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: to perform well in the role of cheerleader, Callie must be able to do gymnastics. That, after all, is how cheerleaders traditionally work. Callie’s supporters would say this confuses the means with the end: With a little practice, Callie could be a good cheerleader, but not in a gymnastics routine. The real point is that Callie’s spirited presence on the sidelines at junior varsity games is what counts. When Callie was at the top of the stands in her wheelchair, waving her placard and smiling, she did well what cheerleaders are expected to do: energize the crowd. So in order to decide what the qualities are that make for a good cheerleader, we must first decide what’s essential to cheerleading, an important question.

The second question raised by Callie’s story is: What kind of resentment might motivate the head cheerleader’s father? Why is he bothered by the presence of a girl who outshines his daughter at every turn? What could he fear that Callie’s inclusion deprives his daughter of? He can’t be afraid that Callie’s inclusion deprives her of the honor regarded as the mark of a great cheerleader, for Callie is already on the team. Nor is it the case that he has a personal resent toward a girl who outshines his daughter at every turn. Here is my hunch: his resentment probably stems from some deep felt sense of honor to the head cheerleader. He wants to see that this honor accorded to his daughter is reserved only for those who truly deserve it, not for a girl who is handicapped and therefore incapable of showing the skills they display no longer appear essential. Thus, if Callie should be a cheerleader because she possesses this virtue, then the honor accorded those who excel in this role is tied to some degree to the dichotomy of disability, the virtues appropriate to the role.

If Callie should be a cheerleader because she possesses a certain virtue, the honors it bestowed was now, thanks to the rousing, only one way among others of being recognized, only one way among others of being recognized. A social practice once taken as if the honors it bestowed was now, thanks to the rousing, only one way among others of being recognized.
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 tumbles 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 tumbles 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 ethic force of these two considerations, and the reason Modern theories of justice try to separate and rights from arguments about honor, is that they seek principles of justice that are neutral to people to choose and pursue their ends (384–322 B.C.) does not think justice can believes that debates about justice are, in fact, about honor, virtue, and the nature of the good life.

Seeing why Aristotle thinks justice and honor connected will help us see what’s at stake in the dispute.

For Aristotle, justice means giving each person his or her due. But what is a relevant grounds of merit or desert? That depends on what we’re distributing. Justice involves two factors: “to whom things are assigned.” And in general what equal should have assigned to them equal things.

But here there arises a difficult question: That depends on what we’re distributing—to those things.

Suppose we’re distributing flutes. Who gets one? Aristotle’s answer: the best flute players. Justice discriminates according to merit and excellence. And in the case of flute playing ability to play well. It would be unjust to distribute flutes according to merit, such as wealth, or nobility of birth, or even a basis, such as wealth, or nobility of birth, or even a lottery.

Birth and beauty may be greater goods than those who possess them may, upon being player more in these qualities than he sup playing; but the fact remains that he is the better supply of flutes.