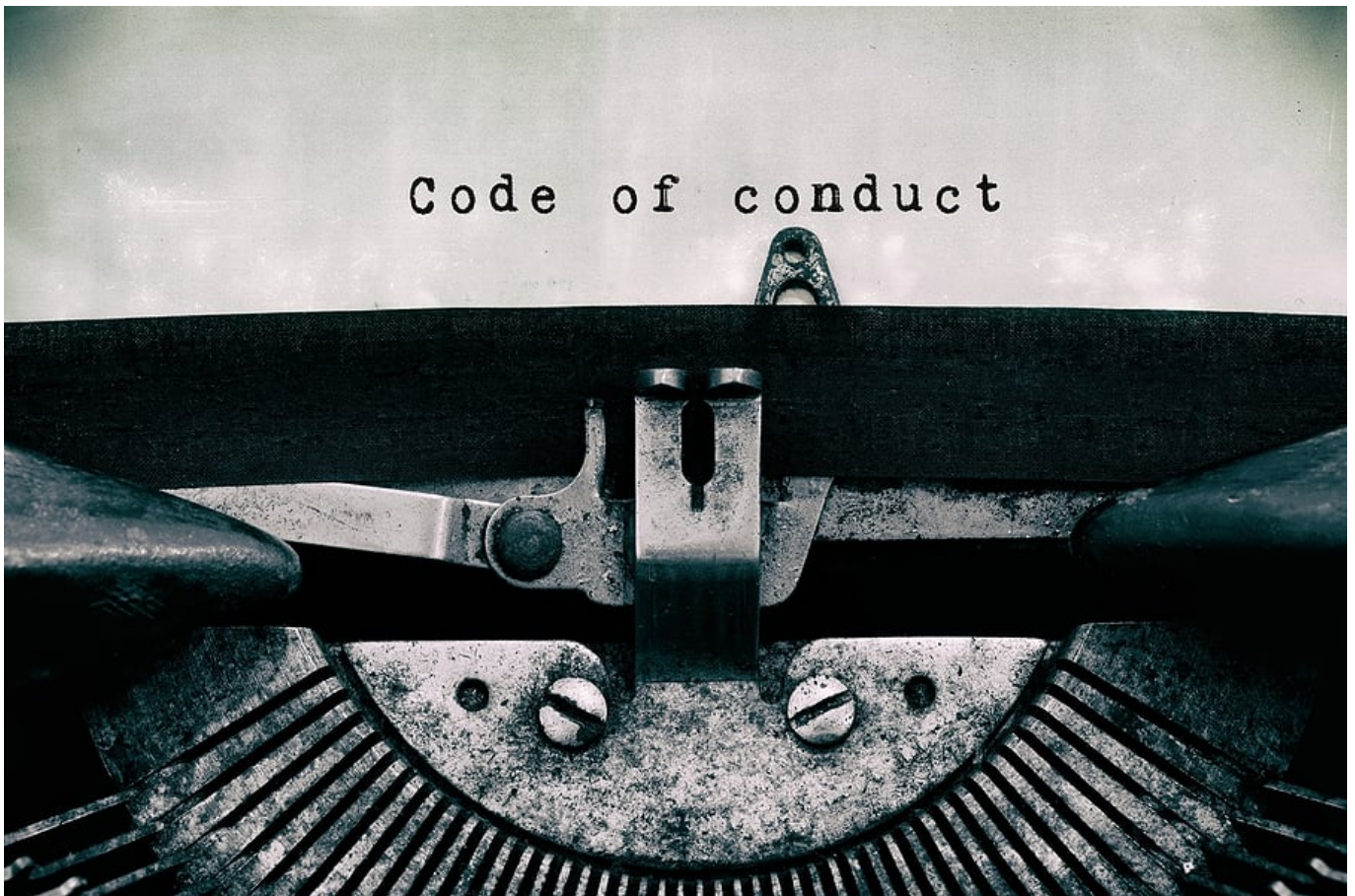


Broken Codes of Conduct



by Theodore Dalrymple

The desire for perfection in human relations is a powerful stimulant of conflict—and of a bureaucracy to adjudicate it. That all should be fair, open, aboveboard, that no one should ever experience discomfort because of what someone else says, that each should be shown equal signs or marks of respect, that no one should feel left out of anything, is an impossible pipe dream, as the most minimal reflection on experience should make evident.

What is possible, however, and what has eventuated, is a large and well-paid bureaucracy that has secured what it supposes to be its own eternity by the pursuit of such chimeras. Its work will never be done. The more cowed people are by regulations of their speech and conduct, the more microaggressions remain to be discovered and adjudicated. The task of securing

diversity, equity, and inclusion is like the task of Sisyphus, with this difference: that in its very impossibility lies an assurance of a job, a pension, and a gratifying sense of doing the world's work.

I suppose one should not rejoice at the discomfiture of a fellow human being, but this is a counsel of the same perfection attempt to achieve that is likely to lead to the same kind of dishonesty as that involved in the search for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Therefore, let me be frank: I have been rather enjoying the saga over the president of Harvard's alleged plagiarism in her academic work. I doubt that I am the only one to feel this discreditable delight.

Medieval theologians are supposed to have argued over the number of angels who could dance on the head of a pin, and we laugh at them for their foolishness; but now we argue about what degree of failure of a writer to attribute to their authors the words he or she uses constitutes real plagiarism. How many words or lines are necessary before oversight becomes not only implausible but culpable? How much recidivism in this respect is forgivable? Should we say, "Let him who has never copied or failed to attribute cast the first stone"?

As I write this, Dr. Claudine Gay has survived calls for her to stand down as president of Harvard, and having no crystal ball I cannot say whether she will continue so to survive, or whether further revelations of non-attribution in her academic work (the titles of her publications do not fill me with much intellectual curiosity or excitement) will eventually cause a kind of administrative gestalt switch in her superiors who have so far sided with her.

I am not a betting man, but if I were, I would not put all my money either way. In such a situation, courage, truth, conviction, or personal loyalty do not count for very much by comparison with the bubble, reputation. There is no honor among snakes.

The trouble began for Dr. Gay when she was asked by a Congresswoman whether a hypothetical call for the genocide of Jews would be in violation of Harvard's code of conduct. I am far from sure that the legislature is the forum in which questions of academic freedom should be aired or decided, since it implies a duty and a power of the legislature to adjudicate everything. The earth is the Congress' and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein (a slight adaptation of Psalm 24 in the King James Version, which I mention only to avoid charges of not-attribution or even of plagiarism).

But the question was asked, and Dr. Gay answered it maladroitly: "It can be," she said, "depending on context." A follow-up question might have been whether a hypothetical call for the re-enslavement of black people in America would be a violation of Harvard's code of conduct; if Dr Gay's answer had been as equivocal, she would have been accused of apologetics for slavery and if it were not, the question would then have been asked whether enslavement were morally worse than genocide. In those circumstances, I would have felt some slight sympathy for Dr. Gay, as well as *schadenfreude*; for she would have been in the position of a man who is asked whether he has stopped beating his wife yet, yes or no.

I think the underlying problem is the very idea of a code of conduct in a university. At the very least, its existence, and the supposed necessity for such a code, goes to show how far mistrust has eaten into our society. Without such a code of conduct, would Harvard and other universities really become a hell of rapine, insult, menace, racial violence, and so forth? This suggests a very unpleasant population, and while I am no starry-eyed admirer of humanity as a whole, yet I have gone through my life without constant fear of the worst in my fellow beings. As Dr. Johnson put it, it is better sometimes to be deceived than never to trust. In my daily dealings, at any rate, I have found more trustworthiness than its opposite,

though I am not unfamiliar with the worst that people can do.

It will be pointed out, no doubt, that before codes of conduct were instituted, people sometimes did behave very badly. No doubt they did: Before there were performance indicators, for example, some professors were like drones who never did a stroke of work once they were irremovable from their position. But I do not think that most were like this: I recall them as having frequently done much more than their duty rather than less. And it is a human trait that when one is harried and harassed, one is disinclined to do more than the strict minimum. If one is treated as a potential cheat, one begins to think and even sometimes to act like a cheat. One studies loopholes, seeks small advantages, studies strict contractual conditions, as never before. Goodwill is lost, but that is precisely what the apparatchik type wants. Goodwill and informal understanding are his greatest enemy; he wants everything to be laid down in codes of conduct, with enough ambiguity in them to require endless adjudication. He wants his staff fragile, insecure, inclined to paranoia: and for diversity read division. He dreams of a world in which the whole of life is but a procedure.

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