(False) Friends?

On the Relationship between Political Realism and Agonistic Democracy

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Abstract: This contribution probes the relationship between two prominent approaches in contemporary political theory – namely, the one between political realism and agonistic democracy – and its relevance for the (as the editors of this special section dub it) 'new realities' of our age. The point of this article is not to deny that agonism and realism share several core concepts. The point, rather, is that if we analyze these core concepts in more detail we will discover that they play out quite differently in the two approaches and pull agonism and realism in different directions. In many respects, then, agonism and realism are 'false friends': their parallels exist only on a superficial level, which renders an 'assumption of friendship' theoretically flawed and practically counterproductive. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to lay bare the divergences between realism and agonism on a deeper level. The second purpose, however, is to show that a 'fusion of horizons' of the two approaches is by no means impossible. Despite – or rather, because of – the fact that agonism and realism pull in different directions, we can bring them closer together and remedy the weaknesses of the superior approach (i.e. agonism) by supplementing it with elements of realism.

Abstract: Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Beziehung zwischen zwei prominenten Ansätzen der zeitgenössischen politischen Theorie – nämlich zwischen politischem Realismus und agonistischer Demokratie – und ihre Relevanz für die (wie die Herausgeber dieses Themenschwerpunktes es nennen) ‚neuen Realitäten' unserer Zeit. Wiewohl Agonismus und Realismus gewisse Kernkonzepte miteinander zu teilen scheinen, argumentiert dieser Artikel, dass wir, wenn wir diese Kernkonzepte genauer analysieren, feststellen werden, dass sie in den beiden Ansätzen unterschiedlich funktionieren und Agonismus und Realismus in unterschiedliche Richtungen ziehen. In vielerlei Hinsicht sind Agonismus und Realismus also ‚falsche Freunde': Ihre Parallelen bestehen lediglich bei einer oberflächlichen Betrachtungsweise, was eine ‚Annahme der Freundschaft' theoretisch fehlerhaft und praktisch kontraproduktiv macht. Ein Ziel dieses Aufsatzes ist es daher, die Unterschiede zwischen Realismus und Agonismus auf einer tieferen Ebene offenzulegen. Ein zweites Ziel besteht jedoch darin, zu zeigen, dass eine ‚Verschmelzung der Horizonte' der beiden Ansätze keineswegs unmöglich ist. Trotz – oder besser: gerade aufgrund – der Tatsache, dass Agonismus und Realismus in unterschiedliche Richtungen gehen, können wir sie näher zusammenführen und die Schwächen des überlegenen Ansatzes (das heißt des Agonismus) beheben, indem wir ihn mit Elementen des Realismus ergänzen.

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1. Introduction

In linguistics, false friends are words that sound or look identical, or at least very similar, to words in one's native language but have a different meaning in another language. This article is about a potential false friendship in contemporary political theory – namely, the one between political realism and agonistic democracy – and its relevance for the (as the editors of this special section dub it) 'new realities' of our age.[1]

In recent decades, these two approaches have gained particular prominence in Political Theory. Advocates of the former have celebrated a 'realist revival' (Hall 2020; more critically Scheuerman 2013) which is centered around several correctives to what they see as the moralistic and abstract character of contemporary political theory (Galston 2010; Rossi/Sleat 2014; Sagar/Sabl 2021). Proponents of the latter have diagnosed an 'agonistic turn' (Maxwell et al. 2018) which foregrounds the ethical and political value of certain forms of conflict (the *agon*), a commitment to human plurality, and a tragic vision of politics (Wenman 2013; Wingenbach 2013; Flügel-Martinsen 2020). While serious comparisons of the two approaches have remained few and far between, realists often claim that their approach holds an "agonistic" account of politics (McQueen 2017: 10), and agonists assert that agonism chimes with "a kind of political realism, one that jars with the dominant normative, moralistic, and juridical tendencies in contemporary liberal and deliberative theories" (Wenman 2013: 41). Thus, we can identify in contemporary political theory what I call the (tacit) 'assumption of friendship' of the two approaches: that is, the idea that by sharing a number of core concepts, they converge on a fundamental level, which gives them a common theoretical and practical orientation.[2]

The point of this article, then, is not to deny that agonism and realism share several core concepts. The point, rather, is that if we analyze these core ideas in more detail, if we 'dig deeper', as it were, we will discover that they play out quite differently in the two approaches and pull agonism and realism in different directions. In many respects, then, agonism and realism are 'false friends': their parallels exist only on a superficial level, which renders the 'assumption of friendship' theoretically flawed. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to lay bare the divergences between realism and agonism on a deeper level. The second purpose, however, is to show that a 'fusion of horizons' of the two approaches is by no means impossible. Despite – or rather, because of – the fact that agonism and realism pull in different directions, we can bring them closer together and remedy the weaknesses of the superior approach (i.e. agonism) by supplementing it with

1 Large parts of this paper were written on Corfu (Greece), and I would like to thank the staff members of my favorite beach bar (which must remain unnamed) for drinks, support, and inspiration. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the journal, Alexander Weiß, and Andreas Busen for insightful comments and constructive criticism. The usual disclaimer applies.

2 I will show in the next section how this assumption expresses itself more concretely. Here it should be mentioned that since agonists and realists hardly engage seriously with each other, there are few explicit statements about this 'friendship'. Matt Sleat, on the other hand, states explicitly that his account of 'liberal realism is not a form of radical democracy' (2013: 147). However, his discussion of their divergences remains sketchy. This article can, thus, also be seen as an elaboration on Sleat's claim through a more serious engagement with agonism.

elements of realism. This 'fusion of horizons', as I intend to show, is of both theoretical and practical significance.

The article proceeds in five steps: Section 2 demonstrates how the 'assumption of friendship' manifests itself in contemporary political theory and on which arguments it rests. Sections three, four, and five will 'dig deeper' and bring to the fore the divergences between the two approaches: in particular, I will discuss their respective views on pluralism, tragedy, politics and order, and optimism and pessimism. Finally, I will demonstrate that, despite these divergences, a fusion of horizon – a theoretical vision that I call 'realist agonism' – is possible and promising. I will conclude with some reflections on the theoretical and practical relevance of my analysis.

Before this article gets underway, a proviso is in order. In this essay I analyze and compare two -isms: agon*ism* and real*ism*. Now, one of the reasons why some think that "-isms are evil" (Lake 2011) is that they gloss over nuances and differences. 'Not *all* realists/agonists argue that…' might be a response to what follows. Against this familiar argument I deploy a triple strategy of *simplifying*, *problematizing* and *constructing*: -isms are, undoubtedly, *simplifying* devices that gloss over important differences within certain camps. They are also, however, indispensable building blocks of our political discourse; as such, they – and the dominant strands within them – are legitimate objects of analysis. At the same time I will *problematize* the relationship between agonism and realism, insofar as I will show that the dominant strands within these -isms pull in different directions and that the 'assumption of friendship' rests on shaky ground. Finally, this problematization will allow me to develop a more *constructive* vision of a 'realist agonism' in the final part. My aim, in other words, is to show that while agonism and realism are, in some respects, 'false friends', their horizons can be fused into an imaginative, yet realistic, realist kind of agonism.

2. The Assumption of Friendship

Spearheaded by Bernard Williams (2005) and Raymond Geuss (2008), the realist revival in political theory is a relatively recent phenomenon. While this 'new realism' is hardly a homogenous movement, and while its proponents disagree on quite substantial questions, realists nonetheless share a number of core assumptions. Those are eloquently captured by what Edward Hall (2020: 13) calls "the realist sensibility": On the most basic level, realists reject a notion of politics as 'applied ethics' and, thus, insist on the distinctiveness of politics as a separate domain of action. Second, realists are critical of the idealised and optimistic accounts of morality that permeate much of political philosophy. Third, realists stress the conflictual nature of politics and think it is utopian at best and dangerous at worst to believe that conflict and disagreement can be overcome. Fourth, realists take seriously the 'priority of order' in political life. And finally, realists aver that the correct starting point for theorizing is the historical and political reality of how human beings are likely to act within institutional settings (Hall 2020: 9 ff.; also Rossi/Sleat 2014;

Galston 2010). In other words, what lies at the heart of the realist sensitivity is that political analysis cannot start out from abstract principles that lie 'outside' the realm of politics because these principles (and values) are created and constantly re-created through political engagement, friction, and conflict. Any kind of apolitical moralism, therefore, is oblivious to the fact that principles, norms, and values arise out of political struggles and cannot be imposed on it from the outside.

Who, it might be asked, are these 'new realists' – apart from Williams and Geuss? Here we can rely on William Galston's enumeration in his authoritative review essay, one of the first diagnoses of a 'realist alternative' to ideal theories of politics:

> "British theorists such Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, John Dunn, Glen Newey, Richard Bellamy, Geoffrey Hawthorne, Raymond Geuss, and John Gray, who are critical of what they regard as the moralism, legalism, and parochialism of American liberal theory; 'left Nietzscheans', mainly American, such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig; Machiavellians such as Chantal Mouffe […]". (Galston 2010: 386)

What is so interesting about this list is that Galston portrays as 'realists' a number of thinkers who are commonly associated with the radically democratic tradition of political agonism: William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe. In fact, the only leading contemporary agonist missing in this list of 'realists' is James Tully – a thinker who describes himself as both a realist and agonist and has been described in such terms also by others (Honig/Stears 2011). But if the leading theorists of agonism are simultaneously 'realists', then it seems that there must be a fundamental convergence between realist and agonistic thought. This, then, is how the 'assumption of friendship' expresses itself in contemporary political theory: Not only do agonists frequently portray themselves as realists, but realists confirm that the parallels between the two approaches are, indeed, so strong that Connolly, Honig, Mouffe, and Tully can occupy a place in both camps.[3] But why did it emerge in the first place? To answer this question, let us take a look at the core tenets of agonistic thought.

Not unlike realism, it would be wrong to think that agonism is a homogenous theory of politics – there is not 'one political agonism' but there are many different versions of it. Nonetheless, there are, again, overlaps that allow us to subsume particular thinkers under the label of agonism (Wenman 2013). The first feature of agonistic thought is that conflict is not necessarily a vice, and harmony not necessarily a virtue of ethical and political life; rather, certain forms of struggle, competition and conflict – what agonists call 'the *agon*' – are desirable phenomena. Agonists emphasize the positive role of the *agon* for two reasons: The first is that for agonists human plurality and diversity are not just (as it is for liberals) 'facts' of political life; they are precious values. It is also clear, though, that diversity and plurality inevitably create conflict and struggle, which is why, ultimately,

3 Again, the fact that this is primarily a *tacit* assumption does not invalidate my argument. And those who still insist that there can be no 'assumption of friendship', due to the lack of comparative scholarship on agonism and realism, merely confirm the significance of such a comparison.

conflict and struggle are expressions of agonistic core values. Secondly, the *agon* is also more than simply a by-product of human plurality; struggle is in and of itself a productive force in political life. This creative element of the *agon* is expressed by Derek Edyvane (2008: 329) who argues: "It is not simply that inevitable differences in identities, lifestyles and moralities might lead to conflict; it is rather that identities, lifestyles and moralities are in the first place formed through conflict." Agonists, therefore, advocate a vision of 'unruly' politics, a vision in which administration, law, and the imposition of order can 'displace' politics and act as a straitjacket for progressive political action (Honig 1993). The final element of the agonistic conception of politics is 'tragedy'. The concept of tragedy is employed here to challenge rationalistic ideas of progress which often underlie liberal thought, and to express the idea "of a world without hope of final redemption from suffering and strife" (Wenman 2013: 33). Thus, against the rationalistic idea that, at some point, the progressive development of humanity and rational deliberation will create consensus on controversial social, moral, and political questions, agonists argue that this is unrealistic wishful thinking at best and a dangerous illusion at worst. The world, agonists insist, is a place of never-ending struggle and conflict. It is worth noting that behind these elements, there is the broadly republican understanding of 'politics as non-domination' and the idea of politics as a means to achieve non-domination. It is precisely the triumvirate of plurality, agonistic struggles, and tragedy that leads, in the eyes of agonists, to non-domination: plurality creates perpetual agonistic struggles that are an indicator of freedom; attempts to impose "harmony under the governance of reason" (Hampshire 2001: 22), on the other hand, are for agonists nothing else than attempts to create domination and unfreedom.

We are now in a position to better understand on which elements the 'assumption of friendship' between realism and agonism rests. At the most basic level, both approaches reject what they call 'moralism' and emphasize the creative role of political action, struggle, and conflict. This view is closely linked to a strong belief in value-pluralism that permeates and shapes both approaches. However, both approaches are also supremely interested in the question of 'order' – that is, in the question of the relationship between the unpredictability of human freedom and the imposition of order to tame the free play of political action. Finally, both approaches have a tragic view of political life: for advocates of both camps the rationalism we find in much liberal and Marxist thought, the illusion that conflict and struggle will at some point give way to consensus and harmony, is deeply misleading. We can see, therefore, that the assumption of friendship is, indeed, grounded in a number of shared key concepts. Yet, the assumption is based on a superficial analysis of these core assumptions. It is helpful to conceive of it as resulting from a 'checklist approach': an aversion to moralism features in both approaches – check; the concept of plurality plays an important role in both realism and agonism – check; both approaches share the tragedy of political life – check. I will now dig deeper. I will go beyond the superficiality of the checklist approach to bring to the fore the different meanings of these key concepts in the respective approaches.

3. Moralism, Methodological Pluralism, and Normative Pluralism

Realists and agonists agree that 'moralism' is a vice. But what is meant by 'moralism', and why do they reject it? For starters, it is worth noting that moralism is often – and unhelpfully – treated as a synonym for morality; someone is a moralist if they are interested in moral questions and moral judgments. Beyond this simplistic understanding, though, the concept of moralism has three different meanings. The first use of moralism refers, broadly speaking, to analytic philosophers whose theorizing is so abstract that it hardly has any bearing on the real world. John Gray (2007: 5), for instance, levels a devastating critique against this form of "political philosophy" when he writes that "for the most part […] contemporary political philosophers of the presently dominant school are reduced to talking with each other, and to no one else, about topics of interest to no one else". In this context, moralism simply means (extreme) *abstractness*.[4] The second meaning of moralism is the one we encounter in Williams' and Geuss' writings – a methodology whose first task it is to stipulate moral principles to which politics must conform. This is what realists criticize as the 'ethics first approach'. And the third meaning of moralism is succinctly captured by C.A.J. Coady (2006: 1), when he writes that moralism is "the vice of overdoing morality" – that is, a form of *moral crusading* that ultimately does more harm than good in the real world.[5] Of these three expressions of moralism, realists routinely attack the second one, although it is obvious that at least the first and the second ones are closely intertwined. To be sure, agonists are less explicit about the vice of moralism, but for them, as Wendy Brown (2002) puts it, moralism is nonetheless a form of *anti-politics*. Hence, in the rejection of moralism we undoubtedly find a major point of convergence in realist and agonist thought, which is based on the mutual belief that politics itself is a source of normativity (Sleat/Rossi 2014). That is, norms, values, and even agents simply do not exist 'before politics' as pre-political phenomena; they are forged through political action, struggles, and conflicts. On both accounts, then, politics, and especially political conflict, is an inherently *creative* force. This understanding of politics as a source of creation, however, also brings us up against another, perhaps even more fundamental, issue: agonists' and realists' respective understandings of plurality. And on this point, as we will see, the two approaches diverge in important respects.

In addition to the reason I have just sketched (i.e. the creativity of politics), realists and agonists regard moralism as a vice because of its anti-pluralist nature. For both camps, the 'ethics first approach' leads to what Gerald Gaus (2016) has called the *tyranny of the ideal*. That is, moralism turns a blind eye to the plurality of often incompatible moral values and ideas that characterize political life; as a consequence, moralistic approaches seek to lay down (moral) ideals before political and social actors even have a chance to negotiate them, to struggle over them, and to exercise their right to resist. In other words, moralist approaches suggest that the game is decided before it is even

4 The discussion is also often couched in the terms of 'ideal theory' versus'non-ideal theory' (Valentini 2012).
5 For a similar typology of moralism, see Ivison (2005).

played. But if it is true, as Bernard Williams (2011: 52) insists, that a particular ethical ideal "is only one of many that are equally compatible with human nature", then realists rightly ask why moralists think they can impose an overarching ethical ideal on a world marked by multiple – equally valid – moral values (Stears 2007). In agonism, the concern for plurality also occupies a central role. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a single agonistic thinker who does not emphasize 'deep pluralism' as a central element of moral and political life (Connolly 2007) or who disagrees with William Connolly's (1995: 27) statement that agonism seeks "to tap into a care for the rich diversity of life [that] already flows through the conventional identities installed upon us".

Yet, only a superficial reading of the two traditions would lead to the conclusion that their respective visions of pluralism are congruent. A deeper analysis, in fact, brings to the fore a crucial difference that we can fruitfully understand as realism's 'methodological pluralism' on the one hand and agonism's 'normative pluralism' on the other.[6] For realists, plurality is a *fact* of political life that creates contestation and conflict; these struggles, in turn, are creative forces because they bring into being the elements of political life. For realists, the moralistic approach is, first and foremost, a methodological problem – it is a misguided approach to politics because it has a wrong starting-point (Jubb 2017, 2019; Maynard 2021).[7] For agonists, by contrast, the commitment to pluralism has a normative component. For them, the 'wonder of human plurality' (as Hannah Arendt famously called it) is the necessary pre-condition for the *agon* – the vital clash of different opinions, worldviews, and identities that characterizes a vibrant democratic sphere. And the *agon* is, indeed, something desirable: It is seen by agonists as a tool to break up ossified structures and combat oppressive practices, a tool, that is, to achieve non-domination (Tully 2008a; 2008 b). To put this point slightly differently, the agonistic approach, in contrast to realism, is not limited to exposing a methodological non-starter.[8] Rather, it insists that human plurality, as the enabling condition of the *agon*, is a highly desirable normative value without which the vibrant democratic sphere in which relationships of non-domination are constantly created and re-created through democratic struggles vanishes. And this divergence between realism and agonism is significant. For one of the strengths of agonism is that it not just takes the value of diversity and plurality as self-evident (as other critical-progressivist theories tend to do); rather, it gives a concrete and, in my view, compelling answer to the question of *why* plurality should be regarded as a fundamental *value* of political life. Realism, on the other hand, has been criticized for not being able to demonstrate how its insights are relevant for practical political

6 Admittedly, my use of the term 'methodological pluralism' here is unorthodox. What I mean, as will become clear, is simply that realists emphasize pluralism mainly for their methodological rejection of moralism.

7 As I will argue below, one important exception in this context is the work of John Gray, which, despite being realist in orientation, engages directly with real-world problems.

8 See, however, Louis McNay's critique (2014) that agonism suffers from "social weightlessness" insofar as it glosses over the social and political inequalities that characterize the 'real world'. For McNay, then, agonism itself is based on a methodological non-starter. For a more detailed engagement with this argument, see Royer (2021).

problems.[9] It is accused, in other words, of being 'merely' a methodological approach that serves as a corrective to liberal political philosophy.[10] And the consequence of this criticism is deeply ironical: that an approach to political theory that chides others for their abstractness and hesitancy to engage with 'real politics' suffers from exactly the same problem. There is, thus, a real danger that John Gray's scathing critique also applies to contemporary realists who 'are reduced to talking with each other, and to no one else, about topics of interest to no one else'.[11]

4. Tragedy as a Source of Despair and Hope

To say that realists and agonists have a tragic view of the (political) world in common begs the question of what 'tragedy' means within the respective approaches. It is worth noting that, on the most basic level, tragedy is *not* used here, in the quotidian sense, as a synonym for a 'disastrous event'. While events like war, terrorist attacks, homicides, or accidents are routinely labelled 'tragedies' today, political theorists have a more complex understanding of the term. In his book on the ancient Greek notion of tragedy, Simon Critchley (2019: 34, 48) characterizes tragedy as "the experience of moral ambiguity". According to Critchley, we experience tragedy in situations in which the right course of action is radically uncertain, any action (or inaction, for that matter) comes at a price, and in which it might even be possible that all courses of action are highly problematic. While I agree with Critchley's characterization, its emphasis on the situational occurrence of tragedy can lead to a misunderstanding: while it is true that we experience tragedy in specific situations, tragedy is also to be understood as a characteristic of the human condition – this is what is meant by the idea of 'the tragedy of the human condition' that features so prominently in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy as well as in the Indian culture of the Hindu epic drama (Minnemma 2015). This is important because even stalwart theorists of tragedy frequently insist that it is possible (and necessary) to transcend our tragic condition or to "reduce [our] vulnerability to tragedy" (Lebow 2012: 65 f.). Such 'hope', though, is highly misleading; for, as a "fundamental condition" (Hamilton 2016: 1),

9 Alison McQueen, in her backcover endorsement of Hall (2020), writes that "the revival of political realism has produced a sharp methodological critique of 'ethics-first' theorizing. But that is all this revival has produced so far […]". And I have argued that "if realism wants to be a credible alternative to moralism, and if it wants to be more than a methodological approach, then it must demonstrate, much more concretely, how its skeptical spirit helps us analyse, understand, and probably even address the complex political and moral problems of our time" (Royer 2020: 147).

10 Some realists might reject this criticism. Prinz and Rossi (2017: 362, note 4) insist that realism is not "exclusively a methodological stance", without, however, further elaborating on this claim. And Rossi (2016: 411) makes the point that realism can "move beyond a *Methodenstreit*" but then comes back to the familiar claim that realism "change(s) our starting point altogether".

11 It should be noted, though, that Prinz and Rossi (2021) have recently drawn on realism to show that (and to what extent) questions of sovereign debt are a matter for political adjudication. This is a step in the right direction which, however, does not change the fact that attempts to bring realism together with practical problems have remained few and far between.

anchored in our very humanity, tragedy will neither go away nor ever be overcome. To put it bluntly, difficult choices, struggles, and conflict will remain our lot.

This basic understanding of tragedy can indeed be found in both realism and agonism. Yet, as I will demonstrate, the more specific orientations of both approaches vary in important respects. Let us, again, start with realism. Here, Bernard Williams' characterisation of the tragedy of the human condition, which still stands as one of the most powerful expressions of the realist idea of tragedy, is worth quoting at length:

> "We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we may hope to authenticate our activities. We have to acknowledge the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value, including this reflective sense itself, and recognize that there is no redemptive Hegelian history or Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show that it will come out well enough in the end. In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible." (Williams 1993: 166)

Upon reading this passage it can hardly be denied that the realist vision of tragedy has a deeply pessimistic ring to it. Since the world 'was not made for us', we are homeless, disoriented, and confused, and this is all too often reflected by our actions. The very idea of progress, as Williams' words bring it home all too clearly, is viewed with suspicion. "Here and there", says Christopher Hamilton (2016: 1 f.), "there may be progress in one or more senses – moral, political, technological, and so on – but there is no inevitability about the continuation of such progress". And even if there is progress, these achievements come at "hideous costs". This outlook chimes with the words of Hans Morgenthau (1974: 202) who asserts that there is "a tragic presence of evil in all political action": politics, according to Morgenthau, is simply "the endeavour to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil". There is, then, a profound pessimism in the realist conception of tragedy. We are homeless, stranded in a world that we cannot rationally understand, and yet forced to act within the political realm in which all we can hope for is to choose the least evil form of action.

On the face of it, the agonistic conception of tragedy is strikingly similar. Mark Wenman (2013: 33), for instance, asserts that the concept of tragedy is employed by agonists to express the idea "of a world without hope of final redemption from suffering and strife". Thus, against the rationalistic idea that, at some point, the progressive development of humanity and rational deliberation will create consensus on controversial social, moral, and political questions, agonists argue that this is unrealistic wishful thinking at best and a dangerous illusion at worst. Yet, Wenman's characterization can be misleading: for at the very heart of the radically democratic approach of agonism is, as he himself notes, a distinction between healthy and productive *conflict* and destructive and violent *strife*. From an agonistic perspective, then, the argument that the world is a place

of never-ending struggle and conflict is *not* the same as the one that there is no hope for redemption from suffering and strife. In fact, it is precisely the hope to overcome violent and destructive strife and replace it with the productive *agon* that lies at the heart of Chantal Mouffe's (2005) concept of sublimation, James Tully's (2002: 218) guiding principle of *audi alteram partem* ('always listen to the other side'), or William Connolly's (2005: 47) ideal of "agonistic respect". We can see, therefore, that the agonistic idea of tragedy is a far cry from the gloomy conception of realism: To be sure, for agonists the fundamental tragedy of the human condition is, indeed, the inescapability of conflict, competition, and struggle. At the same time, though, it is the most salient feature of agonism that it does not understand conflict and struggle as something 'bad' that must be overcome. The *agon* is seen as a tool to break up structures of domination and unfreedom. What logically follows from this is that there is nothing pessimistic about the agonistic conception of tragedy; for without this tragedy we would live in a world in which relationships of unfreedom and structures of domination would be frozen and unchallengeable.

It is true that scholars are often hesitant to engage with the concept of tragedy, as they believe it "obfuscates notions of moral agency and responsibility" (Erskine/Lebow 2012: ix). Is, then, an appeal to tragedy an invitation to despair and inaction? Realism and agonism give two subtly different answers to this question. The gloomy realist notion of tragedy can easily lead to despair in the face of our homelessness in the world. It is not, however, an invitation to inaction; indeed it is the very core of the realist notion of tragedy that we have to act *in spite of* the ambiguity, complexity and unintelligibility of the political world. The agonistic notion of tragedy, by contrast, is not even one that invites despair. Agonists construct a direct link between tragedy and progressive political action and, thus, render tragedy a source of hope rather than despair. As Bonnie Honig (2009: 11) puts it: "A tragic perspective […] can be seen rather to issue in a call to action, responsibility, and the creative communities of festival and ritual – not an excuse to withdraw from them".

5. Politics and the Threat to Order versus Politics and the Threat of Order

The attentive reader might have noticed that the comparative analysis of some of the salient characteristics of political realism and agonistic democracy – moralism, pluralism, tragedy – have repeatedly brought us up against the question of politics. I have delayed a more detailed discussion of the respective conceptions of politics, but it is now time to face it head on. And I will do so by probing the relationship of politics and order in the two approaches.

As noted, realists do believe that politics has a creative role. It is, after all, at the heart of their methodological critique of moralism that the latter ignores that political life is created through political action – including conflict and struggle. At the same time, though, many realists also believe in the "priority of order" (Hall 2020: 10) – that is, the

conviction that order is a supreme value without which all others are unattainable.[12] It is, again, Bernard Williams whose conception of order as the 'first political question' is often taken as a reference point by contemporary realists.

> "I identify the 'first' political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation. It is 'first' because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others. It is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again. This is particularly important because, a solution to the first question being required all the time, it is affected by historical circumstances; it is not a matter of arriving at a solution to the first question at the level of state-of-nature theory and then going on to the rest of the agenda." (Williams 2005: 3)

Of course the question here is an old and familiar one: how can it be *legitimate* that a political entity establishes a coercive order on supposedly free individuals. Williams combines these two values – order and legitimacy – in his 'basic legitimation demand' which locates legitimacy in the political action of citizens and shared judgements that lead to the creation of order. Now, we do not have to delve into the specifics of Williams' 'basic legitimation demand' here because there are two more fundamental points for our purposes. The first is that for realists, political order is a necessary precondition for any further (political) activity; order, on the other hand, is always a fragile achievement that must be constructed and reconstructed time and again. In other words, realists theorize against the backdrop of the ever-present possibility of a collapse of order in which political action might become impossible. The second point is that the consensus that legitimates order does not require unanimity. Williams (2005: 136) is explicit on that point, for there "may be anarchists, or utterly unreasonable, or bandits, or merely enemies" who simply reject the very idea of order and, thus, seek to destroy it. For Williams, this poses the question of "toleration" and its limits. It is important not to overlook the implications of Williams' statement: as much as realists have sought to shift the focus from justice to legitimacy, the realist conception of politics is still the Hobbesian concern with taming human plurality and political action – in other words, precisely because human plurality and political action are not seen as normative values, Williams frames the problem as one of "toleration". A plurality of opinions and worldviews has (merely) to be tolerated, not cherished. And if a particular opinion or worldview is deemed unacceptable by the majority, "the minority group, whatever they say for political reasons, cannot be surprised at what is happening" (Williams 2005: 137). Thus, the realist focus on tolerance always has an eye on those who have to be excluded – for realists, therefore, exclusion becomes the political act *par excellence*.

12 I focus here on so-called 'liberal realists' who often take their cues from Williams. It is true that 'radical realists' such as Geuss, Finlayson, Rossi, or Rakestad are critical of the 'status quo bias' in liberal realism. The latter's main focus is predominantly on ideology critique (for splendid discussions of 'radical realism', see Rossi 2019 and Cross 2021). As such, they come close to the agonistic position I am going to sketch out below and see order as a constant threat. Just as with agonism, though, the difference between these realist approaches to order should not be exaggerated. As Enzo Rossi (2019: 641) puts it, "different strands of realism assign different relative weights to stability and ideology, and resolve the trade-off accordingly".

At a first glance, the agonistic conception of politics seems to have exactly the opposite orientation. For agonists, order is inherently problematic. Order, indeed, all too often serves as a straitjacket that seeks to stifle plurality, freedom, and political action. Appeals to reason and rationality are, according to agonists, all too often an insidious attempt of oppression and domination. In Bonnie Honig's (1993: 6) work we find the agonistic critique of order most eloquently expressed:

> "By denying their regime's role in the *production* of the well-fitted subjects it presupposes, virtue theorists [such as realists, author's note] manage to distance themselves from the remainders of their politics and that distance enables them to adopt a not terribly democratic intolerance and derision for the other to whom their democratic institutions are supposed to be (indeed, claim to be) reaching out." (Italics in the original)

This statement brings to the fore several agonistic themes: any attempt to impose order inevitably creates 'remainders', to wit, 'the other' whose worldviews and opinions are not compatible with the majority. Realism's focus on tolerance switches all too easily to a 'not terribly democratic intolerance', a project of exclusion under the pretense of maintaining order and stability that stifles human freedom and the wonder of human plurality (Brown 2009). Against such a political project, agonists stress the importance of inclusion; but not, to say it again, for exclusively moral reasons or because they think that 'justice' demands it, but because they regard the clash of a plurality of voices as the most effective antidote to oppression and domination. Now, it might be objected that one of the most prominent agonists – Chantal Mouffe – advocates a different model of agonism that seeks to draw lines between legitimate and illegitimate voices. Yet, as Keith Breen (2009: 139) has rightly observed, even Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy, based on the idea of sublimation, "paradoxically suggests that this condition [of antagonism, author's note] can be largely overcome". In other words, Mouffe has so much trust in the sublimation of dangerous strife into productive conflict that she has precious little to say about the possibility that in some cases sublimation will remain impossible and certain voices and opinions have to be excluded from the shared democratic space.

It is important, though, to avoid a potential misunderstanding at this point: agonism is by no means a nihilistic or anarchistic tradition. In fact, precisely because it *values* human freedom and plurality it *presupposes* a political and legal order to defend these values. "To affirm the perpetuity of contest", says Honig (1993: 15),

> "is *not to celebrate a world without points of stabilization*; it is to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, *even within an ordered setting*, and to identify the affirmative dimensions of contestation. It is to see that the always imperfect closure of political space tends to engender remainders and that, if those remainders are not engaged, they may return and destabilize the very closures that deny their existence." (emphasis in original)

We can find such a commitment to order also in other agonists. James Tully (1995: 40), for instance, insists that even within a radically democratic kind of constitutionalism there must be norms that are beyond the realm of "reasonable disagreement". For, even

an agonistic contestation of norms has to take place against a "relatively stable background of customary agreements […] that are not questioned in any given critical discussion". In his earlier work, Tully (1995: 30) identifies mutual recognition, consent and cultural continuity as these three basic norms; later he compresses these conventions into the norm of reciprocity: *audi alteram partem* – "always listen to the other side" because "there is always something to be learned from the other side" – should be "the first and perhaps only universalizable principle of democratic deliberation" (Tully 2002: 218). The point is that even for Tully – an insightful critic of liberal constitutionalism – agonistic confrontation presupposes a stable order in which fundamental norms are respected.

All this reveals a more subtle divergence between realists and agonists. For the real difference here is *not* that the former embrace order and the latter reject it. The difference, rather, is that realists see order as a precious but *fragile* achievement of political life that is perpetually in danger of being destroyed by its enemies. That is why the maintenance of order and the exclusion of those who seek to destroy it is the 'first political question'. Agonists, on the other hand, presuppose an already existing order – for instance a liberal democratic system. This established order all too often serves as an "imperial yoke, galling the necks of the culturally diverse citizenry" (Tully 1995: 5), and it is, thus, primarily minority groups that must struggle against this form of domination. We can see, therefore, that realists and agonists *do* agree on the fundamental importance of order as a necessary precondition for political action. However, realists, in contrast to agonists, gravitate closer towards a conservative defense of order because the specter of the collapse of order, brought about by "anarchists, or utterly unreasonable, or bandits, or merely enemies" (Williams 2005: 136), constantly haunts their vision of politics as an ever-present possibility. Agonists, on the other hand, portray themselves as 'critical' or even 'radical' theorists because they foreground the oppressive effects of order for minority groups. But they do so against the background of an 'agonistic optimism' (see next section) that allows them to attack the existing order without seriously contemplating the risk of a collapse of order in the case of which their vision of politics – the *agon* – becomes impossible. For realists, then, order is constantly under threat, for agonists, order is constantly threatening.

6. Agonistic Optimism versus Realist Pessimism and the Fusion of Horizons

Since the divergences between realism and agonism have been undertheorized in the academic literature, it has also remained concealed that many of them can be traced to a deeper source. In this final section, therefore, I would like to dig even deeper into what I see as the most basic divergence between the two approaches – a difference in temperament which I frame as an opposition between 'agonistic optimism' and 'realist pessimism'.

Now it is true that this is a problematic framing that invites all sorts of objections – from the obvious point that 'optimism' and 'pessimism' are themselves contested concepts to the criticism that not *all* agonists are optimists and not *all* realists are pessimists, and so

on. Nonetheless, I would like to use this framing for several reasons. One of them is that it *is* significant that political realism has been associated with a certain degree of pessimism (see the references to realist 'Oxford pessimists' in Cartwright 2015) and agonism with a certain degree of optimism – and not only by their respective enemies but also by realists and agonists themselves in terms of self-characterization. Even more importantly, though, thinking along these lines does tell us something important about the different temperaments driving the two approaches. As for 'agonistic optimism', consider the following statement by Bonnie Honig:

> "Optimism is the agonist's greatest asset […]. If you aspire to forms of life in common constellated around public things, in affectively charged ways that are both pleasurable and sometimes infuriating, built around finding, promoting and building shared public objects, engaged in some common cause, but not disciplined into oppressive forms of normalisation, then agonistic politics is very optimistic. Moreover, if you crave withdrawal but find waiting for you in the so-called private sphere, accretions of power and privilege that signal your impotence in a world beyond your control and influence, then agonism's commitment to action in concert is for you, and its screams optimism." (Honig 2013: no pagination)

Honig's statement reveals how profoundly the agonistic outlook as a whole is shaped by optimism. It shapes its view of politics as action in concert, its (as I have argued) rather tame understanding of 'tragedy' as perpetual political contestation, and its framing of political order as an ever-present 'oppressive form of normalisation' free individuals and groups must struggle with. Moreover, what makes agonism an inherently 'practical' political theory is the fact that this optimism translates into its views on practical politics: agonists tend to be sympathetic toward public demonstrations and displays of resistance to power (Volk 2018); they are drawn toward pro-immigration policies (Hansen 2020), and tend to support progressive initiatives on race and gender (Joseph 2020; Honig 2021). To put it more generally, since agonists are highly critical of practices of exclusion, 'agonistic optimism' is a very specific kind of optimism: it is an optimism based on the constructive potential of human beings to act together, to forge bonds of solidarity, to create a 'common world', and to overcome the oppressive forces imposed by domestic, international, and global structures of domination. In short, agonism rests on an optimistic view of the human nature.[13]

Realist pessimism, by contrast, is based on a different temperament. Two brief examples can bring this point into sharper focus: The first is that realists do not share the agonists' highly positive view of struggle and conflict. For, even if it is true that agonists do not just celebrate any kind of conflict (only the *agon*), realists counter that it might not be possible to control (or sublimate) conflicts in the way agonists envision. Realists, therefore, argue that there is always a risk that a conflict gets out of hand and that it plunges the established political order into anarchy and chaos (Burelli 2019). This is not to say that

13 Many agonists will recoil at the concept of 'human nature'. Nonetheless, in the way I describe it above – as a belief in the positive potential of human beings – the concept of human nature seems apt.

realists are *necessarily* hostile toward the ways of emancipatory political action agonists advocate; but they are certainly more cautious and more skeptical of what agonists like to call 'the free play of the agon'. A second, even more concrete, example is immigration. Here we are in the fortunate position to draw on a concrete statement by a political realist: In 2015, at the height of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe, John Gray penned an article in which he argued that the ensuing chaos demonstrated that the sovereign state must return to its primary function, which is to maintain order and provide security for its citizens.[14] Much of the article is an indictment of the EU, which he describes as "a pseudo-state, an institution that claims many of the prerogatives of statehood but cannot meet the […] overriding need for safety that states exist to serve". Since "uncontrolled immigration on the scale that has been reached in the past year cannot avoid posing security risks in conditions that approximate those of war", Gray's (2015) advice, then, is to consider a return to a strong version of state sovereignty. While Gray refers explicitly to Hobbes, there are also clear echoes of Bernard Williams in this paper: For the state's ability to provide and maintain security and order which is, in Williams' words, the 'first political question', is one that has to be answered before all others because it constitutes the fundamental basis without which all other values are unattainable. I want to be clear that it would be utterly unfair to portray political realism as a xenophobic right-wing theory. What is true, though, is that the realists' pessimism makes them skeptical of more radical solutions. For them, Angela Merkel's 'open door policy' was a kind of moralism – this time understood as the vice of overdoing morality – that had dangerous consequences and, ultimately, threatened the very existence of the post-war European order. Realist pessimism is, thus, based on a sentiment that is in stark contrast to agonistic optimism: For them, while human beings should enjoy freedom and be able to engage in creative action, these elements must always be checked by a robust political order. The maintenance of order and security is the 'first political question' precisely because the realist temperament focuses on the inherent dangers of collective action; for realists, the guiding idea is not that human beings create a common world through struggle and productive conflict but that they destroy it through violent strife. Realism is, thus, based on a pessimistic view of the human nature.

The upshot of this analysis is that the 'assumption of friendship' is simplistic in both theory and practice. And this seems to leave us with an unedifying conclusion: since there are important divergences between the two approaches, and since they, on the most basic level, rest on different temperaments, a fusion of the two horizons is impossible. Yet, this conclusion would not only be premature but simply wrong. Just as different languages can merge into one (think, for instance, of Esperanto), different theoretical approaches can be combined.[15] In fact, it is precisely *because* the two approaches diverge

14 Gray is routinely portrayed as a political realist; I have no objections to this characterization, but Gray is also an unusual political realist insofar as he connects his realism directly to the empirical problems of the 'real' world. The article I am referring to is just one example of Gray's more practical orientation.

15 As I also try to make clear in the conclusion, I would like to reject the tacit assumption that the differences between realism and agonism will nonetheless – as if by magic – lead to broadly similar conclusions. My point

in important respects, precisely *because* they are driven by different temperaments, precisely because they pull in different directions, that a space for creating something new and original opens up – this 'new and original' is what I call 'realist agonism'. Such a 'fusion of horizons' must start out from an approach that has more theoretical and practical potential.[16] In my view, as the term 'realist agonism' implies, this is agonism: agonism, as I have laid out, is a practice-oriented theory, it offers a compelling explanation as to why political engagement matters and, most importantly, it provides an explanation as to why diversity and plurality are precious values of moral, social, and political life. Realism, by contrast, has focused primarily on the refutation of liberal-moralist methodology but has not ventured beyond the traditional liberal view that plurality is a 'fact' of life. It is, thus, the agonistic vision of politics that we should take as our point of departure. But it is precisely at this point that a curious agonistic blind-spot – which is another dimension of agonistic optimism – emerges: Despite the fact that agonism has a distinctively normative orientation and frames diversity, plurality, and inclusivity as precious *values*, agonists often theorize as if it was not necessary to *defend* these values against those who threaten, violate, or reject them, as if agonistic values had no real enemies who must be excluded from the democratic realm of contestation. In agonistic scholarship this appears by two variants: either agonists refuse to talk about exclusion at all and, thus, suggest that the proper way to defend agonistic values is ever more inclusion – this tendency is dominant in the more 'cheerful' versions we find in Connolly, Honig or Tully. Or, as in the case of Mouffe, they acknowledge the need for 'drawing lines' but ultimately come back to the position that every conflict can be 'sublimated' into a healthy and productive *agon* – in this case, exclusion is simply circumvented by the optimism that the enemy can be transformed into a respectful opponent. From a realist perspective, then, agonism simply does not do enough to prepare us for the harsh realities of political life.

The solution to this problem seems, quite simply, be to complement 'agonistic optimism' with 'realistic pessimism'. At a first glance, this might look schizophrenic. Yet, there is no reason why such a combination should be impossible. For starters it is perfectly possible to combine the two respective visions of political order: agonists, precisely because their vision of politics depends on a robust political order, do not – and, indeed, cannot – reject the idea of order *tout court*. This does not mean, however, that they cannot simultaneously be critical of the stifling and dominating effects that many kinds of political order have. In other words, agonists can, indeed, defend the elements of liberal constitutionalism without losing their awareness of the dangerous exclusions, dominations, and exploitations liberal systems produce. Thus, exposing the weaknesses and dangers of order does not mean to seek its destruction. It is worth mentioning that while agonists tend to emphasize the detrimental effects of order, they will not reject

is that we have to make a conscious effort to bring these approaches into a more fruitful relationship that harnesses the strengths of both. I am grateful to Andreas Busen and Alexander Weiß for making me aware of this point.

16 I borrow the term 'fusion of horizons' from Gadamer, to express how the two – rather different, as we have seen – approaches can be fused into a new one that unites elements of both.

this point. The next demand, however, will be more unpalatable to them: agonists need a 'deeper' conception of tragedy and exclusion. As we have seen, agonists portray the fact as being tragic that the world will always be one of struggle and conflict; however, given the fact that they see conflict and struggle as potentially positive, this is a rather tame version of tragedy. In fact, it is yet another expression of agonistic optimism that these theorists have little to say about the deeper tragedy that so long as societies are open in the way they imagine, conflicts will always have the potential to take on the ignorant, violent, and lethal dimensions that can plunge societies into chaos – war, genocide, crimes against humanity, human rights violations are, after all, anything but rare and isolated phenomena in human history. This is the much bleaker conception of tragedy that we find in realism, to wit, the tragedy that in 'open societies' in which plurality leads to conflict, escalation is always possible. And this is precisely the reason why realists have a much stronger focus on exclusion: they know that the values of a society need to be defended against those who violate or even reject them. The agonistic counterargument against this is clear enough: they will argue that the exclusion of certain voices from the realm of politics reduces the human plurality that is necessary for an agonistic vision of politics, and they will argue that, historically, exclusion has led to the most brutal kinds of atrocities and totalitarianism. Against this, it must be noted that agonism's traditional focus has been on marginalized groups of society – refugees, immigrants, people of color, et cetera. This leads to their immediate association of exclusion as the exclusion of vulnerable groups. Who they rarely talk about, however, are precisely those voices, opinions, and worldviews that are hostile toward the agonistic values of inclusivity, diversity, and plurality. Realists, as we have seen, have less qualms about exclusion. Recall Bernard Williams' (2005: 137) words: "If the point comes at which toleration has to cease, the liberal state has an entirely reasonable account of why it has ceased, and the minority group, whatever they say for political reasons, cannot be surprised at what is happening." Agonists, of course, cannot embrace this statement because they are suspicious of the concept of toleration. But we can rephrase Williams' statement to make it more compatible with an agonistic vision of politics: 'if the point comes at which individuals and groups violate or even outright reject agonistic values such as inclusivity, diversity, and plurality, the democratic state has an entirely reasonable account of why they must be excluded, and the minority group, whatever they say for political reasons, cannot be surprised at what is happening'. Agonists, presumably, will recoil at so much realism. Yet, the crucial point is that an agonistic optimism that is not checked by realist pessimism is one-dimensional; for it overlooks that a radically democratic society cannot simplistically rely on ever more inclusion but demands a complex interplay of openness and closure, inclusion and exclusion, freedom and order. And it is precisely this complex interplay, one that rejects every kind of dogmatism, one-dimensionality, and cliché, that must drive an agonist realist approach when confronting the harsh and tragic realities of our time.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that while agonism and realism are indeed 'false friends', their horizons can be fused into a kind of imaginative, yet realistic, 'realist agonism' – just like Esperanto brings the elements of different languages together; 'realist agonism' is a blend of elements from both political traditions. But the question is: why does this matter? Should we be interested in the relationship between agonism and realism merely for theoretical purposes or is there a 'practical' aspect to it?

To begin with, it is worth emphasizing that the relationship between agonism and realism is epistemically interesting. For the very fact that their relationship is so fundamentally underexplored in the academic literature renders a comparative analysis worthwhile and important. My point here is that to uncritically assume a natural 'friendship' between realism and agonism means theorizing against a background that turns a blind eye to the significant divergences that emerge as soon as we dig a bit deeper.

However, the relationship between realism and agonism also matters for the 'new realities' of our age. Even a cursory glance at the academic literature reveals that, today, democracy is in crisis. The recent works of prominent democratic theorists, of which David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends* (2018) and Steven Levitsky's and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018) are only two examples, leave no doubt about the alarming situation in which we find ourselves. History, it seems, has returned with a vengeance. While there was much enthusiasm about the triumph of capitalism and the expansion of Western liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War, the renaissance of authoritarianism, the rise of populism, the lack of adequate representation, ever-growing levels of inequality, or technological domination threaten to unravel democracies today. Simultaneously, protest movements – both on the political left and right – have emerged that distrust political institutions, challenge traditional authorities and, in many respects, demand nothing short of a revolution. We live, then, in highly politicized times in which polarization, conflict and exclusion have become the norm rather than the exception. But, as the editors of this special section emphasize in their call, the contemporary crisis of democracy also acts as a magnifying glass, insofar as it brings into sharp relief the theoretical shortcomings of our political visions. Clearly we cannot even begin to address our formidable challenges in practice if we (continue to) operate with theoretical illusions. Superficially, realism and agonism might be based on similar concepts, but on closer inspection they play out very differently in the two approaches. If we want to develop new political visions that are better suited for the 'new realities' of our age, we cannot simplistically equate these approaches or, more subtly, believe that their superficial similarities will – as if by magic – 'come together' at some point. The assumption of friendship is theoretically flawed and practically counterproductive. And it needs to be exposed in order to open up spaces for more theoretically sophisticated and practically promising visions of politics.

While some have argued against the very idea of democracy (Brennan 2016), I believe that the vision of a realist agonism I have sketched out offers a promising political vision

for our age. It retains, in many respects, the radically democratic orientation we find in agonistic thought. It understands certain social, moral, and political conflicts as emancipatory struggles against oppression and subordination, and it values genuine pluralism as the indispensable background condition for human freedom. At the same time, it injects some non-utopianism into agonism, by making room for a deep notion of tragedy and the endorsement of a complex interplay of openness and closure, inclusion and exclusion, freedom and order. Most significantly, the realist agonism I have introduced here does not rest on the (tacit) assumption that realist and agonist ideas will magically converge and culminate in a promising political vision at some point; rather, it is based on a *conscious effort* to bring these two different approaches into a more fruitful relationship, to fuse their horizons, and to carve out a theoretical vision that can be a viable *Option for the Realist* (Ahlstrom-Vij 2018) today.

Of course, 'realist agonism' is not intended to be a rigid theoretical model, let alone a blueprint for political action. It is much rather to be understood as a certain 'ethos' by way of which real-world problems can be approached, understood, and even addressed. For if it is true that currently we are facing a deep moral, social, and political crisis, then what is surely needed are radical, imaginative, yet realistic approaches to the manifold and complex problems of our time. And realist agonism has the potential to be precisely that.

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