

In recent years, suspicion of civility as a political ideal has become increasingly common in radical, progressive circles. For traditional formulations of civility often devalue the affective dimension of politics, while instead privileging a dispassionate politics that is focused on rational deliberation, and which is premised on viewpoint neutrality. This clashes with the desire of many activists to explicitly reform how we affectively relate to one another and the world around us. Accordingly, many such activists have concluded that civility is simply irrelevant to politics as they practice it.

In this paper, I argue that this conclusion about civility is a mistake, even if we are committed to a conception of the political that encompasses affective reform. For as I argue, the concept of civility writ large is grounded not merely in the respect that we ought to have for our fellow citizens as dispassionate rational deliberators, as both friends and critics of civility are wont to think.

Rather, civility writ large *also* has a basis in the respect that we ought to have for our fellow citizens as feeling subjects who are capable of freely cultivating an open and curious affective receptivity to the world. In this way, there is room for a new, non-traditional notion of civility—*affective civility*—that takes seriously the affective dimension of politics.

Indeed, as was recognized long ago by Kant and Schiller (and more recently in contemporary aesthetics), our affects are themselves a unique venue in which our autonomy and humanity finds expression. Each of us has the capacity to form an affective outlook on the world that is achieved via our relating to the world around us in a curious and open spirit. And it is this capacity to attain what Schiller called a “playful” perspective on the world that allows us to explore modes of feeling that are alien to our usual habitus, and to thereby enlarge our affective perspective on the world. Call this our capacity for *affective autonomy*.

Political environments can, moreover, either cultivate or stifle one’s affective autonomy. And as I argue, we have reason to cultivate one another’s affective autonomy. This is not only because of the respect that we owe one another as citizens, but also because the changes of heart that activists so deeply desire from their fellow citizens are ultimately meaningfully—*unless* we can count them as being autonomously produced via a spirit of curiosity and openness.

In this way, *affective civility*, where this is understood as picking out those forms of political interaction which shape our fellow citizens’ affects in ways that cultivate, rather than undermine their affective autonomy, ought to be an ideal of radical, progressive politics.

In this paper, I will only be able to lay out a basic and non-exhaustive groundwork for what affective civility consists in. Nevertheless, I tentatively identify three characteristics of affectively civil speech: namely, I argue that such speech is *transparent*, *non-disdainful*, and *invitational* in character.