

## 295. Neither Top-Down nor Bottom-Up

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You want your classroom and your campus to be places of open and free inquiry and, thereby, places of open and free critical discussion. You also want each to be a place of civility, welcoming to all inquirers and to all their various points of view. But there's a lot at stake in the matters into which your colleagues and students will inquire, and nerves are going to get touched. How will you encourage disputation while keeping name-calling, fist-pounding, door-slamming, and ill will to a minimum?

Many advocate achieving civility through policies and rules. A student code of conduct, a safe-and-respectful campus policy, a sheet of guidelines and expectations for students in the classroom—those sorts of things, plus enforcement mechanisms.

I'm sure readers of this article are painfully aware of what sort of hell all that's going to create. Fear of falling afoul of the rules will stifle discussion. Rather than respond with evidence or argument to a point with which they disagree, students (professors, even) will launch administrative complaints. Someone will strongarm the academic senate to affix the university's imprimatur to their manual of approved idioms. A bureaucracy will evolve to vet proposed events, to check syllabi, to resolve conflicts, to adjudicate cases, and to administer discipline. Students and professors will think that if something isn't covered by the rules, they should be able to get away with it. Administrators will hold meetings and hire lawyers. Tragically, no one will be able to think of any way out of the mess they've brought upon themselves but through more meetings, more administrative involvement, more struggle sessions, and more rules.

What sort of hell is that *going* to create? For many of us, the university of oversight and control is already our reality. Those associated with such an institution will tell you that life there is neither civil nor disputatious.

The top-down approach to maintaining civility cannot work. Its central directive is: be civil or else. But that's a threat, not a rule that can be issued by an equal to an equal. An institution in which a central principle offends the moral and intellectual autonomy of its members cannot be an institution that respects the moral and intellectual autonomy of its members. The absence of name-calling and door-slamming at a top-down university is not due to the happy presence of good will, but rather to the fear of consequences.

Rules, though, need not be imposed top-down. Patterns of behavior can be cultivated bottom-up. Professors can model for their students and colleagues active and public disagreement that nonetheless manifests respect for the moral and intellectual autonomy of their adversaries-in-ideas. They can remain calm and abjure invective even as others speak angrily to them. After setting an example, professors can talk explicitly to their charges about respecting the speaker while loathing the speech.

Modeling virtuous behavior while engaged in critical inquiry or disputation is one way to help instill virtuous academic behavior in students and other members of the academic community. But it's not the only way. Glances of approbation or disapprobation are another, and more effective, way. When students or colleagues go off topic, begin to get angry, or seem to be ready to mock a peer, a raised eyebrow or arms akimbo from an esteemed professor can set things right in the moment and encourage good behavior in the future. A certain look from the professor when sexist or racist sentiments appear in assigned readings will help to set the class tone. A word of praise to a class after they've civilly discussed a sensitive topic will turn that discussion into a standard students will aspire to meet during the next class session.

Professors also promote civil behavior through the gatekeeping they do. They select topics, readings, approaches, and arguments. They show their students and their colleagues by what they suppress that which isn't worthy of attention or discussion.

Nonetheless, the manners and habits of civility cultivated through the bottom-up approach are detached from the academic endeavor itself. In the bottom-up approach, civility stands as a value on its own, as something to cultivate directly for its own sake, as a set of characteristic attitudes and behaviors university people would strive intentionally to embody. When the bottom-up approach is working well, our students are civil, at first to please their professors, and then, with luck, to please themselves. Eventually, civility might reign for them as an efficient means to sound academic engagement, but that's only so long as academic engagement is also something they value. Even then, their and our commitment to civility is independent of the commitment to academic engagement, the latter of which is only one among many potential endeavors supported by civility.

To sum up: We want our campuses to be places of free and open inquiry and, because discussion is an integral part of inquiry, of free and open discussion. Discussion must be civil if it's to be enjoyable and productive. Policies and rules might subtend a culture of civility, but only if members of the university community cultivate them internally, rather than find them imposed by an external authority. Yet, even when civility is adopted as a virtue held for its own sake and not experienced as a constraint, civility as rule-following is, in the context of inquiry, a mere means.

That result, that civility can be cultivated from the bottom-up as a virtue in service of productive discussion, is not so bad. Nonetheless, I don't think it's the very best.

I propose that we not think of civility as adherence to rules at all. We don't have to assimilate collegial academic behavior to rule-following. University people could well be mindless of whether their behavior is civil. Their behavior would be civil—that is, external third parties would rightly describe their behavior as civil—and yet for the academics and their students themselves, whether that description fits would be neither here nor there.

My idea is that people's behavior will look to be civil when those people are engaged in trying to understand or interpret or evaluate some matter at hand. If a person's commitment is to formulate an intellectually satisfying understanding of some idea, then that person will treat others with honesty and fairness, for treating them otherwise would hobble his academic work. He'll listen closely to criticism because he wants to get the matter at hand right, and getting the matter at hand

right is what he values for its own sake. Civility would simply be an artifact generated by his commitment to his academic business. It would for him be neither a means to an end nor the expression either of rule-following or of an internalized norm.

Trying to understand things is a difficult endeavor, one that one can do well or poorly. Doing it well is to meet certain standards of excellence in the gathering and interpretation of evidence, the articulation of explanatory ideas, the construction of arguments and theories, the testing of conjectures and theories, the adapting of theories to new areas and phenomena, and so on. In meeting standards of excellence, the academic or student attains or produces such goods as insights, well-conceived studies, informative seminars, and profound essays. To meet standards of excellence, the academic or student will have to be truthful with herself and her partners and receptive to ideas and criticisms from others. She will have to be willing and able to hold aspects of her identity at arms' length and to subject them to critical investigation. But in being truthful, open, and receptive, her behavior will model civil behavior, but not because she intends it to do so.

I contend, then, that a renewed and strengthened commitment to the academic mission of the university on the part of university people will solve the problem of incivility (and the related problems of self-censorship and deference to authority), and will do so without much reliance on rules, either top-down or bottom-up.

Of course, the fact remains that the academic mission is only one purpose people attribute to universities, and for many people, even university people (almost all university administrators, it seems), it ranks low on the list of important functions. It is this fact that tempts people to act in uncivil ways and that makes those of us who rank the academic mission high yearn for a campus ethos of civility. We then try to find rules and ways to encourage the rule-following that we believe will produce civility.

If I'm right, it's a mistake to think of civility as a cause of successful academic engagement. Yes, successful academic engagements with the matters at hand will appear to outsiders as involving a series of civil exchanges among students and colleagues. But that's not because civil exchanges lead to success. Rather, the exchanges appear to be civil, though they were not motivated by a concern to be civil, simply because they were part of a successful academic engagement. It's the joy of academic engagement that does the work, and it does it all by itself.

Advocates of bottom-up rule following speak of enculturation into civil speech communities. They appeal to ideas of curation or gatekeeping or regulatory processes or rules. Those ideas find no echo in my proposal. There will be enculturation, of course, but it is enculturation into the academic mission, and that's a matter of coming to enjoy figuring things out.

One possibility we all must worry about is the development at our institutions of corrosive academic cultures. I was in graduate school during the heyday of philosophy as blood sport, and I'm certainly glad that those days are now behind us. There's no guarantee they won't return, though, and so perhaps encouraging civility as an independent value might be well advised as an effective prophylactic. In fact, we're caught up right now in something quite similar to the game 1980s academic philosophers played, that of seeking to show one's critic to be an absolute idiot. What's similar is the viciousness by which cancel culture is often marked. Another corrosive

academic culture, corrosive of the academic mission, that is, is the culture of academic celebration, in which the goal of inquiry is to celebrate the ways, values, and identities of different peoples and various groups. The culture of celebration is incompatible with a culture of academic criticism and, thereby, is corrosive of the academic mission.

I'll mention one more corrosive academic culture, the culture of official complaints and disciplinary processes. Nothing degrades collegiality as much as administrators happy to accept formal complaints from members of the university community keen to register them.

Taking the realities of our time and place into account, then, which include cancel culture, the culture of celebration, and the safe-and-respectful campus ethos, we have to allow that there's some benefit in promoting an independent culture of civility. Upon that culture, we can build a critical and disputatious academic culture, as advocates of the bottom-up approach envision. Students and professors valuing civility for its own sake might help to sustain the academic mission at times when universities are expected to serve social or political ends. But I would want to recognize this exploit as second to best, as a falling away from a self-sustaining academic culture. Still, we have to begin from where we are, and where we are isn't always optimum. I worry, though, that any compromise with external values will have corrupting effects on the internal values. If, given our reality, we must seek to create a culture of civility that can be taken into our academic culture, let us be careful not to sacralize it when we are engaged in our academic projects, lest we diminish our commitment to academic culture.

That said, my central point remains. If we take pleasure in the academic pursuit of understanding for its own sake, we won't think of civility as a means (a pleasant means, no doubt) to the success of our pursuit. We won't think of civility as a means because we won't think of it at all. Because we won't think about it, we won't try to bring it to campus, either as a virtue we cultivate or as a constraint we accept. Our commitment to the academic pursuit of understanding for its own sake will shape our behavior. Others might describe that behavior as civil, but they would do so to our profound indifference.

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