

Honor in the Modern World

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Fighting Together

Civil Discourse and Agonistic Honor

Dan Demetriou

In ancient Greece, an *agon* was a public contest meant to reveal excellence. An *agon* may be a wrestling match between two champions, a poetry competition, an athletic event, or any other forum in which respectable equals are matched up to compete for fame. *Agonism* is just the cultural, psychological, and behavioral syndrome that characterizes these profoundly meaningful struggles between evenly-matched and respectable opponents. Agonistic principles—often spoken of as being “honorable” or a “code of honor”—are obvious enough in athletics and warrior-aristocratic warfare. However, a number of notable political theorists have argued for decades that democracy itself is essentially contestatory and “agonistic.”¹

If democracy is agonistic, or even if (more humbly) it merely has a strong agonistic element, then it would stand to reason that agonistic honorableness would count as a *civic virtue*. And yet it is rarely spoken of in this way. One reason for this may be that discussions of agonistic democracy are often framed in terms of postmodernism, critical theory, and Continental philosophy. Political philosophers leery of those traditions will be disinclined to accept agonism if it means taking on board (what they see as) undesirable theoretical baggage. Another factor militating against categorizing agonistic honorableness as a civic virtue is the widespread (and partially correct) assumption that agonism approaches everything as a fight. To those who think politics and civic debate need be *less*, not *more*, combative, promoting agonistic honorableness will seem

like a bad idea.² A third criticism of the civic importance of agonism comes from the opposite direction: talk of agonistic honorableness strikes a number of readers as hopelessly romantic: in the real world of dog-eat-dog, combatants (literal and figurative) have no time for chivalric twaddle about fighting fair or respecting one's opponents.³

I think the best way to reply to these worries is as a "Hobbes of honor" might. First, a Hobbesian rational reconstruction of agonistic honor on behalf of civility would be perfectly intelligible to readers from any philosophical tradition, be it "analytic," "Continental," or what have you. Second, as we shall see, a Hobbesian reconstruction would have the benefit of explaining how agonistic honor works to quell, not enflame, hostility between disputants. Finally and perhaps most importantly, a Hobbesian reconstruction of honor would explain to our more hardboiled critics why the self-disadvantaging norms of honor are not naïve or unrealistic, but perfectly rational given the agents and conditions involved. So, using Hobbes as my pattern, I begin this chapter by illuminating and justifying the self-disadvantaging principles of agonistic honor by showing how they would emerge from honor's equivalent of "rational" individuals situated in honor's "state of nature."

This Hobbesian exercise makes it easy to appreciate why agnostic honorableness is a civic virtue, especially in spaces (such as pluralistic democracies, universities, courtrooms, etc.) where conflict is inevitable and desirable. Thus, in the second half of this chapter, I apply its principles to the pressing question of civil discourse. In contrast to what might be called the "standard model" of civil discourse, which attempts to neutralize the contestatory nature of public debate, on agonistic honor adversaries are allowed and even encouraged to see each other as status-seeking opponents. Nonetheless, disputants must play by the rules necessary to sustaining the system that allows them to "champion" their causes in the first place.

A HOBBSIAN RECONSTRUCTION OF AGONISTIC HONOR

According to contractarian ethical and political theory, what we are "owed" by justice is determined by cooperative principles. By definition, cooperation is mutually beneficial. But the fact that some scheme is mutually beneficial doesn't mean it is *maximally* beneficial to every individual involved. If I have plenty of chickens but no shoes, and you have no chickens but plenty of shoes, it would be mutually beneficial for us to trade. But it would be even *more* beneficial for you to take my chickens by force, *if you could do so with impunity*. Such an uncooperative act would be patently unjust on contractarian principles, however, because it is coercive. Thus, contractarian justice places constraints on our pursuit of well-being.

What is the value of these contractarian constraints? "The importance of justice itself" does not satisfy the skeptic. Hobbes attempted to answer the skeptical challenge by reconciling justice's constraints with a value the skeptic *does* take for granted: self-interest. Hobbes sought to show that, in certain circumstances, our self-interest is served by respecting the constraints of contractarian justice, and that it is in our self-interest to create such circumstances whenever possible.

Hobbes begins this project by imagining us as completely "rational" on the skeptic's way of seeing things: i.e., as individuals aiming to maximize our own material well-being. He supposes further that we are all equal in the sense that none of us can exert his or her will on others without fear of reprisal. Finally, he assumes a certain amount of material scarcity: we all cannot have as much as we would like, but nonetheless there can be enough for everyone.

If rational agents so conceived and so situated were given total freedom in an ungoverned "state of nature," Hobbes observed, it would be rational for them to be uncooperative. Even if one's neighbors mean to keep their bargains, it makes sense to break faith with them whenever profitable. As a result, cooperative endeavors become impossible, and a "war of all against all" ensues, leaving our imaginary agents without industry, commerce, exploration, or arts, and consigned to lives "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." To escape this scenario, a law enforcement system must be established that is effective enough to make it irrational for people to violate the terms of their mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements. Since (in Hobbes's view) one mustn't be unjust and yet cannot be obliged to act irrationally, justice itself doesn't come into being until the payoff structure is changed to make it imprudent to break faith.⁴

Turning from justice to honor, it should be noted that Hobbes was also interested in justifying a strong (indeed, totalitarian) government. Hobbes felt that only a powerful state apparatus could enforce covenants and thus enable us to rationally and justly promote our well-being. Aristocrats, however, posed a difficulty for the Hobbesian state since, as Montesquieu would later elaborate upon, they tend to resist totalitarian control.⁵ More problematically yet, aristocratic honor-mindedness doesn't square with the psychology Hobbes felt necessary for an orderly society, since honor-mindedness drives its subscribers to fight over trifles, glory, and status. The carrots and sticks of material well-being (life, health, security, etc.) have relatively little sway on the honor-minded, who are moved by considerations of calumny and prestige more than they are physical punishment or material reward. Insofar as people are uninterested in promoting their material or physical well-being, they won't be motivated to construct or obey a leviathan.⁶

Assuming the moral value of material well-being (and the instrumental value of the items conducive to it, such as security or wealth) is impor-

tant for any apology for justice, since justice is about the cooperative rules governing our pursuit and distribution of these goods. Justice *isn't* suited to managing other sorts of goods, however. It is difficult to imagine how we could create laws redistributing reputation, for example, or how we might collectively increase overall prestige—a zero-sum good that can be gained only by taking an equivalent amount from others—through cooperation. Insofar social status is a good, it is a good justice simply cannot govern, and therefore a good that isn't promoted for oneself by creating a state that enforces our cooperative agreements. Thus, everything would be much easier for Hobbes's political agenda if we agreed that material well-being mattered and social status did not, and that is why Hobbes had to disparage the value of prestige-seeking in his takedown of honor.⁷

Unlike Hobbes, I hold that prestige matters morally, and there are moral constraints on our pursuit of it. Some readers may disagree, but even for skeptics about the moral importance of prestige, it should be interesting to see if the limits agonistic honorableness places on our quest for status can be "reconstructed" in a Hobbesian manner. In other words, would we need to invent agonistic honorableness if we didn't already have it?

Agonistic Honor's "Rational" Agent

We begin by imagining, as Hobbes did, a certain sort of person in a certain sort of circumstance. As noted earlier, to the contractarian Hobbes, rational agents are concerned solely with maximizing their material well-being. In contrast, we imagine agents wholly unconcerned with health, wealth, and security but obsessed with social rank. I stress rank: we are imagining people who wish to be judged as *superior* to their fellows, not just as their equals. Moreover, the sort people we have in mind are highly social, since what they value—social rank—supervenes on the positive opinion of their comrades. In some respects, then, "rational" individuals (insofar as they seek to maximize their "good") in this thought experiment are the polar opposite of "rational" individuals on Hobbes's contractarian picture: they are social (as opposed to individualistic), competitive (as opposed to disinterested), and prestige-oriented (as opposed to prudential).

The puzzle Hobbes hoped to solve is how the restraint justice demands of us could become rational, so he places his prudential agents in a context that makes such restraint irrational for them. For our purposes, we are supposed to be perplexed by how it could be rational for adversaries to obey the constraints of agonistic honor. So we must place our prestige-driven agents in a context that makes the rules of honorable contest superficially irrational for *them*. To make it as challenging as possible for ourselves, imagine our rational agents at war. This war isn't a Hobbesian war of mutually "diffident" (in the archaic sense of "suspi-

cious”) disinterested atomic individuals, but a war of two factions—call them the “Reds” and the “Blues”—who utterly abhor each other. Here we have a war not of all against all, but of some against some, and its hellishness is none the lesser for it. For example, the sort of animosity I’m imagining can be found in certain quarters of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as evidenced by the Palestinian Authority children’s show *The Best Home*, which occasionally featured young children reciting poems such as this:

I lit a fire like volcanoes under their [the Jewish Israelis’] feet
 I refused to be submissive and degraded
 I rejected everything but dying with the honor that will give me life
 From a nation that has forgotten the Muslims’ heroism
 Omar ibn al-Khattab and Saladin
 from between the whistles of the bullets I sing:
 “Long live the nation of Fatah and Yasser Arafat”
 Allah’s enemies, the sons of pigs
 Destroyed and uprooted the olive and fig trees
 They murdered children with guns, like snakes
 They cut off their limbs with stones and knives
 They raped the women in the city squares
 They defiled Allah’s book in front of millions
 Where is the nation of Islam?
 Where are the nation of Islam and the Jihad fighters?
 Where is the fear of Allah in Jerusalem, which has been defiled by the
 Zionists?⁸

Watching the online video of a young girl reciting such lines is an unsettling and discouraging experience. How could our imaginary Reds and Blues, animated by similar feelings, ever come to treat each other with honorable restraint?

Stage 1: Intramural Ranking

Given the importance of this war for each faction, they will distribute honors and social prerogatives (including, according to anthropologists, mating privileges)⁹ to those on their side who do the best job of killing the enemy. We have already assumed that our agents are status-seeking and covet such honors. So the first step in our progression to honorable restraint is an intramural one: although the *fight* is ostensibly against the Reds or the Blues, a *competition* will emerge between comrades.

Examples of intramural ranking abound. Consider, for instance, the culturally widespread practice of taking scalps of the enemy as trophies, a practice old even in the writings of Herodotus, who reports of the Scythian warrior that “he is proud of [his] scalps, and hangs them from his bridle rein . . . the greater the number of such napkins a man can show, the greater he is esteemed among them.”¹⁰ Or consider the poem quoted above, which praises “Omar ibn al-Khattab and Saladin,” power-

ful Ottoman caliphs, and admonishes the current generation of Muslims to raise up heroes in their league. Perhaps the most famous example of intramural competition in modern Western culture is found in the rousing conclusion of Winston Churchill's "Finest Hour" address:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "*This was their finest hour.*"¹¹

Although Churchill offered many good reasons for resisting the Nazi threat in his address, these lines—strategically saved for last—activated the anxieties and aspirations of those British citizens who were interested not only in winning the war, but also in surpassing the martial exploits of past and future generations of Britons.

Stage 2: Intermural Ranking

In Stage 1 of our Hobbesian reconstruction of agonistic honor, we saw the first emergence of order from chaos: instead of the Reds and the Blues fighting each other in an egalitarian helter-skelter, we observed each side ranking its combatants according to who does the best job of cutting down enemies. However, each side ranked its fighters based on a crude method that treats every opponent as equal. It's the number of scalps, the number of "w"s in one's "win" column, that counts. But as we all know, not all kills are equally meritorious: defeating a tough foe speaks better of one's prowess than does overmastering a weak one. Thus, those distributing honors in Reds' fight against the Blues must turn their gaze across the battlefield and estimate the relative excellence of individual Blue warriors, and vice versa. If Homer's presentation is any indication, notable warriors of the Greek dark age would seek each other out and risk their lives to strip vanquished equivalents of their armor. In the *Beowulf* epic, Beowulf pursues Grendel precisely *because* Grendel is so fierce, and Beowulf makes it clear to his Danish hosts what the implications would be for their relative prestige if he succeeds where they failed:

The monster is not afraid of the Danes,
Of the folk of the Danemen, but fights with pleasure,
Kills and feasts, expects no contest,
But he will soon learn to dread the Geats.¹²

In modern militaries, unit citations are given to those who engage in the fiercest combat, and the principle is the same in sports, such as college football, where a team's ranking is determined not just by victories and defeats, but also by strength of schedule. The principle is an old one: "We are known not by our friends, but by our enemies."

Obvious as it seems that we must rank opponents to rank ourselves, judging the quality of our opponents necessitates two significant moral

advances. First, evaluating opponents requires us to distinguish among them. No longer are they a faceless mass, a herd of animals to be slaughtered. Now they have identities, even if that distinctiveness is based merely on the quality of the armor they wear or the number of feathers in their hair. Second, ranking our enemies means giving them at least *some* sort of positive appraisal. Evil though they may be in our eyes, at least they manifest an excellence we grudgingly admire—the very same sort of excellence, in fact, we use to rank ourselves.

Stage 3: Intermural Coordination

Even if the Blues and Reds consider the strength of opponents when distributing honors to themselves, no mechanism has been introduced for matching fighters. The inefficiency of this situation is manifest. Combatants ambitious for honors do not want to waste their time, energy, and luck on enemy fighters whose scalps, armor, or standards will earn middling reward. They would much rather find worthier opponents whose defeat would bring greater prestige. On the other hand, fighters motivated to accumulate honor would hesitate to challenge a much higher-ranked foe, since the probability of victory would be so low that, even multiplied by the greater potential payoff, the risk wouldn't be worth it. Thus, in Stage 3, we begin to see fighters in both camps pairing off against their equivalents.

Although an improvement, a mere face-off cannot establish superiority, thanks to problems of incommensurability and vagueness about the rules of engagement. Perhaps the most salient example of this is the battle between David and Goliath.¹³ Clearly, agonistic considerations, on both the individual and group level, propel David and Goliath to fight each other as champions. Their combat, however, is problematic as far as fairness is concerned. Goliath's physical advantages are superhuman (on some interpretations, he stands at eleven feet). Absent some offer of handicap, he doesn't seem like a reasonable match for David. On the other hand, ancient slingers like David could kill at ranges over a hundred meters and knock birds out of the sky. The David-meets-Goliath story, then, is hardly one of an underdog standing up to a bully,¹⁴ and the incommensurability of each champion's advantages makes gauging how much honor to award the victor difficult. Was what David did sneaky, within the stated rules but outside the unstated ones, "not quite cricket"? Or was it perfectly fair, considering Goliath's size? Such questions are the warp and woof of Monday morning commentary, but for the champions themselves such questions have existential import, not only for their lives but also their legacies.

Because of incommensurability problems and vagueness about the rules, combatants or their seconds must do more than simply issue challenges—they must actually cross enemy lines and establish rules of com-

bat. In real life, rules limiting battle usually grow organically, by acquired custom, as in the highly ritualized battles described by anthropologists in cultures around the globe. But even in the West and as late as the nineteenth century, we see examples of prearranged combat wherein the terms of battle are set forth as strictly as possible purely for the purpose of making the prestige distribution uncontroversial. Consider, for example, a challenge issued by Captain Broke, Royal Navy, to James Lawrence, U.S. Navy, in the War of 1812.

Sir, As the [USS] *Chesapeake* appears now ready for sea, I request that you will do me the favour to meet the [HMS] *Shannon* with her, ship to ship, to try the fortune of our respective flags. [. . .] Be assured, sir, that it is not from any doubt I can entertain you of your wishing to close with my proposal, but merely to provide an answer to any objection that might be made, and very reasonably, upon the chance of our receiving unfair support. [. . .] The *Shannon* mounts twenty-four guns upon her broadside, and one light boat-gun—eighteen-pounders upon her maindeck, and thirty-two pound carronades on her quarterdeck and forecastle, and is manned with a complement of 300 men and boys (a large proportion of the latter), besides thirty seamen, boys and passengers, who were taken out of recaptured vessels lately.¹⁵

Broke's letter goes on to give detailed information—information so specific it would be considered traitorous for a modern officer to divulge—about the *Shannon's* capabilities, and even offers to escort the *Chesapeake* under flag of truce to a suitable spot for battle. Lawrence never received this letter, but he guessed Broke's intentions correctly and sailed out to meet the *Shannon* in a ship-to-ship duel. The *Chesapeake* was taken, and Lawrence was killed in action (his famous dying words being "Don't give up the ship!") and buried with great honor by the British naval officers in Nova Scotia. For his part, Broke, though severely wounded, survived and was showered with glory, awarded with a baronetcy, and inducted into the Order of the Bath. His challenge to Lawrence was soon published in the newspapers of both countries, and was generally approved of as highly honorable.

Stage 4: Courtesy

Whereas David and Goliath make declarations about how they will feed each other's bits to the birds, Broke and Lawrence—though keen for victory and wholly prepared for death—treated each other with courtesy: had Lawrence survived, naval tradition and probably inclination would have led Broke to host the American captain and his remaining officers to the finest dinner he could provide at sea, and Lawrence would have been paroled with considerable freedom in Canada.

Of course, Broke and Lawrence were cultural cousins. But mutual respect appears to be possible between warriors divided by race, lan-

guage, and religion. Perhaps this is why some of the most romantic tales of honor are those about Richard I and the above-mentioned Saladin. Richard the Lionheart by all accounts was a phenomenal human specimen and unsurpassed warrior, and as leader of the Third Crusade he inspired awe among both Christians and Muslims. For his part, Saladin was widely credited with being a magnanimous and wise caliph. Although Richard never met Saladin except in literature, we can be fairly confident in reports of their mutual regard. For instance, when Richard fell ill, Saladin sent him fruit, sherbet, and his personal doctor. Richard in turn knighted Saladin's nephew. And in the battle of Jaffa, Saladin sent the unhorsed Richard one of his mounts, remarking that "a king shouldn't have to fight on foot."¹⁶

Courtesy between champions is predictable for elitist and ludic reasons. As we see in the case of Saladin and Richard ("A king shouldn't fight on foot"), elitism can be a powerful bond between antagonists. This is because, after a while, warriors with the highest prestige come to see themselves less as champions of *their sides* and more as *champions simpliciter*, who see war as a platform to prove their superiority. Reasonably, they begin to consider themselves favored by the gods (i.e., lucky) and made of better stuff (good genes), and they value these advantages to such a degree that they would rather their children intermarry with champions of the other side than with commoners on their own side. Perhaps this is why Richard I, in the midst of a religious crusade with strong racist undertones, saw fit to offer his sister in a political marriage to Saladin's brother.

As traditions of extramural coordination strengthen and grow, antagonists inevitably begin to agree to terms that suit their mutual preferences (think of aristocrats delaying battles because of inclement weather). War thus becomes increasingly ludic, a sport to played. At its highest reaches, this sort of combat is pure contest. Gone are thoughts of purging the earth of some defiling enemy, revenging some wrong, or seizing some territory. Fully aristocratic warfare is what John Ruskin called "exercise or play," never to be fought with unwilling conscripts, but only with those of aristocratic leisure—the "proudly idle"—who are kept by circumstance or culture from useful occupation and "thirst for some appointed field for action; and find, in the passion and peril of battle, the only satisfying fulfillment of [their] unoccupied being."¹⁷ This spirit of deadly play is especially evident in the rules of warfare for Kshatriyas, the warrior caste of Hindu society, as outlined in the four-thousand-year-old *Rigveda*:

Elephants should oppose only elephants; and so the chariots, cavalry, and infantry only their opposite. [. . .] One should strike only after due notice . . . [and never one] who is confiding or unprepared or panic-stricken . . . or [one who is] without armor, or whose weapons are

rendered useless . . . or [one who is] fatigued and frightened, weeping and unwilling to fight; [or] one who is ill and cries for quarter, or one of tender years or advanced age. [In fact] a Kshatriya should defend even his enemy if entreated with joined hands.¹⁸

These courtesies continue to pop up in the most unexpected places, including the current Ukrainian conflict. As Paul Robinson (this volume) has told the tale,

For months, Motorola's [a.k.a. Arseny Pavlov, commander of the Sparta battalion of the rebel Donetsk People's Republic] unit has been attempting to drive the Ukrainians out of Donetsk airport. His men occupy the old terminal, while [Ukrainian Captain] Kupol's occupy the new one. In an unusual development, Motorola this week permitted the Ukrainians to rotate their troops in the new terminal—taking out 48 tired soldiers and bringing in 51 new ones—on condition that they did not bring any heavy weapons in. The rebels inspected the incoming Ukrainians before letting them pass. While the inspection was taking place, Motorola and Kupol met and shook hands.¹⁹

Thus, we see how, given the initial conditions set forth, it is imaginable that two faceless hordes groaning in their mutual hatred could create a culture of battlefield courtesy and honorable restraint.

As with Hobbes's account of justice, this presentation of honor is mythological: it doesn't accurately represent the actual development of the agonistic ethos, either as a social phenomenon or as an evolved moral instinct.²⁰ Nonetheless, and in parallel to Hobbes on justice, this reconstruction helps illuminate and justify the value of agonistic honorableness by showing why we would need to invent its constraints if honorableness didn't already call for them. Moreover, this exercise serves to answer the three objections to seeing agonistic honorableness as a civil virtue. First, it allowed us to explain and justify agonistic honorableness without appeal to postmodern, Continental, or critical theory. Second, we have seen that agonistic honorableness, although highly competitive, serves not only to limit conflict but also make it less acrimonious. Finally, a rational reconstruction that begins by positing status-conscious agents every bit as familiar to us as Hobbes's prudential egoists, and illustrated at every stage with nonfictional examples from past and present, should demonstrate that the honorable restraint agonism calls for is hardly an unrealistic ideal.

PRINCIPLES OF HONORABLE CIVIL DISCOURSE

We now turn to the question of whether and how to apply the norms of agonistic honorableness to the problem of civil discourse, which grows ever more urgent. According to a variety of measures, public debate in the United States has reached a level of dysfunction unmatched since

Senator Charles Sumner was caned nearly to death by Representative Preston Brooks in 1856.²¹ Universities are currently embroiled in disabling controversies over issues relating to honoring racist founders, addressing racial and gender underrepresentation, and improving campus climates for minorities. Most online news outlets have curtailed their comment boards because of hateful speech. Prominent protest movements seem designed to goad (what they see as) a complacent public more than to garner public support for their causes. Social media feeds are full of outraged commentary and meme-driven rhetoric that heap contempt on positions (on guns, on religion, on immigration, etc.) that wide swaths of the public—indeed, a significant percentage of the typical poster's *own friends*—subscribe to. New injustices and offenses (such as “ableism” and “manspreading”) enter mainstream discussion on what seems like a weekly basis; and although some of these new categories of discrimination and wrongdoing are legitimate, the degree of opprobrium aimed at offenders is frequently disproportionate to the level of consensus about the wrongness of these offenses and the degree of real harm they incur. Indeed, even yesterday's well-meaning faux pas has mutated into today's “microaggression.”

Possible explanations for the toxic nature of so much public debate include unabashedly partisan cable news channels, the democratization of media by social networking platforms, a troubled and bifurcated economy, increasingly aggressive policing, greater religious and ethnic diversity, and overprotective child-rearing. But whatever the causes, the animus is spilling over into ideological and identity-fueled violence. As I type this, the past few weeks have seen in the United States: a spree shooting at an abortion clinic, a racially motivated shooting of four black protestors, a case of domestic Islamist terrorism, a racially motivated execution-style murder of a white police officer, and a campus closing due to an online threat of racial violence.

One might infer from the raucous nature of the culture wars that its combatants are battle-hardened. Just the opposite is true. Calls for “trigger warnings” are growing frequent, as are the much more problematic demands by some students groups to be exempted from triggering material—discussions of rape, for example, are being curtailed in even our nation's most prominent law schools.²² Another indication of discourse fragility is the campus “safe space,” an area where students triggered by opposing viewpoints can retreat. (In one infamous case, student activists at Brown University—concerned about the psychological trauma that could result from witnessing a formal debate over the widespread claim that colleges are rape cultures—set up a safe space furnished with “cookies, coloring books, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets, and a video of frolicking puppies.”²³) Thus, it is easy to conclude that political discourse in the United States has grown both more aggressive and more cowardly.

The Standard Model of Civil Discourse

The 2011 Tucson, AZ, shooting that killed six and left Congresswoman Gabby Giffords brain damaged was considered by many at the time to be a signal moment in decline of American civil discourse. At a memorial service for the victims, President Obama called for a renewed commitment to talking our problems out:

[A]t a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized—at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do—it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.²⁴

A host of institutes, forums, academic conferences, and news organizations were summoned into existence shortly after President Obama's call to action, and the ethical approach usually assumed in these discussions about the nature and purpose of civil discourse is decidedly non-agonistic.

As reflected by President Obama's remarks, the (what we can call) "standard model" of civil discourse aims at *closing gaps*: on it, the breakdown of civil discourse is explained by ideological polarization, and narrowing the gap between ideologies—either as a precondition of civil discourse²⁵ or as its goal²⁶—is the aim. The standard model's advice on closing those gaps often reads like a crash course in Logic 101 or Introduction to Philosophy. For instance, in an essay for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Andrea Leskes encourages disputants to "embody open-mindedness" and "use verified information."²⁷ Another scholar considers civility to require "consideration of diverse viewpoints," an "appreciation for insight offered by those with professional and practical knowledge," and "arguments that avoid manipulation, fallacies or knowingly inaccurate information."²⁸

Like any academic, I'd be delighted if citizens had the will and training to weigh the reasoning and empirical evidence for controversial positions. I fully support efforts to improve civil discourse by making citizens more fair- and open-minded, patient, and skeptical. But I feel it would *also* be beneficial if we inculcated virtues of civil discourse that equipped citizens to debate sustainably even when there is no hope of consensus.

Agonistic Civil Discourse

As an approach to civil discourse, agonism denies gap theory. Unlike the standard model, on which adversaries would ideally come to reasoned agreement, agonism requires conflict, and would ideally shape this conflict into respectful and meaningful contest. Whereas the standard model discourages ego and tries to get us to focus on the issues, on agonism disputants are assumed to, even encouraged to, conceive of

themselves as “champions” of their causes—a timely feature in our narcissistic cultural moment, where posting a selfie while holding up a sign (often with a hashtag), is a principal form of activism. It may seem counterintuitive to base a philosophy of civil discourse on self-absorption and conflict, but recall that the initial conditions of our Hobbesian reconstruction of honor placed status-hungry combatants in a far more rancorous setting. Status-seeking and conflict are the raw materials from which honorable contest is formed. So although it may be antithetical to the aims of the standard model of civil discourse, it is quite possible, as we have seen, for agonists with utterly different aims to fight respectfully and hold each other in mutual esteem.

Calling for an agonistic approach to civil discourse is not an ivory-tower fancy detached from the grim realities of the political trenches. For instance, former U.S. Congressman and National Endowment for the Humanities president Jim Leach has argued that politics needs more of an agonistic sensibility.

I really think America needs an “athletic democracy.” In the sense of people looking at fairness and the sports mentality. There’s no good coach and team in America that doesn’t begin with hard work and respecting your opponent. [. . .] After every game you see the two teams put their arms around each other. You don’t see that in politics. Sport has come up with a higher ethic than the political ethic. We need to ask ourselves if the vigorous competition in sports can be carried out, shouldn’t we expect the same of the political process?²⁹

In fact, as we shall see, agonistic ideas are often endorsed in informal discussions about the rules of political and social debate. In what follows, then, I offer a handful of agonistic principles for promoting civil discourse.

Don’t find ideological disagreement upsetting, unnatural, or immoral. In the liberal utopian tradition of war ethics, peace is assumed to be good and conflict assumed to be bad, the unquestioned aim of all conflict is conflict-resolution, and conflict itself is evidence of prior moral failure. These assumptions are carried over to political debates—but are they sound? Agreement can be reached on a falsehood or an injustice, after all, and there is little reason to believe that, even if consensus is reached on this or that issue, harmony will reign. There are no decisive debates. Things never seem to settle down. As consensus is reached in one debate, another one takes its place, and the new one appears to be as existentially important as the old one. For pluralistic liberal democracies in particular, it seems that there will never be anything like harmony. We like to speak of “culture warriors,” but true culture warriors are not “culture jihadists” or “culture crusaders”: they are not pious, regretful fighters yearning for a future when they can beat their swords into plowshares and live in peace with the world, where “peace” is defined by unanimity on some

issue, an intellectual landscape purged of evil influence. The sooner we understand that politics such as ours are places of perpetual ideological battle, the sooner politically active citizens can shape themselves into true culture warriors.

Don't expect or desire to convert your ideological opponents. As we have seen, the standard model of civil discourse says that it would be ideal if ideological opponents reached consensus. Common experience suggests that this happens very rarely, even in academic disputes. Giving up on converting your ideological opponents doesn't mean forsaking the hope of making a difference, of course. In parallel to Thomas Kuhn's thoughts on scientific revolutions,³⁰ it isn't unreasonable to think that real political progress is made by persuading onlookers, not opponents. Agonism psychologically better prepares us for a war of ideas because agonists don't enter the arena in the vain hope that our opponents will toss down their weapons and accede to our points.

Giving up on our opponents as potential converts doesn't mean disrespecting them, nor does it license dishonorable attacks against them or their positions. First, it's worth remembering that fighting honorably for our views, even if doing so disadvantages our positions in the short-term, usually renders our positions more attractive to our audiences over the long haul. And secondly, for agonistic reasons observed above, we are to recognize ourselves in our opponents, and acknowledge the same motives and principled commitments in them that we pride in ourselves. Sure, our ideological opponents would be "better" in some way if they were correct (read: agreed with us) about the issue under dispute—they'd be better scientists, or philosophers, or what have you. But crucially, agreeing with us or even being actually correct *wouldn't make them better warriors*. If they fight honorably, they deserve our respect as culture warriors.

Pick on someone your own size (or slightly bigger). The denotation of the word "bullying" has expanded in recent decades to encompass any form of unwarranted aggression. Traditionally, the aggressor had to be somehow stronger or better-positioned to count as a bully: for a smaller boy to pick a fight with a bigger one on the schoolyard would traditionally be thought of foolish or spirited, but not bullying. Theories of justice have a hard time explaining why the aggressive smaller boy traditionally got a pass—after all, although aggressing on a stronger party is more likely to result in a (poetically just) drubbing than would aggressing on a weaker party, both are equally unjust aggressions. Agonistic honor, on the other hand, does a better job of explaining our old-fashioned conception of bullies. On agonism, competitors must "find their place" in the relevant ranking. This requires a measured sort of ambition according to which one challenges slightly higher-ranked competitors, but never lower-ranked. This makes sense, and is even evident in male-male competition in some nonhuman species (such as among stags), since competing with a

lower-ranked party will not elevate one's position whatever the outcome, and competing with a much higher-ranked opponent will almost certainly result in defeat and injury.³¹ Bullying on agonism, then, signals weakness or lack of confidence insofar as the bully is interpreted as imagining his hapless victim as a worthy opponent. Bullying also disrupts the ranking by injuring or discouraging a lower-ranked party, thereby violating their honor-right to find their true place in the status competition.

Applied to an agonistic theory of civil discourse, the bully will be someone who chooses a worse-positioned figure for debate or as a target of condemnation. Examples abound. One classic case involves the website *Jezebel's* reposting of some racist tweets a handful of high school students made about President Obama, deciding not only to publish their names, but also to notify their school administrators about their tweets. Given *Jezebel's* influence, any web search of these students' names will, in perpetuity, reveal their offensive tweets within the top few results and thus presumably harm their future prospects.³² More controversial examples of "punching down" include Richard Dawkins's tweets accusing fourteen-year-old Ahmed Mohamed of engineering a publicity stunt with his clock resembling a bomb,³³ and the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo's* Mohammed cartoon, which cartoonist Garry Trudeau accused of "punching downward, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority."³⁴

Again, on the standard view, it is hard to see why it would be worse to "punch down." Why should the relative status of your interlocutor, or the figure you're calling out, matter, from the perspective of justice? Do they do/stand for unjust things, or not? Shouldn't we disregard questions of relative status and power of the parties involved, and focus on *truth* of the accusation or its justification? Presumably so—but the sense that one oughtn't bully persists. Agonism, in contrast, offers us a ready reply: punching down is dishonorable because softer targets are unable to defend themselves or put up a good fight.

As the above examples of "punching down" show, who is higher or lower in the ranking of culture warriors is a point of some dispute. Was *Charlie Hebdo* bullying poor disenfranchised Muslims, or actually standing up to violent Islamists who threaten harmless artists offending against their sacred figures? These debates are being had, and these are the debates that should be had according to an agonistic theory of civil discourse. Generally, however, agonism would take a dim view of professors engaging in (sincere, nonpedagogical) debate with students, public officials denouncing private individuals, and prominent social critics bearing down on relatively obscure ideological opponents. If a better-positioned party wants to address something a weaker culture warrior has said or done, she may do so honorably by diffusing the personal nature of the criticism—say, by taking aim at a general trend that the lower-ranked party exemplifies. Thus, instead of "Obscure person x did

bad thing y” it’s better for a prominent social critic to say, “I’m noticing some people doing y, and it’s bad because of such-and-such reasons.” If some more equally-positioned advocate of y defends the practice in response to your criticism, then you may engage them publicly as a representative of the bad practice.

Do not attack noncombatants. Stuck in the early stages of our Hobbesian reconstruction of honor, commonplace ideologues see their counterparts as evil. They expect their champions to have the same uncompromising attitudes and to employ total-war tactics in prosecuting the culture war. Such “true believers”³⁵ who cross the line should be chastised by their own ideological aristocracy for dishonorable attacks. For instance, CNN anchor Carol Costello was forced to apologize by her own network after encouraging viewers to “sit back and enjoy” a recording of Bristol Palin describing to police an attack she suffered by a stranger in a 2014.³⁶ Costello’s barb violated the time-honored journalistic rule of treating the children of politicians as political noncombatants.

The point applies not only to family of our opponents but also their friends, or those simply too busy, agnostic, or cowardly to speak out one way or another. It is quite common to hear political pundits decry the “silence” or “inaction” from this or that group who fail to denounce some outrage the pundit cares about. In doing so, the pundit is trying to declare the silent, inactive group as a fair target. Now it is perfectly true that the inactivity of the group in question may enable her foes. Nonetheless, their unwillingness to stick their necks out makes them nobodies as far as this fight is concerned, and in the eyes of a warrior, a nobody is a non-combatant because combatants must somehow be engaged in the status competition. They may be cowardly or morally benighted; but until silent supporters actually *do* or *say* anything, they don’t deserve (in both senses of the word) to be attacked by culture warriors.

Don’t silence opponents by appealing to authorities. In a much-discussed article, sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning persuasively argue that we are transitioning from a dignity-based culture to an honor-based one based on victimhood. By “dignity” culture the authors mean one that sees everyone as innately endowed with an unearned and inalienable moral worth. On this scheme, our basic moral equality is assumed, assaults on welfare and property are punished by a central authority, and insults are largely disregarded and thus comparatively rare. This regime replaced the traditional honor culture on which some people have more value than others, personal value could be easily lost through shame and insult, and riposte to offense had to be handled personally.³⁷ According to Campbell and Manning, the new moral culture combines and inverts various aspects of its predecessors. Like a traditional honor culture, victimhood culture is highly stratified, but it elevates *victims* and demotes *nonvictims*, which traditional honor cultures would find bizarre. Also in keeping with honor cultures, victimhood culture is highly sensitive to

insult. Nonetheless, on it offenses to dignity are properly handled by authorities, not personally, as if they were “material” attacks on person or property (hence “microaggressions” and not the more accurate “micro-offenses”).³⁸

These appeals to authority result in the demands we are seeing on campuses and in courts for more censorship, more accommodations, lower standards, and tighter limits on speech and inquiry. For instance, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has noted a spike in university speakers withdrawing because of official disinvitation and the certain prospect of relentless student heckling.³⁹ The standard reasons we give against shouting down or censoring our ideological opponents are either Millian (i.e., that debate helps us to discover the truth and keep our moral and political discoveries from becoming “dead dogmas”), or based on the moral/legal rights we have to free speech. However sound these reasons may be, the agonistic perspective adds to them that silencing our opponents through force, intimidation, and threat (not only of violence, but also to careers) is tantamount to refusing to engage them on fair terms.

Don't insult opponents and especially guests. In September of 2007, then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressed the campus of Columbia University by invitation of that school's World Leaders Forum. The invitation was vigorously criticized by a wide spectrum of groups, including wealthy donors and lawmakers who control the aid the institution relies on.⁴⁰ To his credit, Columbia president Lee Bollinger maintained the invitation. But his introduction of the Iranian leader—clearly aimed to placate his politically powerful critics—was an astonishing six minutes of almost unrelenting insult:

Mr. President, you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator. [. . .] [As a holocaust denier, w]hen you have come to a place like this, this makes you, quite simply, ridiculous. [. . .] [As someone who has threatened to destroy Israel,] do you plan on wiping us off the map too? [. . .] I close with this comment frankly and in all candor, Mr. President. I doubt that you will have the intellectual courage to answer these questions. But your avoiding them will in itself be meaningful to us. I do expect you to exhibit the fanatical mindset that characterizes so much of what you say and do.⁴¹

Ahmadinejad's response was completely predictable, and warranted from an honor perspective. The Iranian leader contrasted his treatment with his country's tradition, which “requires that when we invite a speaker we actually respect our students and the professors by allowing them to make their own judgment.” He went on to say that in

a university environment we must allow people to speak their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed by all. Certainly he took more than all the time I was allocated to speak, and

that's fine with me. We'll just leave that to add up with the claims of respect for freedom and the freedom of speech that's given to us in this country.⁴²

Ahmadinejad's complaint about his introduction actually garnered the loudest applause of his speech. Bollinger's dishonorable stridency exposed him to a devastatingly apt lecture on free thought and speech from a dictator of a theocratic regime, and cost him the moral high ground. He would have been better off either not inviting Ahmadinejad or treating him with the respect due an honorable adversary, even if purely as a matter of form.

These agonistic considerations against personal attacks are different but compatible with the reasons given in philosophy classrooms, which stress that personal attacks do not address the strength of an opponent's argument or evidence. The agonistic reason has to do with treating your opponents respectfully and fairly, since they are your moral equals. Of course, many of those we disagree with on ideological matters deserve to be insulted. Agonistic cultures are full of insults, and agonistic ethics holds that insults are often morally required, such as when we must condemn a dishonorable party, or spur a complacent opponent to accept a reasonable challenge. But insults must not be aimed at opponents during debate, since agonists by definition view their adversaries as respectable. This principle is particularly strict when it comes to invited speakers, who are at a disadvantage.

CONCLUSION: AGONISM AS THE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY

Agonistic principles of civil discourse limn the uttermost limits of "sustainable" adversarial speech in a community. Any set of norms more aggressive, hostile, recriminatory, or exclusionary will tear a community apart (even if state coercion forces groups engaging in such ways to remain together politically, their compulsory political entanglements would hardly constitute a community).

Because some communities ought not to be sustained, sometimes *uncivil* discourse will be morally permissible. Sometimes our ideological adversaries simply refuse to play by the rules of either rational inquiry or agonistic debate, and groups that don't even try to govern their speech by reason or honor may be talked to dismissively and derisively, it seems to me. Nonetheless, on the assumption that the conditions of civil discourse are preferable, it is important that we have a good sense of agonistic discourse norms. Precisely because agonistic rules are the most oppositional ones that still count as civil, they are going to be the most psychologically accessible norms for already fractured communities inching back toward toleration of opposing viewpoints.

And because agonistic norms of discourse are the most oppositional of the civil ones, they are the “last, best hope” for sustainable discourse in communities whose partisans are drifting apart. The standard model discourages us from thinking in terms of winning or losing and instead urges us to think of interlocutors as cooperative truth-seekers. This position mirrors the liberal/justice model that promotes cooperation between individuals or states and views conflict as evil. If the first half of this essay is correct, even those inclined to see things this way should admit that it would be beneficial if, when the spirit of cooperation breaks down, adversaries at least fight honorably. Likewise, in the realm of speech, if the cooperative ideal expressed in the standard model is not attainable, agonistically honorable discourse will at least allow us to fight together.

NOTES

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