

In Defense of the Moderate

In an era that prizes passion, “reasonableness” gets caricatured as political cowardice or bloodless neutrality. A new book says it’s exactly what we need.

By [Nikhil Krishnan](#) April 20, 2026





Radicals on the left and the right hold a shared contempt for compromise and difference-splitting. A new book helps explain why this contempt is corrosive. Illustration by Javier Jaén

You don't want me negotiating for you. I am inclined to fold before the slightest friction and am always the first to blink in a staring contest. These habits may come from my being congenitally risk-averse but also from an overdeveloped capacity for charitable interpretation, for constructing what rationalists online like to call "steel men." Whatever arguments management might think up for laying me off, I'm sure I can come up with better ones. Thank goodness for those hardened union reps who take muscular pleasure in holding the line and wouldn't dream of conceding that management could have a case. Where would we pushovers be without the pushy to defend us? Waiting with exquisite patience in the breadline, that's where.

By all accounts, being a milquetoast is a sort of vice—cowardice masquerading as prudence. But in Aristotle's typology, where virtue is a mean between two opposing extremes, the opposite of a vice tends to be another vice. Courage and resolution are to be distinguished from my sort of cowardice as much as they are from the reckless bravado of the zealot or the mulishness of dogmatists incapable of recognizing when the other side has a point. Anyone who thinks the only alternative to being a victim is to be a victimizer is missing some important possibilities.

Have we a word for this virtue? The Stanford philosopher Krista Lawlor believes that we do. In "[Being Reasonable: The Case for a Misunderstood Virtue](#)" (Harvard), she writes wisely and imaginatively about what separates the virtue of reasonableness from the vices it can be confused with. The distinction is more than an academic nicety. At a time when political life tempts us to treat compromise as capitulation, her argument amounts to a defense of the habits that make common life possible.

Unlike some other terms that philosophers use, the adjectives "reasonable" and "unreasonable" are part of our daily language. A thousand couples, at this very moment, must be accusing each other of failing to be reasonable. A hugely popular forum on the British parents' website Mumsnet is called "Am I Being Unreasonable?" But the highest-stakes appeals to reasonableness have always been in the law.

Lawlor's book opens with an account of the [tragic shooting of Yoshi Hattori](#), a Japanese exchange student in Baton Rouge who was killed after he approached the wrong house for a Halloween party, in 1992. The question before the jury was whether the fears that had led the homeowner, Rodney Peairs, to fire his gun were "reasonable." The jury voted to acquit Peairs of manslaughter. Lawlor is not convinced they got it right.

What question did the jurors think they were being asked? Legal scholars have disagreed. "The average Louisiana homeowner in Peairs's situation could have thought Hattori posed a very real threat of death," the law professor Cynthia Lee has argued. Like many people, she apparently takes the term "reasonable" to mean "average" or "typical."

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Lawlor finds that troubling. The average person might be prejudiced, and what could be more unreasonable than prejudice? Even if Peairs's fears were, as the jury's verdict suggested, typical for his environment, they weren't reasonable in a deeper sense, the one that Lawlor's book develops and defends. "People can make mistakes, but being concerned to get it right about value and being reliable in tracking it—that, on my hypothesis, is the heart of reasonableness," she writes.

It's no surprise that the notion of the reasonable plays a central role in the law. Certain statutes explicitly appeal to what's reasonable—exasperating those who find the standard hopelessly indeterminate. Montana once had a traffic law that required drivers to operate their vehicles "in a careful and prudent manner at a rate of speed no greater than is reasonable and proper under the conditions existing at the point of operation." One frustrated motorist, in 1996, prevailed on the Montana Supreme Court to declare that law "void for vagueness," because it failed to "give a motorist of ordinary intelligence fair notice of the speed at which he or she violates the law."

The traffic code was appropriately amended to specify maximum speeds.

Yet Lawlor notes that the amended law nonetheless retained a reference to reasonableness. How could it avoid doing so? Could a traffic code provide explicit limits for every possible set of road conditions? Lawlor mischievously imagines what one might look like: “If four inches of snow, go fifteen miles per hour, if six inches, go ten miles per hour, unless there is fog, in which case . . .” Asking drivers to be, quite simply, reasonable, rather than literal-minded sticklers, “is a time-honored way for the law to handle novel situations,” she observes.

“Being Reasonable” is that attractive and unusual thing, a small book on a big subject. Lawlor writes with the pleasing air of someone keen to be understood by a wide range of possible readers. Philosophical theories are summarized in the plainest of plain English, with jargon thoughtfully rationed and examples taken from the most everyday of situations: siblings wondering whether to move their elderly father to an assisted-living facility, friends recommending movies to one another, a hyper-competitive Sunday-softball player steamed by a loss. Her academic interlocutors, no less than the fictional and real people in her illustrations, are unfailingly treated with a charity that exemplifies the virtue she’s writing about.

Lawlor draws a sharp line between being “rational”—the skill used to achieve one’s own goals—and being “reasonable,” an essentially social quality. Consider the notorious “Dictator Game,” beloved by behavioral economists. In this game, a Proposer is given a sum of money and invited to choose in what proportion to split it with a Receiver. The Receiver is not allowed to reject the offer, so a purely “rational” player—that is to say, a self-interested one—would keep the entire sum.

In a study conducted by the psychologist Igor Grossmann, participants agreed that it was perfectly rational for the Proposer to keep all of the money. Yet they considered Proposers “reasonable” only if they offered a fair split—usually around forty or fifty per cent. For Lawlor, this result supports her larger assertion: in ordinary usage, reasonableness names a different mode of thought than rationality does—it treats other people’s claims as having standing.

To be reasonable is to have the capacity to recognize that we aren’t the only ones making judgments of value; other people, too, are evaluators, and their claims on the world also have weight. A master of hardball negotiation might be a rational man, but he is unreasonable if he refuses to recognize the needs and perspectives of others when negotiating. To be reasonable, Lawlor thinks, is to see your point of view as one of many—while avoiding the slide into pliancy, the endless perspective-taking of the pushover.

“If you are reasonable,” Lawlor says, “you are open to the possibility that what matters to the other person does matter.” To be “open to the possibility” requires discernment: you have to be able to decide when what matters to the other person does, and doesn’t, have a legitimate claim on you. Reasonableness, in her formulation, is a “critical-minded assessment of the concerns of others and an open-minded readiness to change one’s own concerns.”

What would it look like, at the limit, to be without such a capacity? Inevitably, Lawlor reaches for a Nazi. Hannah Arendt’s well-known account of [the trial of Adolf Eichmann](#) contained, among its other penetrating descriptions of the defendant, this diagnosis: “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became . . . an inability to think, namely, to *think* from the standpoint of somebody else.” Arendt hit on the word “banal” to describe his iniquity, but here she roots it in an aberration: a lack of the most ordinary of human abilities.

Lawlor’s most compelling metaphor, borrowed from R. Jay Wallace, a philosopher at U.C. Berkeley, is that of a “landscape of value.” Each of us moves through a world strewn with figurative mountains and molehills, continually assessing what matters more and what matters less. Mapping that terrain is a social practice. We learn from one another, and we convey our judgments through “costly signals,” claims that require explanation and defense, rather than “cheap signals” shouted to advertise tribal allegiance. Reasonable people are disposed to signal coöperatively. That is, they assume responsibility for their judgments and grant others standing to challenge them. They’re constantly updating their maps based on what they hear from travellers navigating the same space.

One of Lawlor’s examples concerns the (literal) mountain climber Ed Webster, who, having experienced bouts of anoxia, turned back from Mt. Everest’s summit when he was just three hundred feet from it. He decided that he’d rather relinquish the chance at glory than jeopardize his life. Some mountaineers may have regarded the retreat as a failure of nerve. Even so, the decision tracks value in a way others can recognize. Choosing life over glory is reasonableness in action.

“Which two people on this conference call are discreetly messaging each other about you?”

Cartoon by Jon Adams

Webster’s decision has one feature that makes it easy to classify as reasonable: it was his to make. No one else had to live under the shadow of its consequences. Although the decision was exercised against a background of possible disagreement, it didn’t require that disagreement to be resolved. Those who considered Webster a failure by some mountaineer’s code could have expressed their disdain, but they knew that Webster was free to make his own choices.

The word we have for the point where this freedom ends is “politics.” Politics, with all its mechanisms, its conflicts, and its institutions, exists because people—even, somehow, reasonable people—disagree. But they must live and act together anyway, under institutions that govern human beings despite their disagreements. That’s a gentle way of saying that those institutions must be prepared, at times, to coerce. It is one thing to chart a landscape of value for yourself; it is another to do so for a society whose members will be bound, often resentfully, by the resulting map.

Lawlor's book contains chapters devoted to politics, but her inclination to reach for examples of the reasonable and unreasonable that any reader will intuitively share serves her less well here. The question of whether reasonableness has a place in politics does not have an obvious answer. A suspicious reader, all too familiar now with the dismissal of heterodox views as beyond the pale, might see behind her call for political reasonableness a more nefarious agenda: to make a bland moderation the test of virtue.

The thinker on whom Lawlor draws most extensively in her discussion of political reasonableness is John Rawls, that giant of postwar American political philosophy. Rawls provided the most influential modern formulation of what reasonableness demands [under conditions of pluralism](#)—the condition under which the people in most of the world's democracies live. His starting point was not optimism about the likelihood of human agreement but a sober recognition of its unlikelihood.

Modern societies, he thought, are marked by what he called the “burdens of judgment.” People are different; their experiences might have little overlap; their values pull in competing directions. Is it any surprise that conscientious people reasoning in good faith might arrive at incompatible conclusions about what life is for and what justice demands? These disagreements are not curable pathologies but permanent features of a free society. Rawls doesn't think that we must all be relativists; we still have the right to think our own views true. But he does derive from these premises the counsel of restraint. To be reasonable, in Rawls's sense, is to accept that one's deepest convictions may fail to command assent from others who are no less sincere or thoughtful, and then to propose terms of political cooperation that others can appreciate.

This idea of reasonableness is easily caricatured as moral timidity or a bloodless neutrality that drains politics of passion. But Rawls didn't seek to empty politics of conviction. The alternative to what he called “public reason” is not authenticity, or what Yeats called the “passionate intensity” of the worst, but force. When citizens insist on shaping the basic terms of social life by appealing to premises that others cannot reasonably be expected to accept—revelation, doctrines of transcendence, private moral visions—the result is not a purer politics but a dangerously brittle one.

The unsentimental grounding for this picture of reasonableness was provided by another giant of postwar American philosophy, though not one generally praised for his insights into politics: David Lewis. Better known for his bold and occasionally kooky-sounding arguments in metaphysics, he was also the author of a neglected gem of political philosophy. In an essay titled “Mill and Milquetoast,” Lewis takes aim at the comforting stories liberals sometimes tell themselves about tolerance—that we refrain from suppressing one another because we admire diversity or because we believe that truth will emerge from the clash of ideas. Nonsense. The modern norms of tolerance emerged, rather, as a hard-won peace treaty, hammered out, as Rawls had held, after Europe exhausted itself in religious war. “I won't suppress you if you don't suppress me” was not an expression of moral indifference, and still less of a sudden burst of generosity. It was a recognition by the wounded and the grieving of a shared vulnerability.

Reasonableness, like tolerance, is best seen as a convention of restraint, sustained because everyone remembers, however vaguely, what happens when the treaty collapses. In time, the treaty of toleration becomes, Lewis writes, “not just a constraint of conduct, but a climate of thought.” The habits that sustain this treaty and this climate are precisely those that radicals on all sides find contemptible: compromise, procedural fidelity, the refusal to go for broke. Demanding absolutely everything, Lewis says, makes you a bad signatory to an agreement that keeps one from being crushed by rivals the next time they have the chance. Lawlor's evolutionary story, with its emphasis on shared mapping and cooperative signalling, lends this picture further support. Reasonableness is a survival trait. To be unreasonable is to be a bad survivalist.

Say we accept that picture of how we learned to be reasonable. What keeps the peace treaty in place, frayed though it is? In [“Concealment and Exposure,”](#) another neglected gem of liberal philosophy, Rawls's student Thomas Nagel wrote that society depends not only on what is publicly justified but on what is tactfully left unspoken. Civilization, he suggested, would be impossible if we could read one another's minds. The world of mind readers would be, of course, a world without hypocrisy but also one without discretion. Forcing every disagreement into the open, and demanding consensus on matters of taste, meaning, or identity, would destroy the very conditions that allow diverse ways of life to coexist.

The point is that some disagreements may be too socially expensive to stage as public trials. Why—to take Nagel's example of a “culture war” episode from the late nineteen-eighties—did art-world partisans dig in their heels and insist that federal funding should support an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's notoriously provocative photographs? The debate forced a showdown that would have better been avoided. The reason that reasonable liberals may refrain from pressing a victory is not that they hew to Robert Frost's fond sendup of the type (“so altruistically moral / I never take my own side in a quarrel”). It's that they understand how fragile the settlement is.

It can be easy to forget in the twenty-twenties, but there was a time when this ethos of restraint defined politics in much of the West. Bill Clinton's infamous “triangulation,” Tony Blair's Third Way, and Barack Obama's insistence on being the most reasonable person in the room were all variations on a single theory of the case: that if you offered terms fair enough to hurt your own side, the opposition, faced with your fairness, would accept them. In retrospect, this faith looks naïve—as, indeed, it looked to some people at the time. But its failures (we are quick to forget its successes) suggest less that reasonableness was a mistake than that too many players stopped believing in the treaty it presupposed. All virtues rely on some set of conditions for their relevance.

Hostility to such politics has been voluble and loud. Left-wing critics of tactical triangulation have maintained that this can be seen only as collaboration with evil. Right-wing impatience with the politics of compromise appears in the disquieting [revival of Catholic “integralism,”](#) whose proponents favor capturing the state in order to impose a singular, and religiously inspired, vision of the common good. What unites these movements is a shared contempt for the moderate, who is dismissed as cowardly, unprincipled, or insincere: wimps who inexplicably hate winning.

Lawlor's account helps explain why this contempt is so corrosive. When one side decides that the treaty was a mistake—that only total

victory will do—it stops sending the costly signals that sustain shared “discursive” space. “Better wrong with Sartre than right with Aron,” the slogan used to go in the glory days of the French postwar left. Who wouldn’t prefer the glamour and the redemptive grandeur of the radical Jean-Paul Sartre to the pallid temporizing of the liberal [Raymond Aron](#)? But people like Aron have offered something other than the glory of commitment: a sense of imagination, of compassion, an awareness that your foes, too, have ideals that feel glamorous to them.

In defending reasonableness, Lawlor is defending the exhausted majority—those who still want to live together on terms of mutual recognition. She is unlikely to persuade the most passionate of partisans. But she may perhaps give heart to the despised moderates, who may be starting to internalize their critics’ charges that their willingness to compromise is really just a failure of nerve.

Think back to another culture-war moment. In the wake of the [1992 Los Angeles riots](#), the rapper and activist Sister Souljah asked, rhetorically, “If Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?” To a question about whether there were any good white people, she replied, “If there are, I haven’t met them.” Bill Clinton, then running for President, reproached her when he spoke at Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition. Many on the left saw betrayal and calculation. Why not see it, instead, as a performance of reasonableness, a refusal to allow a minority position within one’s alliance to define the map of value for everyone else?

It is a mistake of the passionate partisan to assume that moderates share the radicals’ principles but lack the audacity to act on them. Perhaps they don’t share those principles. Even if they do, they may value stability over purity and the survival of the treaty over the triumph of a vision. It’s not so much that they hate to win as that they recognize that most victories are temporary. The moderate’s vision may even be the harder one to sustain, requiring a tolerance for frustration and an inurement to defeat and political disappointment. There is something to be said for admitting that the prospects of disagreement are permanent and that wisdom consists not in tearing up the peace treaty but in renewing it.

It’s no secret that half of being a moderate is being a good loser. The other half, less widely acknowledged, is being a gracious winner. One of Aron’s latter-day disciples, Emmanuel Macron, was challenged during his breakout 2017 Presidential campaign over a triangulating phrase he liked to use when registering a reservation about one of his own convictions: “*en même temps*,” meaning “at the same time,” or “on the other hand.” It was, he freely admitted, “a verbal tic.” He was, however, unrepentant: “I’m going to keep on using it.” ♦