5 Civility, Contentious Monuments, and Public Space

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5.1 Introduction

In recent years, many campaigns and protests have taken place to demand the removal of monuments considered controversial. Prominent cases include the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement starting in South Africa and the Countering Colston campaign in England. Some view Cecil Rhodes as the embodiment of British imperialism, and Edward Colston as the embodiment of slavery. Both introduced and promoted practices and institutions that contributed to the development of structural racism and its consolidation over time. Statues or other forms of commemorations in their honor, including naming places after them, are therefore highly contested. In April 2015, after weeks of protests, the University of Cape Town made the decision to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from its campus. In June 2020, the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled by Black Lives Matter protesters and thrown into Bristol Harbour.

Following these incidents, statues and monuments have received increasing attention in both public debate and scholarly literature. In moral and political philosophy, this is part of a general trend to reflect on the role of public architecture and the built environment in society, how they affect our social and political lives, and the messages public symbols might communicate. Monuments are physical objects such as statues or buildings that are meant to commemorate a person, issue, or event. Although there are many private monuments, we focus on public monuments in this chapter. By this term, we mean monuments which officials may have commissioned and/or whose construction or placement on public grounds they may have authorized, and which are often maintained through the use of public money. Importantly, a monument can be public even if it was introduced or paid for by private parties (Bardon 2022, 256–257). For instance, many of the Confederate monuments in the United States were paid for by a private association, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and were then given to states or cities to display on public property. Consequently, they should still be understood as public monuments.
Philosophers working on the issue of contested monuments have mainly focused on two questions. First, what is it that makes certain monuments controversial or morally contentious? When monuments are public, it can be argued that whatever message they are sending can be interpreted as a message endorsed by the state. This means that monuments can be understood as “government speech” (Schragger 2021). Monuments are morally objectionable when they are interpreted as honoring someone who is a “serious wrongdoer” (Frowe 2019), when they represent a degrading ideology (Schulz 2019), when they valorize historical injustices (Matthes 2018), or when they threaten sources of self-respect for some members of society (Lim 2020; Schulz 2019). This leads to the second question: what should be done with morally objectionable monuments? Burch-Brown identifies and analyses four different solutions: preserving, removing, recontextualizing, and reclaiming contested monuments (2022). Most of the discussion, however, has focused on the ethics of removal. On the one hand, it has been argued that monuments such as Confederate statues should be removed because they are harmful (Timmerman 2020), because the state has a duty to condemn serious wrongdoing (Frowe 2019), or because this is necessary to challenge unjust hierarchies (Burch-Brown 2017). On the other hand, it has been argued that monuments, including contested ones, are the sites of memorialization (Demetriou 2020) or public memory (Abrahams 2022), and that removing them would be wrong because it would obliterate morally problematic yet factually important figures, events, and/or issues from the historical record (Cannadine 2018). Presenting this dilemma as a false dichotomy, according to which we can only either remove or preserve contested monuments, Lim argues that vandalism can be the most appropriate thing to do since it can address the harms or wrongs that are associated with the monument “while not reducing everyday occasions for remembrance” (2020, 198).

In this chapter, we take a different approach by addressing the question of monuments through the concept of civility. Since civility is ultimately about the expression of respect, we believe that it makes sense to interpret monuments as being more or less civil. Crucially, the concept of civility brings additional nuance to the evaluation of monuments and of the messages that they convey: the types of serious injustices associated with the statues of Rhodes or Colston, for instance, represent incivility at its worst, but monuments can also be uncivil in more superficial and less objectionable ways. Using the lens of civility allows us to go beyond the more straightforward cases of monuments that are considered overtly racist and show that it is important to also pay attention to monuments that violate civility more subtly. Ultimately, this can open up new ways of thinking about monuments: we should consider not only whether a certain monument should be removed but also, as a society more generally, what themes and functions we should prioritize with monuments.
Our analysis proceeds as follows. In Section 5.1, we explain what we mean by civility. We distinguish between different dimensions of civility and of incivility, and different ways in which they may intersect. What is particularly relevant is that we identify a form of civility that is not necessarily a good thing (surface-level civility) as well as a form of incivility that is not necessarily a bad thing (critical incivility). In Section 5.2, we focus on surface-level civility, which is illustrated by the statue of Joan of Arc in the Place des Pyramides in Paris and by *Fearless Girl* in New York. Next, we examine how monuments can also be critically uncivil, through the cases of a statue honoring Desmond Tutu in South Africa and Australia’s settler monuments. The complexities and nuances of monuments are revealed through the use of the disaggregated concept of (in)civility, showing that the question of how to interpret the messages that these monuments send requires more work than has commonly been assumed.

5.2 Civility as a Lens

Civility is often understood as a virtue associated with etiquette and good manners. For instance, according to Edyvane, “civility is bound up with the idea of what it means to be civilized, to be well-mannered or polite; its focus is on standards of behavior in our dealings with others in everyday life” (2017, 345). Some authors refer to this kind of civility as “ethical civility” (Edyvane 2017, 345) or as a “moral virtue” (Calhoun 2000, 273). However, politeness is a more accurate and clearer way to define this first kind of civility, since one can be polite toward others and respect the rules of etiquette for non-moral reasons, without acknowledging the moral worth of others. For example, to label civility as politeness “ethical civility” or “moral virtue” would prove contentious in the context of a racist politician who uses polite speech or behavior to advance a racist agenda. The politician exhibits only a surface-level kind of politeness, lacking any (positive) moral connotations.

Civility in this sense involves not only a list of dos and don’ts for everyday life, including how to greet people and how to behave in particular scenarios (e.g., not jumping the queue, not speaking loudly on the phone in public), but also a “set of habits of speaking and listening” (Bejan 2017, 164) that tells us more specifically how we should talk to others, especially when we happen to disagree with them: we should avoid offensive language, we should listen to what others have to say, we should not interrupt, we should not give dismissive responses, and so on. Civility as politeness is just enough to make disagreeing possible and tolerable, “even – and especially – in the absence of actual respect or affirmation” (Bejan 2011, 417); for this reason, the “mere civility” defended by Bejan is kept distinct from the much more demanding values of recognition or mutual respect. What civility as politeness demands is not the recognition of others’ equal
moral worth but merely the recognition of others’ status as co-members of society with whom we must coexist. It is this kind of recognition that we communicate to others when we treat them politely. As Edyvane notes, politeness “implies recognition of members of the group as enjoying a certain standing in relation to the problem of sociation” but it does not necessarily imply “that I think you [are] entitled to an equal say” (2020, 95, original emphasis). It therefore seems misleading to call such a thin conception of civility “moral,” which is why we prefer the term “civility as politeness.”

Civility as politeness inherently depends on “generally agreed upon, often codified, social rules” (Calhoun 2000, 260). Crucially, these rules are neither universal nor static; rather, they are based on customs, which are relative and vary between societies (Kekes 1984; Sinopoli 1995). This poses another problem. The historically and culturally contingent nature of civility (as politeness) is also sometimes linked to its alleged “dark side” (Bejan 2017, 9) and the view that civility may be a vehicle for oppression, silencing, and exclusion. As Elias (1969) and Freud (2004) have famously argued, and as Bejan aptly reminds us, given that its norms are often developed against the structural background of pre-existing power asymmetries, civility could be considered by some as “irremediably imbricated with colonialism and empire . . . a covert demand for conformity that delegitimizes dissent while reinforcing the status quo” (Bejan 2017, 9). When that is the case, potential responses may include “incivility as dissent” (Edyvane 2020), that is, deliberate acts of incivility aimed at expressing a sense of injustice toward established social norms, structures, and institutions.

Alongside the thin conception that we label “civility as politeness,” some scholarship views civility primarily as a political concept, describing it as a civic virtue that relates to liberal politics (Edyvane 2017; Meyer 2000). This understanding of civility focuses on an individual’s responsibilities as a member of a liberal-democratic political community. Echoing and expanding on this sentiment, Edyvane notes how this notion of civility is bound up with the idea of an association of citizens, and includes cognate ideas of the civic, the civil, and the civilian; it concerns one’s status and duties as a member of a political community, as a citizen with certain rights and responsibilities.

(2017, 345)

This characterization of civility highlights the importance for individuals to adhere to core liberal-democratic values in a way that takes into account the collective good. In other words, those who are civil in this political sense engage in “a kind of politics, a type of political discourse that does not harm, injure, or offend fellow citizens” (Harcourt 2012, 5). A civility
that entails a regard for the broader public can arguably improve democratic governance and social coexistence in the long term.

This second kind of civility is often simply called “political civility” (Edyvane 2017, 345), but we believe that “civility as public-mindedness” is a more accurate term. It is not merely civility applied to the political sphere; instead, it is a kind of civility characterized by an attitude of giving proper weight and recognition to others as free and equal members of society. Those adhering to civility as public-mindedness demonstrate a deep moral commitment to liberal political values and institutions (MacEdo 1992), and it is in this sense that civility is considered a core liberal value (Boyd 2006, 863; Meyer 2000, 79; Rawls 2005, 217; Sabl 2005, 219). While politeness is not necessarily absent from civility as public-mindedness, the distinction between the two dimensions is important. It helps us to highlight that one can be perfectly civil in the sense of politeness without adhering to any of the rules of civility as public-mindedness tied to specific liberal and democratic commitments.

We believe that it is useful to distinguish between two different subdimensions of civility as public-mindedness. The first sub-dimension focuses on one’s duties toward others regarding the justification of political decisions. We call this “justificatory civility.” Rawls (2005, 217) introduces and defends the most prominent account of this first sub-dimension of public-mindedness in what he refers to as the “duty of civility.” This notion of political civility corresponds with the “practice of reasonable public discourse” (Meyer 2000, 72): the policies that one advocates should be justified by appealing only to public reasons, that is, reasons that all persons in a diverse society could understand and accept at some level of idealization. By complying with the duty of civility, members of society treat one another as free and equal persons. To be civil in the justificatory sense means to comply with the demands of public reason. This requires refraining from invoking our comprehensive (e.g., religious or philosophical) doctrines when justifying political rules and appealing instead to political values that are widely endorsed in liberal-democratic societies. These include individual rights and liberties, equality of opportunity, and the promotion of the common good; guidelines of inquiry, that is, “principles of reasoning and rules of evidence in the light of which citizens are to decide whether substantive principles properly apply and to identify laws and policies that best satisfy them”; and “the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial” (Rawls 2005, 224). As Cohen puts it, this kind of civility is not about politeness and “how we talk to our friends or students or members of our neighborhood or church or union or company,” but about politics and “how we ought to argue with others on basic political and constitutional questions” (2012, 119–120). By complying with the constraints of public reason, we communicate our respect for
other members of society as free and equal persons. In the recent literature in liberal political philosophy, this is often how civility is understood.

The second sub-dimension of civility as public-mindedness – what we call “moral civility” – also involves recognizing others as free and equal. However, unlike justificatory civility, moral civility does not relate to the justificatory status of the reasons used to support political decisions. What matters here is not whether we use the language of public reason when justifying political rules but whether our words or actions express the right kind of moral commitments toward others. More specifically, being morally civil involves recognizing others as free and equal by refraining from infringing upon their fundamental rights, liberties, and equal civic standing. This may require, for example, refraining from the use of physical violence (Zurn 2013), discrimination (Peterson 2019), or racist or hateful speech that characterizes members of certain groups (e.g., women or minority ethnic groups) as holding a lesser status in some way (see, e.g., Waldron 2012; see also Bejan 2017, 7).

Importantly, moral civility (like the other [sub-]dimensions of civility) concerns not how we treat others per se, but rather the kind of moral commitment that we are communicating to others when we treat them (or, in the case of moral incivility, do not treat them) in a certain way. More specifically, moral civility involves displaying or communicating to others, through one’s speech and/or behavior, that we respect them as free and equal members of society. Indeed, as Calhoun (2000, 261–262) points out, one can be respectful (or tolerant or considerate) toward others without actually being civil or uncivil – for example, someone who donates to charities without knowing (or being known by) their beneficiaries. Conversely, one can be disrespectful toward others, for example, by engaging in covert criminal activities, without being uncivil, that is, without communicating any disrespect to their victims or to other members of society more broadly (Calhoun 2000, 261). Furthermore, in some cases, one can be both respectful and uncivil at the same time – for example, an employer who fully complies with affirmative action regulations but who says to the new employee, “[y]ou know you only got this job because you’re black” (Calhoun 2000, 261).

The distinction between the three (sub-)dimensions of civility becomes particularly clear if we consider that adherence to one dimension does not always imply adherence to another (Bardon et al. 2023). Indeed, while one can simultaneously be polite and public-minded, or impolite and non-public-minded, in some cases, there is a functional incongruence between civility as politeness and civility as public-mindedness or, under the latter, between justificatory civility and moral civility. For example, so-called “polite Nazis” (Tiso 2017) may strategically comply with norms of civility as politeness in order to advance political agendas that fail to recognize
members of some groups as free and equal members of society entitled to basic rights and liberties, thus contravening moral civility. In other cases, one might comply with justificatory civility in order to defend or preserve social and political institutions that are not consistent with moral civility, for example, far-right political actors that appeal to liberal values, such as free speech and gender equality, in order to advance exclusionary (and, therefore, morally uncivil) political agendas (e.g., Castelli Gattinara 2017, 346). We call this kind of incongruence surface-level civility.

Conversely, the goal of civility as public-mindedness may sometimes be accompanied by impolite means: acts of dissent or civil disobedience may violate norms of civility as politeness while advocating more just institutions in line with the demands of civility as public-mindedness. Edyvane (2020) describes these kinds of challenges to civility norms as “incivility as dissent,” where incivility refers to violations of civility as politeness, as opposed to civility as public-mindedness. He suggests, “instead of functioning as a one-off challenge to a particular institutional failure, incivility-as-dissent more often consists in recurring practices of small-scale rebellion inspired often by a nebulous sense of injustice” (Edyvane 2020, 105; see also Delmas 2018). Likewise, one may disregard the constraints of justificatory civility, for example, by invoking God, in order to promote liberal-democratic values and institutions or fight illiberal and undemocratic ones, such as slavery, thus advancing moral civility. For example, Rawls (2005) refers to the case of those abolitionists who explicitly used religious reasons to justify the abolition of slavery in the United States and therefore advance liberal-democratic norms and institutions. Slavery, they argued, was simply “contrary to God’s law” (Rawls 2005, 249); this would be consistent with moral civility but not with justificatory civility. In some cases, norms of moral civility may be violated in order to promote them in other ways, as when climate activists engage in violent or other criminal acts in order to put pressure on governments to tackle climate change – a goal that arguably communicates respect for others as free and equal (cf. Zellentin 2015). We call the use of impoliteness, justificatory incivility, or moral incivility itself to advance morally civil goals critical incivility.

In the next two sections, we examine two of the aforementioned instances of functional incongruence – surface-level civility and critical incivility – in connection with specific monuments.

5.3 Surface-Level Civility

In the case of surface-level civility, an apparent commitment to the norms of civility (as politeness) can be used to undermine it in a deeper sense. This can also happen with monuments.
5.3.1 The Statue of Joan of Arc in Paris

Consider, first, the case of the statue of Joan of Arc in Paris located in the Place des Pyramides (see Figure 5.1). During the 15th-century Hundred Years’ War, a teenage Joan of Arc was supposedly guided by the voices of angels to save the kingdom of France. Captured and sold to the English, she was put on trial for heresy and burnt at the stake in Rouen in 1431. In the 19th century, she became the embodiment of French nationalism. The 1858 publication of a book by the republican historian Jules Michelet, dedicated to Joan of Arc, contributed greatly to her renewed popularity and to the idea that she plays a significant role in the national myth. So much so that this statue in the Place des Pyramides was the only public monument directly commissioned by the French state in the first few decades of the Third Republic (1870–1914) (Sniter 2001, 265).

The golden bronze statue was created by Emmanuel Frémiet and inaugurated in 1874: it presents Joan of Arc riding a horse, wearing armor, and

Figure 5.1 “Dad, Who Is This Woman? – One of Our Great Men.” Le Monde Illustre 04 Avril 1874.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr/BNF
waving her flag. She is not depicted as a pious Catholic or as a martyr but as a warrior and a figure of national resistance, ready to lead the battle against the foreign invaders. At the time of the statue’s inauguration, Joan of Arc was widely perceived as a “republican symbol” (Sniter 2001, 265). At the end of the 19th century, left-wing senators even attempted to introduce an annual national holiday in celebration of Joan of Arc (Sanson 1973): they were unsuccessful in 1884 and in 1894 (Sanson 1973), but the national holiday was adopted in 1920 under the official name of Fête nationale de Jeanne d’Arc et du patriotisme and it has been taking place ever since on the second Sunday of May.

Yet, over time, Joan of Arc gradually became more closely associated with monarchists and with right-wing Catholic nationalists (Sniter 2001, 278), who would emphasize the religious and royalist aspects of her story. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, the far-right monarchist movement Action Française “sought to establish unequivocally Joan of Arc as the symbol of non-republican France” (Hanna 1985, 217). This appropriation by the far right continues to this day. In the 1980s, the Front National decided to celebrate Joan of Arc not on the second Sunday of May but on May Day (May 1), to provoke the left-wing trade unions that organize a demonstration every year on that day. A march leading to the statue of Joan of Arc has become the annual parade of the far-right party. Interestingly, in 2022, for the first time, the march led not to the statue in the Place des Pyramides but to another statue of Joan of Arc in Paris. The golden monument had been so deeply appropriated by the far right that it ended up as embarrassing for the Rassemblement National, the successor of the Front National, since the relabeled party claims to be “neither right nor left,” and officially rejects the violent, racist, anti-democratic, and antirepublican elements associated with the far right.

Today, Joan of Arc in general, and her statue in the Place des Pyramides in particular, remains deeply connected to the speeches of the Front National and Rassemblement National leaders, and to the images of gatherings of far-right activists. The meaning of the monument has been significantly affected by its political appropriation. So what does this have to do with civility? We believe that approaching the interpretation of the monument through the lens of civility is useful to explain the discomfort felt by many French people today toward the statue. As a result of its appropriation, the monument can be interpreted as a case of surface-level civility: there is nothing particularly offensive about the statue of Joan of Arc in the Place des Pyramides, but the fact that it has been routinely used with the purpose of undermining what we call moral civility matters. For far-right activists as well as for the general public, the statue has become the symbol of a certain idea of French nationalism, of the defense of its territory and its identity, and of the need to fight against foreign invaders. Because of the
actions of several far-right groups, the foreign invaders are understood not only as an enemy army in the context of an international war but also as immigrants, or maybe even as non-White or non-Christian French citizens, in the context of a culturally diverse society. The official celebration of a historical figure and national hero begins to convey a message of inequality and exclusion, which conflicts with the idea of communicating respect for others as free and equal persons that is central to moral civility.

The surface-level civility at work here can be seen as a more general strategy by the far right to come across as respectful while, at a deeper level, violating the norms of moral civility. In other words, Joan of Arc has become a dog whistle which allows its far-right appropriators to explicitly claim a commitment to certain values of the French republic while at the same time, and implicitly, undermine others. Ernst Nolte, focusing on the Action Française, once made a similar point commenting:

True, no photograph exists exposing the character of the Action française as dramatically and graphically as is often the case with pictures from the Italian Fascist and National Socialist era. A group of peaceful citizens, the Comité directeurs of the Action française are walking in the procession in honor of Joan of Arc, among them [nationalist intellectual Charles] Maurras, short, grey, and unobtrusive, carrying an umbrella.

(Nolte, as cited in Hanna 1985, 239)

Hanna adds that, for Nolte, “this semblance of civility cleverly concealed the true character of the Action française” (Hanna 1985, 239). This true character, which we have argued represents a serious violation of moral civility, ends up being reflected in the monument itself. It is this “semblance of civility” or surface-level civility which explains the unease that many feel toward the statue today.

What is striking about the case of the statue of Joan of Arc is that its perception as an instance of surface-level civility results entirely from the fact that it has been appropriated by the far right in recent history. When the statue was inaugurated in 1874, no such interpretation existed. Furthermore, it is interesting that the perception of surface-level civility is associated very specifically with the statue located in the Place des Pyramides, and not necessarily with Joan of Arc herself, or with other statues that represent her.

5.3.2 The Fearless Girl Statue in New York City

The idea that a monument can be civil only on a superficial level while in fact conveying uncivil messages at a deeper level does not always result from the way it has been received or appropriated by people. Sometimes, it
results more directly from the monument itself and the intentions (implicit or explicit) of those who created or commissioned it. The Fearless Girl statue in New York City presents such a case.

To understand Fearless Girl, we must discuss the Charging Bull, a statue that was installed on December 14, 1989, in front of the New York Stock Exchange during the night and without authorization. For the artist, Arturo Di Modica, the statue symbolized American financial resilience and it was meant as a Christmas present to New York City. The statue was quickly removed, but, following public outcry, it was brought back to the financial district, on Bowling Green, a couple of blocks away from its original location (Chused 2020, 45–46). On March 7, 2017, the day before International Women’s Day, the Fearless Girl statue was installed—also during the night but this time with a temporary permit from the city (McGregor 2017)—in front of Charging Bull. It features a young girl with her hands on her hips and her chin up, standing defiantly. A few months after it was installed, the city decided to move the statue to Broad Street, where she now stands facing the New York Stock Exchange. Although no longer located next to Charging Bull, the meanings of both statues remain connected.

Fearless Girl was created by artist Kristen Visbal but it was commissioned, through the McCann advertising agency, by one of the largest asset-management companies in the world, State Street Global Advisors. That the statue should represent a little girl and that it should be placed in front of Charging Bull were decisions made by the advertising agency, with the intention to “call attention to ‘the glass ceiling regarding pay and promotion of women in the Wall Street community’” (Kolhatkar 2022, quoting Visbal). With Fearless Girl facing it, Charging Bull became a symbol not of economic power but of “patriarchy and capitalism gone wild” (Peluso 2017). This made Fearless Girl immediately controversial: Di Modica’s lawyers wrote to the mayor of New York City, complaining that the new statue violated his rights regarding derivative work, that is, the “right of an artist to license works that rely on her or his original creation to make a new work,” as well as his “moral right to limit modification of his work” (Chused 2020, 54). Another reason that Fearless Girl was contested is that it was seen as an illustration of “corporate feminism”: the promotion of women leaders in financial companies generally does little to challenge the structures of gender inequality. To some, the statue relies on “outdated conventional gender stereotypes” and is a “symbol of the disneyfication of feminism” (Peluso 2017).

The legal disputes regarding the rights of an artist over their work and the disagreements over conceptions of feminism are however not what make the idea of surface-level civility relevant in the case of Fearless Girl. The reason why the statue can be seen as an instance of surface-level
civility is the discrepancy between the explicit purpose of the statue and the actual objectives of the company that commissioned it. The timeline suggests that the true intention behind Fearless Girl was to restore the image of the company:

In January, following an inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Boston field office, the Justice Department announced that State Street Corporation, the parent company of State Street Global Advisors, had entered into a deferred prosecution agreement with the government, consenting to pay more than $64 million to resolve fraud charges. (Bellafante 2017)

That the firm is particularly committed to gender equality can also be seriously questioned: in 2017, only three of the 11 board members of State Street Corporation were women (Bellafante 2017) and in September 2017, just a few months after Fearless Girl was installed, the company agreed to pay several million dollars to settle claims of gender and racial discrimination (Kolhatkar 2022). Far from being particularly praiseworthy in terms of its treatment of women and other underrepresented groups, the firm behind the statue had itself reinforced structures of gender inequality. Feminism is therefore not the message; it is the disguise. The statue is ultimately a publicity stunt motivated by the private interests of a major money manager, and the success of the publicity stunt comes precisely from the fact that several explicit elements are used to convey the idea that Fearless Girl results from a commitment to the public value of gender equality. Pretending to act out of public-mindedness only as a cover-up for one’s true private ambitions is objectionable: the hypocrisy and cynical self-interest of those who orchestrated its creation have deeply tainted the meanings associated with the statue.

As with Joan of Arc, the example of Fearless Girl shows that civility is not always a good thing if it is exploited by those with more questionable values or interests. In these cases, civility becomes a tool used for something different than a genuine expression of respect. It is this doublespeak that makes surface-level civility morally suspect. Monuments, like people, can and should be criticized for it.

### 5.4 Critical Incivility

While the monuments that we examined in the previous section, we argued, are instances of surface-level civility, here we turn our attention to monuments which are critically uncivil either because of what they represent or
because of how they have been interpreted by some. As we explained in Section 5.2, we are in the presence of critical incivility when the norms of civility as politeness, justificatory civility, or moral civility itself are violated in order to advance moral civility.

5.4.1 The Statue of Desmond Tutu in Cape Town

The first example of a monument capturing the idea of critical incivility that we examine is the statue of South African Anglican Archbishop and theologian Desmond Tutu, a key figure in the anti-apartheid movement, unveiled in Cape Town in March 2023. The statue became part of the Long March to Freedom exhibition, “[a] pantheon of 100 life-size bronze sculptures of liberation heroes [that] honours South Africa’s brightest and bravest icons and tells the story of the country’s 350-year journey to freedom and democracy.”3 The life-size bronze statue depicts Desmond Tutu in his purple clerical robes, wearing a large Christian cross. After the statue was unveiled, Tutu’s granddaughter Nyaniso Burris commented:

> It looks like him. I wasn’t expecting it to look so much like him. It’s beautiful. It feels like him. It’s such a beautiful rendition of who he was and the memory we have of him. It’s amazing that over a year after he passed, he’s being honoured in such a way.

(McCain 2023)

Inevitably, references to Tutu’s religious faith were also prominent in some of the commentary around the statue. For example, Dali Tambo, the head of the National Heritage Project NPC, which owns the Long March to Freedom, reacted: “He was a man who occupied a unique position – without being appointed or elected, guided by his faith – as a global moral conscience and human role model” (McCain 2023).

The role of religious faith in Tutu’s anti-apartheid and human rights activism is, of course, well known. For example, in his book No Future Without Forgiveness, Tutu wrote: “[T]heological and religious insights and perspectives would inform much of what we did and how we did it [in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission].” (Tutu 2000, 73).

At first glance, it would seem that elements of Desmond Tutu’s statue violate the norms of justificatory civility. Indeed, one might argue that a commitment to justificatory civility implies a commitment to the idea of a “neutral” public space, that is, one where visual manifestations of citizens’ different comprehensive doctrines – for example, in the form of monuments, buildings, street names, and other visible public features – is
discouraged. This is, for example, the kind of neutral public space that Avner de-Shalit (2003) identifies with Manhattan. According to de-Shalit:

[T]he Manhattan streets and avenues are numbered, as if to declare: we place no greater value on this event or that person. . . . They never take you to a dead end, to some place in particular, which strikes me as analogous to the palpable climate of neutrality which pervades the city. . . . [I]n order to sustain . . . [its] . . . openness the city holds to its neutrality among different conceptions of the good.

(de-Shalit 2003, 13–14)

Does this mean that Tutu’s statue, with its clear emphasis on his religious role and background, is not consistent with the ideal of justificatory civility? Not necessarily. According to Rawls’s “wide” view of public reason, for example:

[R]easonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support.

(Rawls 2005, 462)

It would therefore seem that, from this perspective, Tutu’s religious faith is consistent with justificatory civility, at least as long as public (non-religious) reasons are eventually also provided to justify the kind of positions (in support of human rights and against apartheid) that Tutu had endorsed.

However, while the wide view of public reason might work for citizens deliberating in the public space, it is less clear that it may help relax the constraints of public reason when applied to monuments and statues. This is because, unlike people’s speech, monuments and statues are more permanent and solid, and once established, they are not easily amenable to the kind of change that the Rawlsian proviso demands – Tutu’s clerical robes and Christian cross will always remain highly visible and prominent religious symbols while the statue exists. In other words, justificatory civility, especially as intended in Rawls’s “wide” view, is a temporal phenomenon, that is, an ongoing and fluid process of reason exchange that only needs to “crystallize” when, “in due course” (most likely, when political decisions are about to be made), only reasons deemed public after that process can be appealed to, whereas non-public reasons should be abandoned. Statues and monuments, though, are different. For a start, they are more permanent and stable, and this creates a tension with the dynamic nature of justificatory civility. Furthermore,
when religious reasons are represented by a public (i.e., state-supported or state-endorsed) monument, they acquire an “official” status, that is, the monument can be understood as sending the message that the state provides public support for those reasons.

However, even if Tutu’s statue does constitute a violation of justificatory civility, it may still advance civility in a deeper, critical sense. Indeed, as we explained earlier, one may disregard the constraints of justificatory civility, by invoking God, in order to promote liberal-democratic values and institutions or fight illiberal and undemocratic ones, such as slavery or, in Tutu’s case, apartheid, thus advancing moral civility. Tutu’s statue can therefore be considered a physical manifestation of critical incivility.

5.4.2 Australia’s Settler Memorials

The second example that we use in this section to illustrate how critical incivility may manifest itself via statues and monuments concerns Australia’s settler memorials. These are graves, memorial monuments and even place names . . . dedicated to white settlers who were “killed by Natives” . . . [and which] serve to uphold the pioneer legend that honours the brave settler and the characteristic representation of the “Natives” as being savage and vengeful, and their attacks unmotivated and unpredictable.

( Carlson and Farrelly 2023 )

In what sense do these memorials constitute instances of critical incivility? These memorials commemorate the killings of Australian white settlers, calling attention to their status as victims of a morally uncivil act. Indeed physical violence, we saw earlier, constitutes an instance of moral incivility ( Zurn 2013 ) – that is, a failure on the part of its perpetrators to recognize their victims as free and equal persons. Killing is an extreme act of physical violence and, therefore, of moral incivility. This point, however, only captures the incivility aspect of critical incivility. In what sense, then, is the incivility that these memorials commemorate critical? As in the case of the statue of Joan of Arc in Paris, this question can only be answered by distinguishing between the memorials themselves – or, more precisely, the intentions of those who erected them – and the interpretation and appropriation of them by others.

In the case of Australia’s settler memorials, we are particularly interested in the way some Aboriginal activists have reinterpreted and appropriated them. That is, it should be noted that “[these] commemorations . . . despite their original intentions, inadvertently testify to the fact that Aboriginal
peoples did, in fact, ‘fight back’ and that colonisation was, in fact, violent” (Carlson and Farrelly 2023). For example:

[T]he Wills Massacre [which involved] the 1861 killing of 19 white settlers by the Gayiri people on Cullin-La-Ringo Station near Springsure, Queensland – the largest recorded massacre of white settlers by Aboriginal people in Australian history . . . is also seen as an important Aboriginal victory in the struggle against the settlers.

(Carlson and Farrelly 2023)

This and other “commemorations to settlers ‘killed by Natives’ have gained social significance for Aboriginal communities” and become “a testimony of Aboriginal resistance” (Carlson and Farrelly 2023).

As in the case of the statue of Joan of Arc in Paris, therefore, our analysis shows that monuments may be sites of contrasting narratives and that reinterpreting and reimagining can play a key role in this process. As Fredericks and Bradfield point out:

[M]onuments, statues and re-enactments [can] function as sites of colonial resistance. Through their contextualisation, monuments reveal unstable terrains that “problematis[e] not only hegemony and domination but resistance as well”. . . . For some Aboriginal people in Cooktown, resistance comes not from outright opposition to colonial narratives, but rather through repositioning figures such as Captain James Cook within Indigenous perspectives that emphasise Aboriginal agency and sovereignty.

(2023, 352)

From the perspective of Aboriginal peoples, and based on instances of reinterpretation and appropriation of memorial sites, Australia’s monuments (including settler memorials) can become sites and channels of critical incivility. The killing of others, of course, is incompatible with moral civility and should never be tolerated. However, remembering certain past killings in order to challenge the morally uncivil acts of colonizers seems to be a much less problematic behavior than directly engaging in those killings. While killing per se should never be celebrated, the memory of violent acts of armed resistance in the context of colonial encroachment, aimed at challenging colonizers’ morally uncivil policies, can arguably be considered an instance of critical incivility, therefore consistent with civility all things considered.

At this point, two clarifications are required. First, establishing whether an uncivil act constitutes an instance of critical incivility may often require a certain degree of contextualization. More specifically, in the case that
we are examining, while remembering and celebrating gratuitous killings would seem to overly stretch the scope of what critical incivility should allow, the killings to which Australia’s settler memorials are related were often not gratuitous. “Typically,” Carlson and Farrelly argue, “the events are decontextualized [in the memorials]; there is no account of what led up to an incident, what actions by the settlers prompted the attacks made by Aboriginal peoples on them” (2023). Only if understood as a response to settlers’ own hegemony, domination, and violence – themselves uncivil acts, to say the least – can the memorialization and reinterpretation of the uncivil acts of violence perpetrated by Aboriginal peoples be considered instances of critical incivility.

Second, for an uncivil act to count as an instance of critical incivility, the message that it communicates must be a matter of public knowledge. Indeed, recall that civility is an inherently communicative virtue. Therefore, unless most Australians are aware that Aboriginal peoples reinterpret and contextualize settler memorials as a response to settler hegemony, domination, and violence, we may not be able to characterize Aboriginal peoples’ reinterpretation and contextualization as an instance of critical incivility – the critically uncivil signal that they intend to send will either undershoot or misfire, so to speak. Arguably, that kind of public knowledge is not currently present in Australia. It would therefore be important, for Aboriginal peoples and those committed to highlighting and correcting the historical record about injustices, to make their views about settler memorials more widely known, for example, through scholarly, educational, and (social) media channels.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have employed the lens of civility to examine a number of contentious monuments. We have shown that rather than simply categorizing certain monuments as civil or uncivil, we can evaluate them in more subtle ways, by considering the complex intersections between different (sub-)dimensions of (in)civility. We hope that our analysis will stimulate more nuanced research and public debate about the meaning of monuments in contemporary liberal democracies, and the role they can play in fostering civil attitudes among their citizens.

Notes

1. This section on ‘Civility as a lens’ reproduces material from Bardon et al. (2023) that unpacks several dimensions of the civility concept.
2. There are other statues of Joan of Arc in Paris, but this is the most famous one.
3. www.longmarchtofreedom.co.za/Home/Welcome
References


