

It is evident to me, as it is to so many in these fraught times, that we need a serious reexamination of our civil discourse. This has become such a clichéd appeal that I am sure many of this journal's readers have already rolled their eyes due to their presumptions of my naïveté. "Please," I can hear them saying in exasperation, "the year is 2275, can we move on from this? Everyone knows that politics is toxic, and you can't even have a decent conversation with your neighbour without them bringing up how it might not be such a bad thing if the river Thames overflowed this year and flooded London thoroughly.¹ But can we please focus on the serious problems England is facing? The time for talking is past: we need action!"

I sympathize with my imagined readers' concerns, but I must confess that I find them based on rather shaky premises. First, while I agree that this is a significant year in recent English history², the idea that we, as a society, can simply "move on" from certain conversations is not borne out by the historical record. Beginning with the earliest written records known to humankind, the Sumerians chiseled receipts from sales of barley in stone tablets, a social interaction currently mimicked all over the country at the pubs every night. Moreover, the last two hundred years should provide evidence that whenever we may feel history has reached some sort of pinnacle or terminus, it will turn in a direction hitherto unexpected. Could one have predicted, in 1995, the cataclysms of the 2040s, or in 2040, the prosperity and utopianism of the 22nd century? Indeed, the problems we face going into the elections this year are far kinder problems than those the world powers met and solved in the late 21st century – they simply seem more serious when compared to the previous century of peace and concord we have just enjoyed.³ No easy narrative of historical progress or decay can account for recent history, and as such any decently informed individual should never consider any topic as belonging solely to the

¹ "Might clean up the city a bit, if not the deals in Westminster," they say. Or at least my neighbours do.

² Though it is not nearly as significant as will be next year, the 500th anniversary of the founding of our *de jure* high government, the United States of America. In case you readers were unaware, the USA achieved their independence from us, a fact that I am sure next year is likely to be mentioned a few million times on our media networks.

³ While the popular story taught to our schoolchildren is that the 22nd century was the Global Golden Age, we must remember that does not mean there were no disputes at all, or that the world powers were always on agreeable terms – as this article will argue, there were just means of handling discord that have been abandoned in recent times.

past. History is like any long, meandering conversation: as new parties join in, much will need to be repeated for the newcomers.

As I am sure the readers will notice, I am an advocate for seeing the importance of discourse, and not just as a metaphor. And while we can discuss the political and hygienic benefits of the Thames floodwaters until the Guernsey cows come home, it is the last part of this imagined critical readers' response that troubles me more. "We need action, not more talking!" I can already hear the philosophers laughing in scorn. Yet, this is not an uncommon position to hear in England today, that the problem is that our politicians talk all the time, but never take any action. So why look for solutions that involve talking? These complainers⁴ cite many convenient precedents in British history to show that talking even makes problems worse, while action solves them. For example, in attempting to stop the advance of Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain talked; Winston Churchill acted.⁵ Or for another example, during the evacuation of Australia in response to the Animal Uprising, King George VII talked; Queen Charlotte I acted.⁶ Nevertheless, I feel these arguments are red herrings. There are many factors that led Churchill and Charlotte to be more successful in their responses than Chamberlain and George, but more importantly, there is a much larger body of evidence to suggest that proper discourse can prevent situations like these from arising in the first place. While popularly we may credit the *initiation* of the Global Golden Age of the 22nd Century with the actions of certain world leaders, it is also imperative to remember that there was a great deal of talking that *kept* that Golden Age afloat.

If the importance that civil discourse held in the Global Golden Age has been forgotten, so too has the underlying philosophy that moderated Golden Age politics been mostly lost to English culture. I know there are some who claim that philosophy is purely the academicians' game, and that it is hardly relevant to the daily lives of the common folk. But what these opponents do not realize is that philosophy, whether explicitly or implicitly, is always having an effect on culture.⁷ Think of the profound philosophical influence of Confucius on dynastic

⁴ I would call them voters, but for people who bemoan their leaders' lack of action in their political responsibilities, they rarely seem to exercise their own political responsibilities.

⁵ See Churchill's famous quote: "You can't reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth."

⁶ See Queen Charlotte's equally famous quote: "You can't reason with a kangaroo when your life's savings and weapons cache are in its pouch."

⁷ There is an excellent extended analogy that goes something like this: "In this world we are like fish swimming in a river. We do not even notice the presence of the water around us, but it is there. Culture is this water. And we also do not notice the strange man dipping his finger into the water above us, questioning whether the temperature of the water that he feels on his finger is a relative or ontological concept, whether or not perception of such extra-rational sensations can ever be formulated in language in a meaningful way, and whether or not the presence of such

Chinese social order, or Thomas Aquinas on European theological universities, or Nietzsche on late twentieth-century teenage males. And when I say we need a serious reexamination of our civil discourse, I mean we need to investigate how civil discourse changes depending on its philosophical underpinnings. As a historian of discourse, I would like to explain this with a case study: that of the influence of Colavitan Discourse on world leaders at the beginning of the 22nd century.

While I would hazard to guess that even most philosophy PhD students are familiar with Colavitan Discourse, it may be less well-known to lay readers specializing in other fields, especially here in England. Carl Colavito, the namesake of Colavitan Discourse⁸, is much better known in the USA, where his book *Rational Discourse* was a best-seller in the mid-21st century. Much like how John Locke's ideas on human rights were pivotal in setting the agenda for the USA's founding fathers in the late 18th century, Colavito's ideas on proper discourse methods were pivotal in laying the framework for the USA's critical and timely actions to help avert global destruction in the late 21st century. Colavitan Discourse thus not only played a crucial role in enabling the Global Golden Age, it became the standard for American civil discourse well into the 22nd century, before complacency and greed during the height of Golden Age luxury once again turned American politics for the worse. It is my hope (and I plan to write a full book on this) that England can itself learn from Colavitan Discourse to face its current political problems.⁹

Before I make my point, allow me to provide some background on Carl Colavito. Though mostly known for his *Rational Discourse*, his corpus of writings is actually quite extensive, revealing him to be much more than a one-book philosopher. In addition to various works on the

questions in his mind is sufficient evidence to present to his tenure review board. This man is a philosopher, or would be, if philosophers ever went outdoors."

⁸ Why the 'o' at the end of his name was changed to an 'a' in its adjective rendering is unknown. Some scholars have argued that the similarity of his name with a certain brand of olive oil that was popular at the time may have caused the confusion. Others have argued that "Colaviton" sounded too robotic, not to mention the fact that it makes the pronunciation rather ambiguous (Colavi-tone? Colavi-ton, rhymes with 'none'? Colavit-on, like the preposition?). Regardless, given the lack of importance of this fact on the particulars and merits of his discourse methods and other philosophical ideas, it is mainly seen as niche topic and rarely discussed seriously by Colavitan Scholars, as they are very practical people. I jest of course – there is at least one paper on this debate given at almost every Colavito Conference, and it inspires a lot of discourse that to outsiders does not seem very rational. But I digress.

⁹ I know that American Philosophy is not very fashionable this side of the pond, but I would argue Colavito is not like other American philosophers.

subject of autonomy¹⁰, family members have posthumously published volumes of notebooks filled with notes from various student discussion groups, artistic flyers for costumed dances, and an immense number of heavily edited Hallmark birthday and holiday cards. Typically, Colavitan Scholars today choose one area of his work in which to specialize: the vast majority specialize in *Rational Discourse*, with a notable minority group of scholars specializing in his discussion group notes, but every one of his publications is represented in the field.¹¹ Colavito himself was known for his quick wit, his ability to think on his feet, his strong sense of duty to his students, and grammatical pedantry.¹² When one reads *Rational Discourse*, one can immediately see the influence it once had if one is familiar with early Golden Age American politics – and not just because it became commonplace, in Colavitan fashion, for American politicians to refer to their discourse partners as “buddies.”¹³

Colavitan Discourse was based on the intuitive, yet practically revolutionary, premise that in proper discourse there are only winners and no losers.¹⁴ For Colavito, the goal of discourse was truth, rather than political expediency or self-justification, and *Rational Discourse* provides a number of powerful methods for approaching truth in the best ways possible. Naturally, truth can be a fickle thing to pin down, especially in arenas like politics when so many chaotic factors are in play, and thus *Rational Discourse* also provides measures for the better understanding others, preserving amiable relationships during difficult discourse, and, if not

¹⁰ Notably, read his chapter in the Festschrift for Antonio De Nicolas.

¹¹ Some of the most passionate and intense discussions I have witnessed at Colavito conferences are actually between the two main schools of scholarship on his heavily edited birthday and holiday cards. The Systematic school argues that the choices of edited words, the locations of the edits on the cards, and the tenor of the changes made reveal profound insights into a deeper philosophy of gifting and festivity that Colavito either explicitly or implicitly held. The Irrationalist School argues that Colavito’s edits show such a scattered range of meaning and form that they could only come from a mind that is so perfectly irrational that it demonstrates no coherent or systematic thought at all. Of course, both of these schools subdivide further into their more mainstream and radical factions: the radical Systematics treating his card-edits as an almost religious framework, and the radical Irrationalists reinterpreting all of Colavito’s work, including *Rational Discourse*, through their anti-coherence lens, to the point that they argue that all those who adopt Colavitan Discourse as a primary interlocution method have still not gone far enough into recognizing the inherent absurdity in all human communication. While most discussions at Colavito conferences tend to abide by the norms of Colavitan Discourse, as one would assume, I have seen arguments between radical Systematics and radical Irrationalists get so heated that they have needed to be solved with impromptu Judo matches, a post-discourse resort that was supposedly sanctioned by Colavito in some folklore traditions, though little serious scholarship supports this claim. Still, I highly recommend these conferences if only for the reason that they frequently have reproductions of some of Colavito’s most famous edited cards, which, while pricey, make for hilarious gifts even in this day and age.

¹² Did he say “**his** grammatical pedantry” when he read this? I bet he did.

¹³ Colavito’s term of choice for discourse partners in *Rational Discourse*.

¹⁴ Carl Colavito. *Rational Discourse*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020) p.3. (Make it happen! 😊)

finding the truth, at least agreeing on a better idea of where to look for it. *Rational Discourse* operates like a training manual, with whole sections on preparation, pre-discourse considerations, impediments to avoid, and practical applications once the method has been mastered. Colavito's writing style is eclectic, to be sure, and more dogmatic philosophers may balk at the conversational elements in his book¹⁵, but the form matches the content – Colavito wants to encourage conversation, and the best way to start is by a conversation with the reader.

It is difficult to overstate just how different his philosophy of discourse was from the prevailing notions of the day when Colavito was writing. In the early 21st Century, American discourse was dominated by ad hominem attacks, blatant hypocrisy, a refusal to listen to any dissenting opinions, emotional manipulation, and an ever-increasing polarization with uncritical acceptance of extreme positions. Those engaging in discourse in those days were required to be hyperemotional, unmoving, overconfident and unapologetic. Colavitan Discourse, in stark contrast, exhorted its adherents to be critical of their own beliefs, open to new ideas, understanding of others' positions, and, to quote Colavito, to "Think like a terminator, not an impassioned lawyer."¹⁶ To engage in Colavitan Discourse, you have to make several realizations that were not common knowledge in his time: that the person you are arguing with is usually not actually arguing with you, but with an interpretation or idea in their own minds; that if something took a long time for you to grasp, it will likely take your interlocuter a fair amount of time as well; that an argument is not won when one party gives up, but when a better understanding of the subject matter has been attained by all; and that immediate goals should only be set to accomplish something wholly within your power. These principles helped the American leaders of the past take their country into an era of prosperity, and it is clear why. A country whose leaders are focussed on truth will ultimately have an advantage over a country whose leaders are focussed on expediency, because a country is like a structure built on shifting ground: the ground will change, but if the structure has been built according to true principles of design and shock absorption, it will stand. If it has been built according to anything else, it will fall.

It is my opinion that a rediscovery of Colavitan Discourse is vital for England, not solely to solve the problems at hand, but because it can lay a solid foundation for our country for years

¹⁵ Like his emojis, which are a surprise feature in the book given his reported aversion to technology and popular texting culture of the 2010s.

¹⁶ Colavito. *Rational Discourse*. p.42.

to come. *Rational Discourse* is a book that does not admit short, easy solutions, but advocates for a way of living and politicking that creates the conditions for long-term prosperity. Carl Colavito was one of the most important political thinkers of the 21st century, and if these last years of the 23rd century are to take the same path as the last of the 21st, with the world coming closer together than at any point in global history, then we need to understand the ideas that predicated that path, and the man who formulated them so eloquently.

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¹⁷ It is very possible I am descended from James Thieke, who – this is a fun trivia fact – was actually Carl Colavito’s nephew! Thus, I may be related to the author for whom I am advocating, but I hardly believe a conflict of interest needs to be declared when a half-dozen generations have passed.