

Shelby Whitehurst
Honors Seminar
Dr. Kardas
27 September 2023

Civility and a Civil man.

What is Civility? What makes you a civil man? When you are at school being civil is sitting quietly and attentively listening to your teacher speak. At church it is dressing modestly and speaking appropriately. When you are with friends being a little “uncivilized” is seen as being civil. At the dinner table at home you may eat finger foods and talk loudly, however, at an upscale restaurant you use four different forks and chew with your mouth closed. I say all this to ask; does civility have an actual one true meaning? The answer is no.

Of course civility does have an important place in our world. Society has rules, and rules are meant to be followed. When there is a global pandemic you wear a mask and get vaccinated. When a police officer turns their lights on behind you, you pull over as soon as possible. We are taught to be polite, make no sudden movements, and have all information at the ready. We follow all these rules set in place to keep us safe. We follow them so we don’t stick out. No one really wants to be thought of as the rude and abrasive rebel. Except sometimes being civil doesn’t keep you safe. Reaching for your registration in your glovebox too fast gets you killed. And some vaccines you get can cause harmful reactions and you become hospitalized. So what is the point of being “Civil?”

It is important to be civil because civility keeps the peace (for the most part). We don’t go around punching and screaming at people because it is the right thing to do. In public, people mostly stick to themselves and go about their business. This is a part of the golden rule we were all raised on. “Treat others the way you want to be treated.” We behave in a way that we expect others to behave around us. If you punch someone in the street for no reason, you’ll probably get struck right back and end up with charges against you. If you compliment someone else’s shirt, they will probably compliment you as well. Civil disobedience is what keeps the general public in control. Civility is a mutual agreement.

This mutual agreement, however, is not always reciprocated. You can be a model citizen and still have your house robbed. You can be a thief and still be shown charity. Everyone has their own moral compass that determines what they see as a civil action. Some people are very proper and “old fashioned.” They believe respect is a given and it is owed to them. This type of person expects people to respect them regardless of how they have treated them. Some people have a more “modern” way of thinking. Respect is not given, it is earned. “Respect me and I will respect you.” These two personality types often view the other as uncivil and rude. But who is to say is the more civil of the two?

Sometimes there are gray areas of civility. We all know stealing is wrong, but if a mother does it to feed her starving children, is she uncivilized? There are always exceptions to the rules, but not everyone agrees with those exceptions. Wars have been fought over these gray areas. We say “thou shalt not kill,” but we send people to war for our freedom. We wouldn’t dare say our soldiers are not civil though. In fact, we hold them with the utmost respect. Rightfully so, I might add. Yet, you can still argue they are doing uncivil acts. We justify them as necessary, but would the other side of the battle agree? They probably see us as brutes, the way we see them enemies.

Like I have stated previously, wars have been fought over civil disputes. One that probably comes to mind is the Civil War. Some people thought it wrong to enslave another man. Others thought it was their “god given right.” Both sides saw themselves as the correct and civil, the other a fool. In an even more recent time in history, people argue for the rights of the LGBT+ community. One side just wants to be able to love whomever they want without hate, the other thinks it is wrong in every way possible.

In all of these examples I have given you, both sides of the argument think they are the civil ones. Doing what they believe is acceptable. They both see the other side as wrong and uncivilized. However, who can really say what is right and wrong. Some of you might say your god has the answers. Again, this remains another argument. Is your god or their gods or no god at all even real? I say all this so say that to be civil is impossible. You can try all you want, but someone will always see your actions as wrong. Civility is a social construct that we ourselves are not even truly sure of the meaning. So go on and exist however you find yourself existing. Just know that eventually you will run into someone whose idea of a civil man is not you.