mothers in Muncie Indiana which traits they wanted their children to have, they listed strict obedience, loyalty to church, and good manners. By 1984, the majority of mothers named independence and tolerance as their primary goals for their children’s character.26 In The Mommy Myth, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels discuss our “narcissism around our kids…a hyperindividualized emphasis on how truly, exquisitely unique and precious our child is, the Hope diamond, more special than the others.”27 In most countries in the world, the task of parents is still seen as molding children into well-behaved citizens, but contemporary American parents tend to cater to the whims of their children much more than their predecessors. Because our culture instructs them to try to understand and support their child’s feelings and desires, in many cases, the child comes to believe “that he’s the center of the universe, his thoughts and feelings the only ones worth considering, the ones that cut in line before everyone else’s.”28

When children venture from the home into the school, they are met with a new set of educational priorities and strategies that reinforce the narcissistic attitudes sometimes inculcated by contemporary American parenting. Since the late 1970’s, the American educational establishment has been advancing a self-esteem curriculum via programs in school districts across the country designed to boost children’s self-esteem. We might want to say that these programs have been very successful. By the mid 1990’s, “the average …college man had higher self esteem (based on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale) than 86% of college men in 1968.”29 And American children rank highly when asked their opinion of their own academic ability (70% of college freshman describing themselves as “above average” or “highest 10%” in 2004). But many of these programs disconnect self-regard from any kind of achievement. Since teachers and counselors aimed “to give unconditional validation of students based on who they are rather than how they perform or behave,”30 children are taught that they are special and worthwhile no matter what they accomplish. In some cases, teachers were even encouraged not to correct errors in spelling and grammar out of fear of damaging self-esteem. Unsurprisingly, these children’s high opinions of their own abilities have not translated into actual abilities to
do math or write coherent English sentences. Many college teachers have observed that the attitudes these young people bring to the academy make it very difficult for them to accept criticism (they tend to see their errors as someone else’s fault).

One result of this focus on self-esteem in both parenting and education seems to be an increase in narcissism, being overly self-concerned, and lacking empathy for others. In the early 1950’s, only 12% of 14-16 year olds agreed with the statement “I am an important person,” by the late 1980’s, 80% agreed with it. A study using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory found that those scoring high on the test rose from 50% to 65% between 1987 and 2006. Contrary to (or perhaps simply in addition to) the claims that millennials are other-focused, some of the data seem to indicate that 2004-2006 college students are the most narcissistic group of all, seeing themselves as entitled to more than other people.

Instead of developing the traits that have actually been shown to promote success and happiness - the discipline and self-control to work through criticism, adversity, and occasional failure - we’ve focused on self-esteem and the optimistic view that “You can be anything you want to be” and “You should follow your dreams.” The shock for which we are setting these children up when they enter the world of work and responsibility is a bit scary. For instance, 70% of 1990’s high school students believe that they will work in professional jobs. More than 30% of college students believe that they will earn a Ph.D. or M.D., but only 5% of those who earn Bachelor’s degrees ever go on to complete an M.D. or Ph.D. program. The average teen in 1999 believed he would earn $75,000 by the time he was 30, but the average salary of 30 year olds in that year was only $27,000. The admonition to “Follow your dreams” may be similarly setting up unrealistic expectations for students, since the most common dreams of young people are becoming famous in the fields of acting, sports, and music, and there just aren’t enough slots in those fields to accommodate so many dreams. Since the 1960’s, the loosening grip of social expectations has apparently led to a declining sense of community and increased feelings of isolation and alienation. But in addition to our more isolated sense of ourselves, the millennial generation is also confronted with the often overwhelming gap between their own expectations about their lives and the realities of our current economic situation. The costs of education and health care have been increasing rapidly, but (except for the top 1-2% of earners) real wages have been essentially stagnant.
Finally, I want to point to the promotion of selfish disregard for others on television as a possible hurdle to teaching civility. Our popular culture is replete with examples of rudeness and violence which would have been unthinkable only 25 years ago. Various television shows not only glorify such behavior as worthy of “fame,” but demean the very precepts of civil discourse that we are trying to promote as outdated, stuffy, or just plain stupid. So-called “reality TV” shows like “Survivor” and “The Apprentice” depict back-stabbing as not only normal and appropriate, but admirable. A recent NPR program investigated the prevalence of the phrase, “I’m not here to make friends” as a justification contestants use for their own disregard for the norms of civil behavior.35

And, of course, since he shows up in the title of my talk, no discussion of incivility on television would be complete without mentioning “The Jerry Springer Show.” Now I don’t know how much of what shows up on Jerry Springer is “real” and how much is “staged” for the benefit of the audience. I’m not even sure that that question matters. What has always shocked me about Jerry Springer is just how much the standards of decency and civility have shifted during my lifetime. When I grew up, the daytime talk shows were hosted by Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, and Dinah Shore. So I would simply ask that you compare daytime TV from my childhood with daytime TV in 2009 and draw your own conclusions.36

Detrimental Influence of Technology on Thinking and Civility

Finally, I want to point to some possible detrimental effects of technology on the level of civility in our culture. When I was young, the majority of Americans watched one of three network news broadcasts in order to keep themselves informed. This fact gave us all a common source of information about the issues of the day. But with the advent of cable television, consumers can tailor their TV watching to suit their own preconceived prejudices and opinions. We can watch FOX NEWS Channel, or MSNBC, or even “Ghosthunters,” or we can read specific “blogs” on the internet that cater to our own informational predilections, and believe that we have been informed about the world. Again, the effect seems to be a further sense of isolation and disconnection from each other, and a preclusion of the possibility of a common discourse on major issues.

Civility is not the distinguishing feature of discourse on much of the internet. Online debates are characterized by aggressiveness, insult, and often the attempt to humiliate opponents. “Flaming,” the posting of
offensive, aggressive, and often nonsensical responses to online discussion board posts, shows up on most blogs and newsgroups. Indeed, when I tried to search the internet for discussions of online civility, I would often find a considered and thoughtful initial post, followed by several attacks on it, eventually disintegrating into an all out shouting match, replete with curses in all capitalized letters. If online political discussion is thought to be a way to open up political discourse to people who have never had the opportunity to participate in meaningful political discussions, it is still not (yet?) a model towards which we should be aiming.

Some other tools of contemporary technology seem to be having the effect of diluting and oversimplifying language. Text-messaging, and twitter require that all messages be kept below 140 characters. A recent article in a local newspaper announced the likely death of the age of blogging because blogs just requires too much time and attention to write and to read. Hence, not only have we switched from reading books and newspaper articles to reading blogs, but now we seem to be headed for a world in which the information is passed between us only in blasts of 140 characters or less. It seems obvious to me that the complexities of many major issues cannot be conveyed in 140 characters. Indeed, it seems to me that many of the concepts that are basic to functioning effectively as a democratic society cannot be conveyed that way. The shortening of attention spans and evaporation of patience even influence the words we are able to use with each other. I note with some sadness that this is the first semester since I have been teaching in which a student turned in to me a philosophy paper that contained the letter, ‘u’ as a shorthand for the word “you,” and the number ‘4’ as a shorthand for the word, “for.” This is not a good sign. Since language is the tool of reasoning, such an impoverishment of language may leave students unprepared for anything but skating on the surface of thought, and since clear and thoughtful expression is the force that binds our community together, such technological toys may ultimately have the effect of dividing us further from one another.

Even if we ignore the limitations on the content of contemporary hypertechnological communication, the simple fact that we are so “plugged in” insulates and isolates us from one another. I’ve taken to referring to my students as part of “the Borg” because of the technological attachments from which they seem almost unable to disengage. The Borg are a species of beings depicted in the TV series, “Star Trek: The Next Generation.” They are part humanoid and part
machine. When I see my 18-year-old son (not really) watching a violent cage-fighting show on TV, and simultaneously listening to his iPod, playing a video game on his computer, and text-messaging his friend in San Francisco, I cannot help but see his generation slipping into borghood. The drowning out of face-to-face conversation in the whirring din of so many insulating technological devices may be another reason why we are forgetting how to behave with respect and consideration toward one another. Even though text-messaging can take place across great geographical distances, the newly developing conventions of the medium actually seem to lessen social distances. It prompts us to communicate with strangers as if they were acquaintances, and with acquaintances as if they were close friends. Hence, in contrast to the face-to-face encounter where the spatial distance between us reinforces a sense of social distance, encounters using some of these newly developed technological means may break down our sense of formality and (social) distance and lead us to forget the rules of civility entirely.

**HOW TO TEACH CIVILITY: A BEGINNING**

Although I’m convinced that we should be trying to teach civility in our classes, I must admit that I’m not at all sure what is the best way to proceed. Some professors have started using “civility contracts,” which outline the basic expectations of civil behavior in the classroom setting, and which they require students to sign at the beginning of the semester. But a student might read a “civility contract” handed out by the instructor as simply a list of rules based upon the instructor’s authority: “I don’t allow X, Y, Z, etc.” Working from the view that it is imperative to get students to see civility as a path that they must choose for themselves if they are going to live together in relative harmony with their fellow citizens, I thought it best to try to get them to see not only the basic rules, but the reasons behind them. Hence I conducted what we might call “The Simplest Possible Classroom Exercise on Civility.”

After a brief introduction where I described my experience at a recent townhall meeting on healthcare reform (and how concerned I was about the lack of civility there), I asked the students in my Introduction to Philosophy class, “What does civil discourse require?” and “Why should we be civil?” Here are some of their responses:

**What does civility require?**
- Don’t threaten violence (obviously).
• Listen with respect and generosity.
• Be patient; don’t interrupt; raise your hand to speak.
• Remember, even if we disagree, we’re on the same side because we’re all trying to develop the best views that we can (all trying to find the truth).
• Be tolerant of (rather than fearful of or hostile toward) differences.
• Promote understanding of minority views (don’t shout down the minority).
• Challenge the view, but don’t insult or attack the person.
• Ask questions to make sure you understand another person’s view before you decide to disagree with it.
• Respect the other person’s right to hold a different opinion than you do.
• Be willing to listen to criticisms and to change your own view (if the best reasons are on the other side).
• Remember that you are not your idea; if someone attacks your idea, they’re not attacking you.
• Remember, it’s not about you; it’s about the issue.
• Be open-minded.
• Have a sense of humor.
• Have a neutral third-party mediator.
• Set groundrules (an environment, an occasion) for civil discussion ahead of time.
• Passion is OK if it comes with a sense of humor, but too much passion can get in the way of civil discourse. When people get carried away by emotions, the framework breaks down.

Why be civil?
• Intelligence and critical thinking require that we sometimes disagree; Civility allows us to disagree without fear.
• We are more likely to reach knowledge (truth, a useful result, a good policy) if we allow many views to be heard and discussed calmly and rationally. We learn from each other.
• If our discussion doesn’t cause grudges or emotional harm, we are more likely to be able to work together again in the future.

• Respectful listening encourages respectful listening; if you want to be heard, listen.

• Disagreement can lead to frustration, but uncivil disagreement leads to chaos and war.

This entire exercise took only 35 minutes or so, and it gave me great hope for preferring “the cognitive deficit view” of my students’ failings in civility. The fact that these responses mirror many of the commonsense rules of civility found in leading texts on the subject (Petri, Carter, etc.) shows that the task here may not be as daunting as we might have supposed. Perhaps all that is needed in order to reinstate civility in our public discourse is simply that we remind ourselves what civility requires and why it is so important.

Of course, this is really just a beginning. Teaching students how to write an email, how to ask for a letter of recommendation, how to speak and listen politely, how to use a cell-phone (or how not to), etc. would be a more involved process. But the ability to understand the purposes of civility, and the willingness to be a more civil member of a social order is there, just below the surface, waiting for us to awaken it.

NOTES

1 This is a revised version of a paper entitled “Philosophy and Civility in the Age of Jerry Springer” which I originally presented at the 11th annual international conference of the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum in Rochester, NY. I am grateful to the Society, the conference organizers, and the conference participants for their many helpful comments and criticisms. I also want to thank Wolfgang Fuchs for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also very grateful for the substantive and detailed comments I received through the blind review process at Teaching Ethics.


11 See, for example, Manning, Peter, “The Decline of Civility: A Comment on Irving Goffman’s Sociology” in Canadian Review of Sociology, Vol. 13, Issue 1, pp. 13-25, 1976, Sennett, Jonathan, The Fall of Public Man (New York, WW. Norton & co., 1974), etc.. We may even go back to some of Adolf Hitler’s complaints about cultural decline caused by the mass media, or Marcus Tullius Cicero’s complaint in 75 B.C.E.: “O Tempora! O Mores!”
17 I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for Teaching Ethics for raising this possible objection to my claim that ethicists have a special responsibility to teach civility.
21 One anonymous reviewer pointed out that the incivility of political commentators is likely to be more influential on students than the incivility of elected politicians. I concede that Glenn Beck probably has a larger following among students than, for example, Dick Cheney does. But the fact remains that Dick Cheney took up a job which required him to swear an oath to pro-
tect and defend the Constitution of the United States (which, I presume Glenn Beck did not). The very existence of Dick Cheney’s job (or the jobs of any of our elected politicians) depends upon political discourse. Since civility is required for our political life to continue together at all, it seems to me that those who take up the project of trying to see that our democracy continues have a special duty to model civility in their interactions with each other.


35 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w536Alnon24 (accessed 9/10/09)

36 Compare, for example, the Youtube videos found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFH6O1FDeQU&feature=related and at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImaoQy87QjU&feature=related

37 One anonymous reviewer pointed out to me that a similar worry was raised against the institution of the telegraph, and that as long as students know the difference between the circumstances in which “texting” is appropriate, and those which call for more formal English, the technologies I am citing are not bound to have the effects on language and thought that I fear they might. What worries me, however, is that, unlike the telegraph, these devices are so ubiquitous that there is likely to be some “seepage” of the linguistic habits
appropriate to “texting” into other arenas of discourse. Indeed, that is why I mentioned my students’ papers; I’m fairly certain that the students in question knew (if they had thought about it) that it isn’t appropriate to use the number, “4” as a shorthand for the word, “for” in a philosophical paper. They did what they did out of linguistic habit, and I worry because if everyone under a certain age is acquiring these habits, they may lead to an impoverishment of both language and thought.