

Shaking Hands Is Vital to American National Character

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, recently told reporters, “I don’t think we should ever shake hands ever again, to be honest with you. Not only would it be good to prevent coronavirus disease; it probably would decrease instances of influenza dramatically in this country.”

This view reflects the perspective of the immunologist, the specialist, [the expert](#). It necessarily fails to take into consideration dimensions of human interaction and their role in shaping our social customs that then inform and reinforce aspects of our civic life.

Fauci seems only to understand the act in itself. He views the handshake in terms of its consequences as an agent of spreading infection and germs. Yet, this perspective ignores other concerns that affect us both as human beings and as citizens.

From the strict viewpoint of immunology, the perfect solution is ever greater emphasis on social isolation and, to that end, reducing all person to person contact.

Yet this view taken to its logical conclusion would require such isolation from one another one would have to ask in what way do we remain human beings and in what way are we fellow citizens?

If the only goal is to prevent the spread of disease then there is no theoretical limit to restrictions on human interaction. But in what way would we see each other as sharers in a shared common civic life? Would not this increased isolation only accelerate the dangerous forces of individualism that Alexis de Tocqueville so forcefully warned

us about in his *Democracy in America*?

The handshake is more than any mere physical act of contact between one human and another – it is also representative of the recognition of the other, not as a threat or an enemy, but as a fellow human being and potential friend. For more than 2,000 years, the handshake has been a sign of friendship, peace and unity. The gesture traces its origins back to 5th century Greece, where it was a symbol of peace, showing that neither person was carrying a weapon.

It was at once a sign of trust and a verification of that trust: extending open palms and then shaking revealed the absence of weapons both in the dominant hand and hidden somewhere on the person. Over time, the gesture was used in diplomacy, sportsmanship, and among peers and strangers as a sign of welcome, trust, and respect. And, consequently, the refusal to shake hands with another is seen as an open rebuke and a sign of distrust.

A handshake is not an act of deference, as a bow is, but of trust and social solidarity among those who are not within our immediate kin group. One shakes the hands of friends and strangers, not family. The bow or curtsy is clearly a sign of deference. One bows or curtsies to someone of status or authority. That person does not respond in kind. The handshake implies a level of equality that the bow or curtsy cannot.

The handshake also differs from the kiss, which is more a sign of affection or a strong familial bond. So, too, the hug. The handshake implies no affection or deep feeling, but merely an act of acceptance and welcome. It is offered to strangers when neither a kiss nor a hug seem appropriate.

In the Anglo-American world, the handshake is also an act of binding agreement or contract. In fact, handshakes often act as confirmation and consent to an agreement or contract between parties. In common law countries, a handshake deal,

just like a verbal contract, may be enforceable in the same way as a written contract. Usually, in today's world of contract law, the use of handshakes is reserved more for smaller contracts whereas contracts dealing with larger amounts usually require a written contract. In today's business world, handshakes are more symbolic and an actual agreement, a written contract, will emerge sometime later – following the handshake.

The civic and political symbolism of the handshake should not to be taken for granted, however. The handshake expresses the fundamental equality which underlies the character of a republican social order. It was the Quakers who first popularized the handshake in America, so argues [Michael Zuckerman](#). Zuckerman writes that the Quakers scorned “courtly gestures of subordination,” preferring the “practice of the handshake, extended to everyone regardless of station.” Thus, the handshake's egalitarian character echoes the egalitarian character of the American Regime.

We should note that Thomas Jefferson was the first American president who brought the handshake into the White House. From his presidency onward it became an established custom and from Jefferson's time up to Calvin Coolidge's administration, it was expected that the president would meet and greet visitors in the White House with a handshake. There was never a bow or a curtsy. Jefferson sought to bring a more republican character to the presidency, which many anti-Federalists feared would readily lend itself to becoming overly monarchical in character.

The act of having the president greet visitors with a handshake was not only an attempt to bring the office slightly down from something majestic and fitting for a monarch but to remind both president and citizen that the president is but a fellow citizen, a peer. And while handshaking and politics still go hand in hand – or they did up to our current political moment of pandemic panic – the gesture reaffirms

that the politician is one of us, a fellow citizen, a fellow Joe or Jane. And the act of a politician not shaking hands can put people, and voters, off. In fact, President Trump, a famous germophobe, was known to dislike the practice before running for office. But even he understood that he had to overcome his discomfort for the sake of the larger point. The view that everyone deserves at least a handshake, makes the act of not offering one a significant symbolic act, signaling conflict, hostility, or ill-will.

Suggested alternatives of the fist bump and the elbow bump are much more aggressive and less open acts. They are hardly acts of trust. Both the fist and the elbow move is more indicative of an aspect of human violence than of friendship towards the other party, it is not a welcoming or peaceful sign, except perhaps in an ironic and modern way. Both acts are more reminiscent of pointing the tip of the sword toward another person than of a handshake. The fist bump is more an assertion of power, where the other party responds in kind to show his equal power – it is not a sign of welcoming.

Ultimately, Fauci's view of handshakes shows that he regards the preservation of the body as paramount. In so doing he fails to consider the myriad ways his advice hampers our ability to live lives truly in community with our fellow citizens.

Aristotle teaches us that the end of life is not simply to live, but to *live well*; to fulfill our full potential as a social animal and human being. While health is a necessary prerequisite to being able to live the good life, the *real end*, the end that is the reason for which the lower ends like mere life are pursued or preserved, is to *truly live*. Subsistence cannot be the *summum bonum*. Mere health and mere physical safety cannot replace the good life.

Fauci's view – that to avoid infecting others in the future, the handshake should disappear as a social custom – privileges

mere life at the expense of the good life and further undermines American civic life by ending a custom that directs us towards others and away from ourselves.

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