

8. WHO DESERVES WHAT? / ARISTOTLE

Callie Smartt was a popular freshman cheerleader at Andrews High School in West Texas. The fact that she had cerebral palsy and moved about in a wheelchair didn't dampen the enthusiasm she inspired among the football players and fans by her spirited presence on the sidelines at junior varsity games. But at the end of the season, Callie was kicked off the squad.¹

At the urging of some other cheerleaders and their parents, school officials told Callie that, to make the squad the next year, she would have to try out like everyone else, in a rigorous gymnastic routine involving splits and tumbles. The head cheerleader's father led the opposition to Callie's inclusion on the cheerleading team. He claimed he was concerned for her safety. But Callie's mother suspected the opposition was motivated by resentment of the acclaim Callie received.

Callie's story raises two questions. One is a question of fairness. Should she be required to do gymnastics in order to qualify as a cheerleader, or is this requirement unfair, given her disability? One way of answering this question would be to invoke the principle of nondiscrimination: Provided she can perform well in the role, Callie should not be excluded from cheerleading simply because, through no fault of her own, she lacks the physical ability to perform gymnastic routines.

But the nondiscrimination principle isn't much help, because it

begs the question at the heart of the controversy: Can a person with a disability perform well in the role of cheerleader? Callie's answer is yes. To be a good cheerleader you must be able to lead by example. That, after all, is how cheerleaders traditionally lead. Callie's supporters would say this confuses the issue with one way of achieving it. The real point of cheerleading is to show school spirit and energize the fans. When Callie sits on the sidelines in her wheelchair, waving her pom-poms and smiling, she does well what cheerleaders are supposed to do. So in order to decide what the qualifications are for cheerleading, we need to decide what's essential to cheerleading, and Callie's inclusion on the team does not.

The second question raised by Callie's story is: What kind of resentment might motivate the opposition? Why is he bothered by the presence of Callie? Can't he be afraid that Callie's inclusion deprives his daughter of the honor she's already on the team. Nor is it the case that the father is jealous toward a girl who outshines his daughter at cheerleading. Callie, of course, does not.

Here is my hunch: his resentment probably stems from the fact that Callie is being accorded an honor she does not deserve. He mocks the pride he takes in his daughter's achievement. He thinks great cheerleading is something that can be achieved only by those who excel at gymnastics. Then the honor accorded those who excel at gymnastics is not appreciated to some degree.

If Callie should be a cheerleader because of her disability, the virtues appropriate to the role of cheerleader threaten the honor accorded the other cheerleaders. If the skills they display no longer appear essential to cheerleading, only one way among others of rousing the crowd, though he was, the father of the head cheerleader's honor was at stake. A social practice once taken as the best way to the honors it bestowed was now, thanks to Callie, shown that there's more than one way to be a cheerleader.

begs the question at the heart of the controversy: What does it mean to perform well in the role of cheerleader? Callie's opponents claim that to be a good cheerleader you must be able to do tumblers and splits. That, after all, is how cheerleaders traditionally excite the crowd. Callie's supporters would say this confuses the purpose of cheerleading with one way of achieving it. The real point of cheerleading is to inspire school spirit and energize the fans. When Callie roars up and down the sidelines in her wheelchair, waving her pom-poms and flashing her smile, she does well what cheerleaders are supposed to do—fire up the crowd. So in order to decide what the qualifications should be, we have to decide what's essential to cheerleading, and what's merely incidental.

The second question raised by Callie's story is about resentment. What kind of resentment might motivate the head cheerleader's father? Why is he bothered by the presence of Callie on the squad? It can't be fear that Callie's inclusion deprives his daughter of a place; she's already on the team. Nor is it the simple envy he might feel toward a girl who outshines his daughter at gymnastic routines, which Callie, of course, does not.

Here is my hunch: his resentment probably reflects a sense that Callie is being accorded an honor she doesn't deserve, in a way that mocks the pride he takes in his daughter's cheerleading prowess. If great cheerleading is something that can be done from a wheelchair, then the honor accorded those who excel at tumblers and splits is depreciated to some degree.

If Callie should be a cheerleader because she displays, despite her disability, the virtues appropriate to the role, her claim does pose a certain threat to the honor accorded the other cheerleaders. The gymnastic skills they display no longer appear essential to excellence in cheerleading, only one way among others of rousing the crowd. Ungenerous though he was, the father of the head cheerleader correctly grasped what was at stake. A social practice once taken as fixed in its purpose and in the honors it bestowed was now, thanks to Callie, redefined. She had shown that there's more than one way to be a cheerleader.

Notice the connection between the first question, about fairness, and the second, about honor and resentment. In order to determine a fair way to allocate cheerleading positions, we need to determine the nature and purpose of cheerleading. Otherwise, we have no way of saying what qualities are essential to it. But determining the essence of cheerleading can be controversial, because it embroils us in arguments about what qualities are worthy of honor. What counts as the purpose of cheerleading depends partly on what virtues you think deserve recognition and reward.

As this episode shows, social practices such as cheerleading have not only an instrumental purpose (cheering on the team) but also an honorific, or exemplary, purpose (celebrating certain excellences and virtues). In choosing its cheerleaders, the high school not only promotes school spirit but also makes a statement about the qualities it hopes students will admire and emulate. This explains why the dispute was so intense. It also explains what is otherwise puzzling—how those already on the team (and their parents) could feel they had a personal stake in the debate over Callie's eligibility. These parents wanted cheerleading to honor the traditional cheerleader virtues their daughters possessed.

Justice, *Telos*, and Honor

Seen in this way, the dustup over cheerleaders in West Texas is a short course in Aristotle's theory of justice. Central to Aristotle's political philosophy are two ideas, both present in the argument over Callie:

1. Justice is teleological. Defining rights requires us to figure out the *telos* (the purpose, end, or essential nature) of the social practice in question.
2. Justice is honorific. To reason about the *telos* of a practice—or to argue about it—is, at least in part, to reason or argue about what virtues it should honor and reward.

The key to understanding Aristotle's ethical theory is the force of these two considerations, and the relationship between them.

Modern theories of justice try to separate rights from arguments about honor, virtue, and the good life. They seek principles of justice that are neutral, that allow people to choose and pursue their ends without regard to honor. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) does not think justice can be separated from honor. He believes that debates about justice are, ultimately, debates about honor, virtue, and the nature of the good life.

Seeing why Aristotle thinks justice and honor are connected will help us see what's at stake in the debate over Callie.

For Aristotle, justice means giving people what is due to them, giving each person his or her due. But what is a person's due? It depends on relevant grounds of merit or desert. That is, justice is about distributing things in proportion to merit. Justice involves two factors: "to whom things are assigned." And in general, what is due to equal people should have assigned to them equal things.

But here there arises a difficult question: What is due to people? That depends on what we're distributing—rights, resources, or to those things.

Suppose we're distributing flutes. Who should get them? Aristotle's answer: the best flute players.

Justice discriminates according to merit, not to wealth, or nobility of birth, or chance. Justice is about excellence. And in the case of flute playing, it is about the ability to play well. It would be unjust to distribute flutes on the basis, such as wealth, or nobility of birth, or chance (a lottery).

Birth and beauty may be greater goods than wealth, and those who possess them may, upon being distributed, be a better player more in these qualities than he who is not. But he is not playing; but the fact remains that *he* is the better supply of flutes.³