

# Practice political civility

Erik Rankin



## Political civility

Politics in a modern world can often feel like a gladiator sport - like combatants, but armed with rhetoric that is designed to cause harm. The goal of inflicting a metaphorical mortal wound on one's opponent is commonplace in contemporary political conversations. Often, people lament the lack of civility in today's political arena. But what is civility, and what would the Stoics have said about its role?

## Much more than politeness

Civility is most often defined as courtesy or politeness (Latin etymology suggests "relating to citizens"). But, political civility is much more than simple politeness. Conversations quickly become charged with partisanship, ideology, or raw emotions and being polite becomes secondary to heated exchanges and anger. The focus is on "winning" the argument. Finding common ground or mutual respect for a person that shares a viewpoint different from your



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own seems impossible.

The only thing that isn't worthless: to live this life out truthfully and rightly. And be patient with those who don't. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 6.49)

## Civility begins and ends with us

Marcus Aurelius, an emperor well-groomed in political discourse, provides us direction. Civility begins and ends with us. Stoic philosophy is at root about controlling our judgments about impressions. We must cultivate patience not only with our rhetorical sparring partner but with ourselves.

So how can we be patient when this person is so...wrong? It begins with listening and doing so dispassionately. Many times, in a heated political exchange, we begin to only hear the thoughts in our own mind, searching for moments to pounce and prove our opponent is wrong. This emotion is felt by the opposition and returned when we speak. As tensions rise, so does a lack of truly listening. It is only a matter of time before harsh words and rhetoric are used, and civility is destroyed.

*What is the first business of one who practices philosophy? To get rid of self-conceit. For it is impossible for anyone to begin to learn that which he thinks he already knows. (Epictetus Discourses 2.17)*

## Listening with an open mind

Listening to a person means coming to

the conversation with an open mind, a chance to learn from the opposition. Your political opponent might have knowledge that could lead you to reformulate your ideas or even strengthen the foundation of your current beliefs. Civility is difficult. It demands attention to our thoughts and emotions, but it also requires us to be present in reality. The reality is that people have deep-rooted emotional connections to their political beliefs, formed through a lifetime of experience.

Adherents to Stoic philosophy have a hunger to learn from others. We can learn from all experiences, civil and uncivil. But, civility is choice-worthy in that it allows us to better practice controlling our judgments. We should seek to embody civility in all of our relationships, from the boardroom, political arena, to home.

## Recalling our shared humanity

In these troubled times, beset by a global pandemic and political unrest, emotions run high. Recalling our shared humanity through the logos and bringing that knowledge to all conversations is crucial. We were made for each other, even when our politics collide. We can grow as a global community if we listen, seek learning, and cultivate our kindness.

Civility is not the same as agreement or absence of criticism. It is about treating others with decency by listening and accepting responsibility for our rhetoric.