

From The NEW REPUBLIC of PLA-DOH

On a bleak and rainy October day, in a large and colorful heated tent just a few steps from the market center, Trashimakus is hosting a barbeque/symposium with some friends. They are well into a half-keg of beer and have nearly emptied a cooler once filled with wine when a passerby is recognized.

Trashimakus (*Shouting*): HEY, MYTHOKRATES! You're all wet!

Mythokrates (Mildly surprised): So, we meet again, Mr. 'T'. Perhaps you'll consider returning the umbrella I lent you last week.

Trashimakus: Do I still have that? But you're already soaked, good fella. And as it is raining again, I may need it. But what brings you to the marketplace on such a cold and wet and dismal day?

Mythokrates: I'm merely on my way to the wine merchant. But, as usual, I must correct you. While 'cold' and 'wet' are apt descriptions, I do not find the day at all dismal.

Trashimakus: Owing to your seemingly perpetual optimism.
But proceed no further. Come under my tent and warm yourself. Visit with us for a while, and I shall provide both the liquid and mental stimulation you seek.

Mythokrates: Very well, and thank you, dear Trashimakus. That is surprisingly generous, but only in moderation, please, for I am not prepared to be your fool today.

Trashimakus: Perish the thought—as if that were ever the case, my friend—for we, here, are all men of honor.

Mythokrates: Then why do you all smile so wryly as you speak of honor. Are you prepared to defend it?

Trashimakus: Never! Rather I am always prepared to deny it, for it seems to me a rather silly idea.

Mythokrates: I thought as much. It seems you have entrapped me again in your circle of sophistry. But I cannot pass on without protesting such ignorant belittling of the very foundation stone of civilization.

Trashimakus: LOOK, MY FRIENDS! Ha HAH! ONCE AGAIN I HAVE SNARED THE PREY!

Mythokrates: Then hand me a glass, and define your terms. Can you tell me what is honor?.

Trashimakus: Who cares? Ha, ha, HAH!

Mythokrates: Very funny. But, if you won't describe it, and explain in what way you believe it to be flawed, how then shall I entertain you?

Trashimakus: Very well. Here is a jug. Let us proceed. But do not expect to silence me, as happened in our debate over justice. Remember, I let that argument go, not because you were correct or had defeated me, but only because what you were proposing seemed as if it would be advantageous to me, if indeed you were able to convince the others, and ultimately the legislators, of the strange philosophy you lifted from your mentor.

So, now we are to have at it over honor. Well, honor would seem easy enough to describe. It is two things. It is a verb: to honor; signifying giving recognition of just, right, and good behavior on the part of the person honored. And it is a noun designating loyalty, trustworthiness and high character, often used in the form of an adjective, such as 'honorable,' regarding a courageous deed or attached to a soul of great worth—usually in connection with actions in the service of others.

Mythokrates: Well, all right; a sort of dictionary-like definition, but of what value is honor—I mean to the honored or honorable? Why would one take the risk associated with courageous acts in the service of others? What's the pay-back? Or, if there is a payback, where's the guarantee?

Trashimakus: Yes, yes—but we were hoping *you* could explain that. From my perspective, there *is* no pay-back—rather, there *seems* to be no pay-back, other than mere recognition—a kind of fame without economic benefit. Although there are cases where the reputation for honor can be cashed in: through advertising in a capitalist society, for instance—a means of selling one's reputation; or election to public office due to publicly spreading one's fame; or a promotion to better employment; or something as simple as a free dinner when one is recognized at a restaurant, or a fancy ribbon or trophy to impress friends and relatives and to decorate one's wall. In extreme cases, the reputation for honor can even grant a kind of immortality, as with 'Honest Abe' Lincoln; the legend of George Washington and the Cherry Tree; "I shall return" (Douglas MacArthur), the signatories to the Declaration of Independence; Martin Luther and his namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr. and some of the particularly famous Congressional Medal of Honor winners. But this, for the most part, is little more than posthumous remembrance. Admittedly, it may have a temporarily favorable, at least prideful effect on the surviving society, which spawned and claims the honored individual as representative of their values. And/or it may impress and encourage certain other individuals, particularly the young, who in one way or another may emulate the stalwart model. Still, honor is hardly of value to the deceased. As for the honored dead, themselves, it almost certainly would have been better had they 'run away and lived to fight (or to run away again) another day.' Take General Custer, for example; or Napoleon's troops at Waterloo, or the Spartans at Thermopylae, or the soldiers of King Pyrrhus versus the Romans. . .

Mythokrates: . . . or the Americans in their War of Independence—or the Battle of the Bulge—or the Union Army at Antietam? Preposterous. If everyone ran away, how would a community advance a cause, or oppose a rapacious tyrant? How would a nation defend itself against malevolent and potentially destructive forces?

Trashimakus: Well—if *everyone* ran away, of course, there would be no fighting, and thus no killing; no wars, you see—everyone would win.

Mythokrates: Awake to reality, my friend. But of course you know your argument is silly. If there were no honorable men, the field would be left to the *dishonorable*—and just take a look through history to see what happens when they are unopposed. And honor goes further than simply a necessary element in defense, or the promotion of a noble cause. It is absolutely necessary as the cement that binds together individuals, the aggregate of society. Without it, how could we trust each other? How could we do business? How could we even be friends? It is honor, alone, that makes mere words concrete. Contracts, even when written, need more than signatures and laws and courts to give them meaning and stability. They depend on the voluntary actions of those who make them. And there are those who think society itself is a kind of contract. Of course it may pay off, now and then, for an individual or two, or a small minority, to act dishonorably at carefully chosen, highly profitable moments. Such actions can be mitigated, even tolerated to a degree, if the vast majority of citizens remain honorable; if we can agree on what constitutes *dishonor*; if we can legislate against such behavior and discourage such an attitude as yours by pursuing and duly punishing those who misbehave—if only by ostracizing them instead of celebrating the deeds and personae of great culprits like Bonnie & Clyde, Jessie James, and the Younger Brothers; making dark idols out of despicable monsters like, Al Capone, Jim Jones, and Fidel Castro—and worshiping thoughtless, under-educated actors and drug-demented rock and rollers.

Trashimakus: So, it seems clear that you believe society has preference over the individual, and the individual should sacrifice himself, if necessary, for the good of the many. So—bear with me, and visualize: We see a great individual character, a young military officer, strong, athletic, well educated and with brilliant potential, who could benefit the society as a leader for many years. He throws himself on a live grenade, giving his life to save a few comrades in arms, buck privates, let

us say; uneducated; slow of wit; obese, to boot, and in need of dental work: the simple sons of below average parents—draftees, shall we add, who would, if given a chance, subvert the whole war effort to avenge their involuntarily induction into the service and their perceived mistreatment at the hands of the training cadre. How, then, Mythokrates, in such a case as just described, has honor served the many?

Mythokrates: It is easy enough to invent, or even find particular circumstances under which a general rule results in a questionable, or even obviously bad outcome. Does that make the rule bad?

Trashimakus: It would seem so in the case I have described. Everyone loses—the dead officer, the other troops under his command, the army, itself, even the besieged society as a whole—everyone, except the undeserving ‘soldiers’ who were saved.

Mythokrates: We live in an imperfect world. Not every situation works out as we would like. Otherwise there would be no war. There would be no crime. There would be no dishonor, so honor would go unnoticed and undefined.

Since humans are inherently weak, we must celebrate strength to encourage general betterment. As men are naturally dishonorable, we must esteem honor, that they might try harder; overcome their faults; develop the spine necessary to stand up to adversity, and the courage to defend high and important principles.

Trashimakus: So, then, honor is artificial. Even these favored principles of yours are artificial. On what basis do you contend that the natural—I mean, the “inherent”—tendencies of humans must be, or ought to be—or even CAN be improved, or overridden? This is where Machiavelli made his great leap forward over the bent backs of the ancient thinkers. He accepted humans as they are—mean, corrupt, self-centered, untrustworthy—and he advocated a kind of politics that accounts for reality, instead of wishing for some sort of pie-in-the-sky “best” regime. Naturally his teachers must have been aghast, seeing his new ideas as folly—even dangerous. But, today, we see that he was right. Look at the prosperity we have enjoyed since the dawn of modernity! Society has not crumbled, or sunk into some Hobbian mire. Instead, freedom prevailed, and men are smarter, healthier, and stronger than ever before. And Machiavelli’s ideas have been around for over half-a-millennium. Before his day humans could add and subtract; hew, stack, and carve stones quite beautifully, and ramble on for days about religion and philosophy and recite the epics of Homer from memory. But their ideas were restricted both in concept and by location. Without ease of transportation, or common written languages, or printing capability, they could hardly effect more than the few within earshot: the citizens of their own polis. Now, in an age of *dishonor*, we can fly; communicate around the world effortlessly and instantaneously; even travel to worlds the very existence of which the ancients, with perhaps a few exceptions, were ignorant. How then will a return to ancient philosophy be of any benefit to moderns?

Mythokrates: Admittedly, there were limitations to ancient philosophy, some of which seem to have prevented what we consider to be beneficial technological ‘advances.’ The old societies were bound much more closely to religion than are moderns, which tended to limit conception. Moderns, on the other hand, are too tightly bound to the idea of limitless progress through science and the conquering of nature, which also limits their conceptualization, or rather directs it in a way that is not always conducive to true benefit, individual or social, but which supports rather the concept of ‘higher and louder’—ever faster, ever stronger, ever bigger, ever more and more and more.

Trashimakus: Yes, and ever more free—you left out that part.

Mythokrates: Intentionally, because it is not actually true. So I have really left nothing out. There is, admittedly, the illusion of freedom; even *that* is restricted to a small minority of the planet’s population: those who live in ‘free’ societies. There they speak of freedom, but science, which they believe has had a hand in securing their freedom, has actually ‘progressed’ such as to restrict freedom by allowing ever greater government intrusion in their lives. In the ancient world, for

other than slaves, should one find himself on the outs with the civil power, there existed the possibility of escape from the city. It might not be a pleasant life alternative, and hardly conducive to raising children and establishing a sense of security, but an individual could live in a primitive and solitary way at the frontier and, for years at a stretch, effectively evade governments and armies, unless they happened to march through your pasture on their way to conquer or die. Such may not have been a particularly pleasant existence, nor one that many would actually choose, preferring the security of an armed city. But the possibility of such an existence contributed to mental stability, and the thought of its harshness fostered social constancy—as did the frontier in the American experience. Today, government reaches into every house and hovel to impose its control. The frontier is closed. The borders are long, but there is no wilderness in which to hide—at least not for very long. There is nowhere to go—and if there were, there are too many means of being discovered. Today, in our prosperous and overcrowded world, there is hardly any conceivable way to avoid social stress, or to evade government meddling. So the ‘fringes’ have disappeared in our modern technological society. The tendency, today, for governments of ‘open’ societies is to compress the social sphere, in the name of equality, into a flat disc wherein everyone has exactly the same amount of freedom—which will ultimately work out to none. In such a life, not only is everyone (except the governors) equally restricted, they are equally indebted to their controllers for allowing them to live without a useful purpose, and equally dependent upon them for sustenance. So, you see, no one can be, or will ever be truly free. Besides, Trashimakus, since when have you and Machiavelli been the least concerned with freedom?

Trashimakus: But, Mythokrates, perhaps I speak in error for Machiavelli, but I believe he and I share a great respect for freedom, and particularly for those who can achieve it. The politico-economic idea of capitalism and the outright ownership of property, etc., has made possible the freedom of certain men of ability and foresight by means of their financial domination over others. It has, further, given them virtual immunity from government through the bribery and corruption of public officials. Thus it could be said that *dishonor* is the root of freedom. These men are freer than any in world history. Although there have always been the corrupt, and those who were protected by their wealth and power from the central authority, the modern version of the wealthy and powerful is more potent than ever before, and they can blow their nose at the concept of honor—it is *dishonor* that protects them and frees them.

Mythokrates: O, by all means—a Nietzschean sort of freedom of the overlords; the supermen who joyfully enslave the rest of the Earth’s population. In such a society as that, *of course*, there is no need for honor, except, perhaps temporarily—among the thieves. Honor is associated only with a free society—or let us say, for the sake of practicality, at least a modicum of honor—an unknowable degree of at least a limited sort of honor—is necessary in a free-tending society, for neither freedom nor honor are perfectible. But I would suggest a rule: ‘The more honor, the more freedom’—certainly the more joy and security.

Trashimakus: Dead wrong! For those who can handle freedom, which generally means those who earn it; those of ability and self-confidence; those with vision and the will to take risks—we’re talking about the strong, here—for them freedom is a wonderful thing. For lesser humans—the despairing; the lame; the limited; the fearful; the weak, the indecisive—freedom is the greatest curse ever wrought by humans upon their fellows. To the economically deprived under-classes and to the disabled, freedom means only that more capable, more energetic and aggressive, more powerful others—the ‘mighty,’ one might say—are free to exploit and enslave and discard them.

Mythokrates: Strong words, Trashimakus, and exactly why freedom must be limited. Government has its role in this. But, generally, government is a means of social control and, as it is operated by humans who, as you pointed out so vociferously, are weak and corruptible, it tends toward excess in its role—toward tyranny. So, government rapidly becomes the enemy of freedom, tending only to exempt the governors and their supporters from their legal oppression of the many. The elective process is the only hope of the many. The powerful will never stop trying to subvert it and control it, but therein is the very heart of general political freedom.

Trashimakus: Elections are a sham! The whole idea is unsupported except by documents—mere paper! Written laws and crusty traditions are no barriers to the mighty. In fact, they thrive in a rule-ridden environment. The more laws there are, the easier it is to take advantage of the obedient.

Mythokrates: Exactly my point! You're quite astute, in ways, Trashimakus. Hopefully that knack will help you find the distortion in your view. In fact, over time—due to the inattention of the many and their inability to understand the complexities of politics and economics, and the tendency for them to be cowed by fancy speeches and fiery orations by the power hungry shysters who are emboldened by just such an honor-free system as you are proposing—the mountains of legislation become enervative, if not oppressive. More and more, though this may be disguised by favorable sounding names on the bills, laws tend to be made in the interest of increasing control and keeping incumbents in power. Thus, gradually, the government becomes more and more the enemy of the governed, ruling by fear even in cases where the system of government is intended to be protective of rights and freedom. Government by its nature—by the very meaning of the word—is the very antithesis of personal freedom. The *system* by which people share in government in the United States, however, is so constituted that it can be a friend to the people, but only so long as they understand how it works and what it is supposed to do—and that it was invented to restrain, rather than unleash government power. But, if those in favor of control also deprive citizens of the understanding of that system and its purpose—through a national department of education, for instance—thus denying to the public the knowledge necessary to preserve it, its protective aspect will be subverted. The founding of that great state will come to be seen as a remote mythology, and its written Constitution but a quaint relic that may once have been applicable in an antique, non-technological, pre-industrial world; a document to be preserved only as paper to be placed under glass alongside the Magna Charta and the Mayflower Compact; museum pieces, interesting only as artifacts representing ideas no longer seriously considered viable by rational modern men.

Such is the world you advocate, Trashimakus. But at least you admit it and you are forward about your tyrannical ideas, so we can know you for what you are. Others who hold these views are not so overt. They hide behind the rhetoric of protecting and helping the many, even 'fighting' for the downtrodden, pretending to be political Robin Hoods exacting vengeance on the nasty rich people in the name of the helpless poor, and spreading the false doctrine that government, if given free reign (if only they could be untethered from that antiquarian Bill of Rights and spared from the spider's web of checks and balances that anchor them to the Constitution), will correct all injustices and unveil a future of perfect fairness and equality.

No Sir! Not at all! These are mendacious distortions. Are such lies honorable? Only in the lexicon of those who truly believe that freedom is evil and totalitarianism is good—like you! But governors do not really care what is good or bad for the people; only for what protects or increases their security in power. In that, they are indeed dishonorable, for they know what they say is false. By their leadership they greatly intensify the already frightening proportions of the tidal wave of dishonor now rising in the social pond. If it cannot be quelled, in its aftermath the pond will yield to the desert, for the expunging of honor is the final blow to a free society. Machiavellian morality—'what is best for the Prince is best for the society'—is the death knell of morality; an express ticket to tyranny.

The only thing that has saved us from moral collapse over the several centuries since his presumptions were published, is the domination of traditional morality continually emphasized by organized religion and taught by believers to their young.. Nietzsche sounded the tocsin with his announcement of the death of God. But little attention was paid by the mostly illiterate masses to the ranting of another crazed German philosopher. Many, in fact—one might be correct in saying 'most' (at least of those who had heard of him)—considered it cosmic justice when he died insane. The world, generally, hardly noticed that God had departed. They still prayed to Him through the Great War, the Second World War, the birth of nuclear weapons and poison gases, and, even now, we see remnants on the modernist side of things; liberal thinkers who are quite sure He's in synch with the idea that it's just fine to kill babies before they are born, and radicals who blow-up buildings teeming with innocent workers and school busses filled with children to advance His causes. But more and more, little by little—due in great part to another idea, that everyone ought to go to college and be subjected to the indiscriminant ranting of puffed up pseudo-intellectuals—

the idea has been trickling down that there might not be a god. After all, what kind of god would allow such carnage as we have seen in this century? He's either powerless, or worse—He's evil. He's no different than the devil, and undeserving of our worship of Him. To more and more humans it begins to seem most likely that there is no god, and that the world is just an accident and we're merely a product of the 'uncertainty principle'—a necessary link in a meaningless chain of unavoidable quantum events.

As this meaninglessness encroaches upon our thought, morality looks more silly. Honor is an empty slogan—nothing but a fancy medal on some idiot's chest who irrationally risked—or stupidly forfeited—his very life for the benefit of others; like the many who have given their lives for you and I, Trashimakus. And you shrug and say there is no honor in their behavior. 'It had to be that way,' you believe. 'We have no choice. We are set in motion by forces beyond our control and understanding. Whatever is given has no purpose; whoever receives has no merit. There is no good; no evil; only accident and randomness in a valueless, uncomprehending universe.'

Trashimakus: Exactly—and well said, Mythokrates. You have finally found the truth. So we must advance and defend ourselves at every opportunity. Well—'must' is not the right notion. A few will advance through some unknown power—a surplus of personal energy. Others will step aside to avoid the social fray as best they can. Still others—most, I expect, will simply be controlled—or, if you must, 'oppressed.' But none of this is due to free will. That is the powerful and pervasive myth that drives your baseless arguments. You think that humans must be granted the opportunity to express, as fully as possible, their free will. That's where your intellectual problem arises—in the mythology of the freedom of will. Modern thinkers, in alignment with the scientific revolution (that, by now, should have swept away all the cobwebs that still bind us tenuously to the ancient world), understand that human behavior is, like any other sort of energy, subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In short, it is entropic. It seeks its lowest energy state. It follows, like water, the easiest available path given any individual's life situation: genetic tendencies, political and financial circumstances, handicaps and/or advantages, training/education, etc. We only think we have free will. It's an illusion fostered by the even greater, one might say 'all encompassing' illusion of consciousness, within which all our other ideas are wrapped.

Mythokrates: Ah, HAH! You admit, then, the ideas you are expressing have nothing to do with truth. They are simply an illusion; nothing but rhetoric and sophistry; rationalization conjured by the automatic firing of neurons in response to the stimulus of opposing views, all done simply to bring before your false self-sensation the further illusion of accomplishment through victory in argument, somewhat akin to satisfying one's hunger by eating marshmallows.

And it occurs to me that you're not entirely convinced by your own pronouncements. If you were, you would have simply killed me by now, rather than waste the time deliberating when you know full well I'll not be convinced or swayed by your arguments; that I will do my best to subvert you. Instead, you give me an opportunity to speak and contradict you. So, you see? You *do* have values, even a sense of fairness and decency. So you are, at heart, an honorable man. Actually, I think you want to be convinced by me.

Trashimakus: Yes—it could be. Perhaps I don't kill you because more enjoyment—even if it is an illusion—is gained from seeing you defeated simply by opposing words of my own making.

Mythokrates: Your own making? How can you derive a sense of accomplishment from words that are simply automatic, which have their source in a kind of quasi-physics; which, if not exactly predetermined, are simply the results of probability wave functions, rather than invented or created—for which you can, by your own arguments, take no credit?

Trashimakus: Whether they are surreptitiously ordered within the unfolding holo-movement, or they are purely random events for which I am merely a conduit, the illusion presented to my consciousness is that of having created them. Denial of all credit for the deed notwithstanding, as I appear to be the vehicle of your defeat, my illusion of joy is undiminished.

Mythokrates: So is that why you don't kill me?

Trashimakus: I suppose so, for I believe my joy would quickly evaporate after your demise. As for the death of your arguments: our illusory contest may soon be over, unfortunately, but I can still derive joy from your suffering in defeat; sufficient motivation to allow you to live—in misery. Or, maybe, by your conversion my joy will be sustained; even increased, instead of being terminated along with your spirit.

Mythokrates: Thank you! But wait—I take that ‘thank you’ back. It is so easy to forget that such common courtesies are misguided in a world void of purpose, free will, and responsibility.
So, would you say, then, that this sensation of joy is motivating—urging you on to more strenuous rhetoric as the prospect of victory over me waxes or wanes? .

Trashimakus: *Hah!* It never wanes, Mythokrates. But, to your question, ‘yes’—though I feel the urge to qualify that response by saying that the sensation of joy carries with it the *illusion* of such motivation, which is, itself, preprogrammed, and is sequentially triggered by the enduring illusion of you and your foolish questions and your pre-scientific beliefs.

Mythokrates: If my beliefs appear silly, yours are a riot! You seem to be serious about them. Yet, to be so, you must be completely unaware that they are founded on guilt—guilt, perhaps at first, over your unwillingness or powerlessness to diminish evil in the world and to promote the good. The position you propose—your ‘reality’—is only a rationalization for avoiding responsibility and the blame that comes from existing in a world that contains evil and doing nothing about it—or worse, *promoting* it by both argument and example. The abandonment of reality to the status of illusion is what is silly. That balloon can be ‘popped’ by the simple, pointed question: “Whose illusion?” After all, if there is illusion, there must be an observer. Someone is being fooled (implying further: an illusionist). It also seems plain that the unreal can only be found out by comparing it to the real—by means of a ‘real’ investigation.

Trashimakus: Since there *is* no reality, *everything* is unreal, including the investigation, the investigators themselves, and all the evidence turned up.

Mythokrates: That is ridiculous, Trashimakus! You’re wasting my time. There should be laws against this degree of sophistry. Even if sense could be made out of such nonsense, you couldn’t convince me that living in such a world is acceptable. Even if it were true, I would want to change it—or die trying. In such a world, I would be proud to be the sophist. Like you must do now, I would study rhetoric all my spare hours so that I might turn just the right phrase at the right time to convince unguarded listeners that the truth is false, and the false true. If I could not defeat, I would at least ignore such ‘truth’ as you have proposed, for I could not accept the prospect of a valueless life. I would rather live a happy and prosperous lie than a grotesque and empty truth.

Now I see that I have overstayed my visit with you. Your tolerable vintage has been consumed, and I must be on my way. So let me leave you with some thoughts about our discussion. If neither of us, in a forest-worth of paper, can absolutely prove the other wrong—though we each think we have overwhelmed the other—it is at least quite obvious that my world is incomparably better than yours. It would seem to me that life in your ‘unreal’ dream-world, even a soft and secure but—by your own admission—*meaningless* life among the mighty in the sterile landscape of sheer probability, is far inferior to a life of hard work to improve the quality of one’s existence among the general population in a world of realizable dreams. Therefore, I shall continue to seek the good. If I should happen across any, I’ll be sure to share it with you—and I’ll bring along a much better wine. And should such good not exist, as has often been said in regard to God, I shall invent it.

So, Trashimakus, I leave you with this advice: If honor is sometimes a fool, remember, your laughter is as applause to the clown. If justice fails you, do you expect perfection? Try again! If the world seems unfair, that’s only natural. The effort made toward self-improvement—to overcome the odds against you—will not go unpaid for long. And even if God is dead, has He not a history of resurrection? And, one more thing—something of ‘real’ importance: next time you go to the market, choose a wine that has a cork!