

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN INQUIRY INTO HONOR

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Our everyday encounters with honor suggest that it is a largely positive notion. Such examples might include honoring one's parents, referring to a judge as 'Your Honor', or a soldier receiving the Medal of Honor for extraordinary battlefield valor. Unfortunately, honor also has its share of problematic associations. Historically, honor has close ties to violence, social hierarchies, oppressive ideologies, and a base desire for public approval. Consequently, despite its initially positive appeal, there is little support for honor as a notion that should be permitted to govern our modern social interactions.

My dissertation is an inquiry into the philosophically underexplored notion of honor for the purpose of defending honor against such views. In Chapter 1, I offer my provisional account of honor as the *respect* to which the member of an *honor group* is entitled according to that person's *reputation*, which is determined by his adherence to the group's shared *honor code*. My account is not intended to be comprehensive; instead, these four stipulated features serve to facilitate an examination of the most significant objections to honor.

In Chapter 2, I explore these pressing objections: first, that honor enables a host of morally objectionable practices; second, that honor promotes problematic social hierarchies; and third, that its essential connection to reputation deprives honor of moral significance. I argue that each of these objections is misplaced. Accordingly, a denial that honor is unfit to govern the interactions of individuals in our society on the basis of any of these objections is inappropriate.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I argue that what makes honor special is its unmatched ability to promote a group's values and ideals. Honor demonstrates this ability in three ways: acting as a distinct form of motivation, aiding in the projection of our values, and enabling moral resilience. In virtue of honor's value, as constituted by these three features, honor can be a benefit not only to the groups that utilize honor, but also to the society in which these groups are located.

AN INQUIRY INTO HONOR

by

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## Chapter 1: A Provisional Account of Honor

### 1.1. An Inquiry into Honor

Our everyday understanding of honor generally evokes positive associations. We tend to connect honor with virtues like courage, honesty, and selflessness. When we formulate a mental picture of an individual to whom we would ascribe honor, we likely think of someone who does the right thing, even if it comes at great personal cost. The words of journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann succinctly capture this commonsense view: “He has honor if he holds himself to an ideal of conduct though it is inconvenient, unprofitable, or dangerous to do so” (Lippmann, 1927, 224). It is only natural that we find the conduct of such an individual to be admirable and worthy of emulation.

Contrary to its outwardly positive impression, however, the notion of honor has become canonically associated with a great many social maladies. When we imagine a modern society in which honor is permitted to influence our interactions with one another, the initial appeal of honor is quickly overwhelmed by visceral criticisms:

- ◆ “Honor is inseparable from violence.”
- ◆ “Honor promotes an uneven social ordering; historically, it only benefitted aristocrats.”
- ◆ “The idea of being esteemed for upholding terrible honor norms is absurd.”
- ◆ “Honor is morally indefensible if it demands that our conduct be based on the opinions of others.”

As one philosopher puts it, honor has metamorphosized into “the alien Other, on which is projected all of the vices that we would like to believe our own society has risen above” (Kaufman, 2011, 558). In light of all its negative trappings, the prevailing opinion of honor is that it has little to offer our modern society.

I disagree. My dissertation is an inquiry into honor, undertaken for the purpose of defending honor against such views. This inquiry is divided into three phases. Chapter 1 is a descriptive

exploration of honor that highlights its fundamental features. Chapter 2 is the ‘negative phase’ of the inquiry in which I examine the most significant objections to honor and offer my replies. Chapter 3 is the corresponding ‘positive phase’ wherein I argue that honor offers inimitable value to not only the members of an honor group, but also to the society in which that group is situated. In establishing a provisional account of honor, offering my rebuttals to objections ranging from commonplace to deeply philosophical, and demonstrating the special value that honor offers, I contend that my defense of honor succeeds.

Nevertheless, two points must be clarified before I begin this inquiry into honor. The first is that the scope of honor, like many other social phenomena, is limited. Despite our general familiarity with honor, I maintain that honor is not a generic notion. Even though honor offers value to society at large, as I argue in Chapter 3, the benefitting masses are not beholden to the influences and norms of the system of honor that produced that benefit. As I make clear throughout this dissertation, honor is not something that can be wielded by all persons in all situations. Furthermore, my position does not consider honor to be the key to human happiness or flourishing. Although honor may contribute to a person living well, it is not a necessary condition for doing so.

Second, a successful defense of honor does not imply that honor is impervious to moral failure. I readily acknowledge that honor can produce despicable norms, just as it can be utilized by groups with detestable values and malevolent agendas. However, my defense of honor does not extend to a defense of all of honor’s various embodiments. I do not seek to uphold, reestablish, or otherwise justify the morally repellant practices that have been carried out in the name of honor. Some may doubt the strength of my forthcoming defense if honor cannot be stripped of the odious representations that threaten to undermine that defense. But I find this to be a specious evaluation of honor’s defensibility. Unfortunately, honor is often derided for that which is plainly permissible elsewhere. Other notions that influence our social interactions, such as friendship, loyalty, and love,

can all manifest in socially destructive ways; yet, we would not consider these notions irredeemable because they are not good in all possible contexts. So, to claim that we should turn our backs to honor merely because of its less-than-perfect track record is inconsistent with how we treat other social notions. My inquiry reveals that this sort of hypercritical treatment of honor is a recurring contrivance of honor critics. Although selective opprobrium is not itself sufficient to vindicate honor, its persistent appearance suggests that honor critics tend to be heavy-handed in their condemnations.

This opening chapter, which serves as the first phase of my inquiry, begins with an orientation to the landscape of honor. I examine various accounts of honor, from antiquity through modernity, in order to draw out honor's salient features. I then offer my working definition of honor as the *respect* to which the member of an *honor group* is entitled according to that person's *reputation*, which is determined by his adherence to the group's shared *honor code*. With my account established, I then set about rebutting two characterizations of honor – the first that honor is inert, the second that it is archaic – that portend to call into question the appropriateness of defending honor. My aim in this chapter is not to articulate a perfect description of honor that encapsulates all possible manifestations, but rather to establish a provisional account of honor that facilitates an examination of its most pressing issues.

### **1.1.1. The Descriptive Challenge of Honor**

Philosopher Harry Frankfurt notes that when a social phenomenon is especially prevalent, we adopt an attitude of disinterest when it comes to ascertaining what that phenomenon actually is or what role it plays in our social interactions (Frankfurt, 2005, 1-3). This insight is a fitting starting point for my inquiry into honor. Honor is a familiar enough part of our cultural milieu that there is little concern for establishing its precise descriptive nature. Although the category of honor has extensive content, we need not be steeped in its history nor its psychology to comprehend its appearances in

our everyday lives. We understand that addressing a judge as ‘Your Honor’ is done so out of deference to the authority and responsibility that the judge’s station demands. When your friend says that he intends to honor his living parents, we can surmise that he is planning an action intended to make his parents proud, such as entering a profession in which the family has a longstanding tradition of service. We are fascinated by tales of honor that abound in the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolkien, and popular films like *Seven Samurai* and *A Few Good Men* because we find it commendable that the protagonists adhere to the laudable conduct that their honor demands, no matter the cost.

But honor also has a dark side. We abhor honor when it is invoked as justification for extreme acts of violence, as in the ‘honor killing’ of a woman by her male relatives in order to recover their family’s status in the community amidst allegations of the woman’s sexual improprieties. Although these despicable cases of honor muddy the descriptive waters even more, we nevertheless seem equally confident in our ability to detect when honor has gone bad. We are quick to condemn honor when it takes the form of social exclusion, revenge, or gratuitous violence. Unfortunately, the ability to label honor’s various instantiations as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ using a criterion that echoes Justice Potter Stewart’s famous concurrence (‘we know it when we see it’ (Brennan et al., 1963, 197)) gets us no closer to an appreciation of what honor is or what function it serves.

The concept of honor has been discussed in many different ways. An early realization of one who undertakes a serious study of honor is that this category is far from settled. But this is no reason to be tepid about subjecting honor to philosophical analysis. The category of honor is indeed uncertain, but the same could also be said for love, equality, or justice. These are notions that we consider most worthy of continued examination, despite their categorical disputes. Some find that these concepts exist as personal virtues; others find them to be abstract notions that dictate certain relations in a social setting. These notions can admit both views and are none the worse for it. Like the philosopher who writes about justice or love, my examination of honor is not an attempt to defeat

all comers. What I offer in this first phase of my inquiry is a working definition of honor. I acknowledge that my account may differ from other commonsense interpretations. Even so, mine is not a novel conceptual analysis of honor. Although the body of serious philosophical literature on honor is admittedly scant, my usage of honor does not radically depart from others who have contributed to this field.

My account of honor highlights four key features: honor requires a *group*, honor is essentially connected to both *respect* and *reputation*, and honor depends upon adherence to an *honor code*. The stipulation of these features helps to ground the debates on the most important issues surrounding honor.

### **1.1.2. Investigating Different Accounts of Honor**

My exploration and subsequent defense of honor does not depend on any one particular account or field study. Still, it is helpful to begin by reviewing the strengths and shortcomings of different accounts of honor in order to better establish my account as one that is worthy of my proposed inquiry. One of the most recognized institutions that employs honor today is the military. As I make clear throughout this dissertation, I consider honor in the military to be the epitome of a successful system of honor in the modern day. Even so, each branch of our armed services offers a different formal description of honor. This puzzling inconsistency can make it challenging to understand the role of honor in this institution. In the U.S. Air Force, honor relates to the core value of ‘service before self’ in several different contexts, including “honor those who made such sacrifices before us”, “loyalty is demonstrated by helping each other act with respect and honor”, and “We must honor the Air Force and others by following our words with actions” (U.S. Air Force, 2023, 6). The U.S. Army characterizes honor as “a matter of carrying out, acting, and living the values of respect, duty, loyalty, selfless service, integrity and personal courage in everything you do” (U.S. Army, 2023).

The U.S. Navy takes a similar view of honor as that which commands a host of professional and personal behaviors. These behaviors are only slightly more tangible than what honor in the Army demands, such as “Conduct ourselves in the highest ethical manner in all relationships with peers, superiors and subordinates”, “Be honest and truthful in our dealings with each other”, “Be willing to make honest recommendations and accept those of junior personnel”, and “Encourage new ideas and deliver the bad news, even when it is unpopular” (U.S. Navy, 2023). Despite falling under the Department of the Navy, the U.S. Marine Corps has a slightly different view of honor: “[E]xemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior. Never lie, never cheat or steal; abide by an uncompromising code of integrity; respect human dignity and respect others” (U.S. Marine Corps, 2021). A third take on honor in the sea services comes from the U.S. Coast Guard, which views honor as a demonstration of “uncompromising ethical conduct and moral behavior in all of our personal and organizational actions” (U.S. Coast Guard, 2025). Even if we do allow for small variances of honor among those who drive tanks, sail ships, and fly fighter jets, there is still a concern that honor is merely a hypernym that can accommodate anything positive we wish to say about military personnel. It can be understandably difficult to take honor seriously if it can attach to so many things.

Another familiar institutional employment of honor is the use of so-called ‘honor codes’ at colleges and universities. The honor code at Harvard University requires that undergraduates “commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity” (Harvard University, 2025). The code at Harvard finds that cheating, plagiarizing, and misrepresenting ideas as one’s own “violates the standards of our community” (Ibid). A similar refrain echoes in nearly all collegiate honor codes. The honor code at Vanderbilt University requires that “students pursue all academic endeavors with integrity” (Vanderbilt University, 2025); Blue Ridge Community College in Virginia espouses an honor code that centers around “honesty in academic work” (Blue Ridge Community College, 2024). Unlike the previous example of military honor that had an overabundance of content, honor as espoused by

institutions of higher learning appears narrowly focused on academic honesty. This thin version of honor is an appeal to the more readily accessible moral notion that is its constitutive core, *viz.* honesty. Whether honor is being used in academia as a synonym for honesty or merely to impart a sense of gravitas, the concern is the same: this form of honor seems superfluous. Honor has no unique function in this particular context, as evinced by the majority of colleges and universities that spell out prohibitions against academic misconduct in an academic honesty policy or student handbook rather than utilize an honor code.

When it comes to formulating a description of honor, these two modern embodiments seem to offer more confusion than assistance. Military honor appears to have too much content, whereas honor in academia has too little. Even so, these two seemingly divergent examples of honor provide us with an important starting point to this inquiry: honor requires a group. An honor group may be as small as a single family, or as large as an entire society. Most of the existent literature on honor groups comes to us from historians and anthropologists. The honor groups that were the subjects of these inquiries were typically large swaths of the population who shared a common national, cultural, or social identity. Not surprisingly, honor norms varied a great deal depending on the group. Honor norms in Ancient Greece, for example, were quite distinct from those of the samurai in feudal Japan or the Sinai Bedouins of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, as anthropologist Frank Stewart notes in his hugely influential book *Honor*, a common thread that emerges from all these studies is that honor has two different senses – *external* and *internal* (Stewart, 1994, 10-23). The former expresses the individual's honor in the eyes of the group, whereas the latter expresses the individual's honor through his own eyes. This basic idea of honor as that which has both external and internal senses is widely accepted (Shapin, 1994, 66-67). Furthermore, within the literature, the view of external honor is uncontentious; external honor is the esteem, affection, or reward granted to the individual by the group (Kaufman, 2011, 557-564; Hacker, 2017, 203-206).

What is less obvious, however, is the subjective aspect of internal honor. One common view is that a person's sense of his own honor merely depends on his being regarded by the group. This view, which largely derives from the examinations of honor societies of old, suggests that internal honor is reducible to external honor (Benedict, 1947, 222-224; Dodds, 1951, 18; Adkins, 1960, 154-156). A second view of internal honor claims that a person's conceptualization of his own honor depends on his having certain traits or qualities. The individual who receives the group's esteem would assert that this esteem is given in virtue of the traits that he possesses (Liepmann, 1906, 227-232; Bacon, 1908, 163-165; Campbell, 1964, 271-272; Westhusing, 2003, 195-197). In other words, this second view requires that in order for an individual to consider himself a person of honor, he must have a quality that his group admires.

I agree that there is an undeniable external-internal bifurcation when it comes to honor. Furthermore, I concur with the accepted view of external honor as that which is bestowed upon the individual by the group. However, I find its counterpart of internal honor in need of some fleshing out. As I stated upfront, I am not on a quest to refute all the different ways in which people may use honor. Nevertheless, I do aim to capture the elements of honor in a way that best facilitates its critical examination. So, to the extent that we wish to recognize honor's distinctive subjective component in order to gain the best possible vantage from which to examine honor's issues, I maintain that both of these views neglect something deep about how a person understands his own honor.

I argue that a sense of one's own honor constructed around *merit* provides a more plausible and comprehensive characterization of internal honor. Regarding the first view, the mere fact that an individual is the recipient of external honor hardly provides us with any meaningful insight into how he views his own honor. The person who cares for his honor obviously desires to be positively regarded by the group. What matters to his own sense of honor, however, is not the mere fact that he is regarded by the group, but rather that he merits this regard. Imagine that Bob and Tony are

members of the same honor group. Bob has fulfilled that which the group demands in order to receive their esteem, so the group confers their esteem upon Bob. In evaluating his own sense of honor, Bob can say that he not only has the group's regard, but that he merits that regard. Another person in the honor group, Tony, fails to fulfill the group's demands, yet the group mistakenly grants Tony the same amount of respect. Thus, Tony is the recipient of unmerited honor. Under the first view of internal honor, this presents a troubling equivalency. If internal honor is only evaluable in terms of external honor received, then we are forced to conclude that Bob and Tony must have an identical internal sense of honor. This conclusion seems hasty, if not entirely implausible. Bob and Tony should not have an identical picture of their own honor, considering that one was deserving of the group's favor and one was not. Appealing to merit, however, can account for why these two cases strike us as sharply different.

Consideration of merit also illuminates the shortcomings with the second prevailing view of internal honor. To say that a person's internal honor is entirely bound up in the possession of some collection of personal traits strikes me as a move away from honor. When contemplating his own honor, a person might be pleased that he happens to have a trait that the group prizes. Although these personal traits might contribute to his being worthy of the group's esteem, they are not equivalent to his honor. The importance of merit to one's own honor, along with the incoherence of honor as a personal trait, are clearly revealed when we examine how members of honor groups respond to insults (Stewart, 1994, 19-23). He who cares to maintain his honor is acutely aware that that honor can be questioned, challenged, or even lost. An insult is an affront to the member's internal sense of honor because it claims that the individual does not merit the group's esteem. If this attack against his honor is not met with a response, it signals to the honor group that the recipient of the insult does not value his honor enough to defend it. To take the high road and allow the insult to pass is to risk suffering a downgraded status within the honor group.

Admittedly, responding to insults when honor is on the line has been historically fertile ground for unbridled escalations and reprisals. In many honor societies, the slightest imputation of misconduct against a person of honor was met with a disproportionately violent response (Sommers, 2018, 37-38). Icelandic sagas from the 13<sup>th</sup> century depict an honor society in which a man who mocks another is almost certainly decapitated. If the belittled man is unable to kill his tormentor, the younger generations of his family will rise to the occasion and do so on his behalf (Cunningham, 2013, 23-25). Even if an insult is completely true, it can still be cause for a fierce reaction. In his examination of the behaviors of gentlemen in the antebellum American South, historian Kenneth Greenberg remarks that “When the man of honor is told that he smells, he does not draw a bath – he draws a pistol” (Greenberg, 1996, 14). This honorable gentleman does not care if he actually smells. Rather, he cares that an accusation of smelling has been levied against him, which threatens to undermine his status among his peers. His response to the insult is not an attempt to correct a misperception, but rather a staking of his honor. By introducing the use of deadly force, he demonstrates that he is willing to bear a hefty burden in order to merit the group’s regard.

At this point, I reiterate that my defense of honor does not extend to all its various instantiations. The troubling subject of unrestrained violence as a means of maintaining one’s honor will be dealt with in the following chapter. For now, the important point to absorb is that a person’s internal sense of honor must account for wanting to merit the group’s favor. Internal honor tied to merit can account for the reality that honorable individuals vigorously defend their honor when it is attacked; honor that is akin to possessing a personal trait cannot. If an individual’s sense of honor rests soundly in his possessing certain qualities, he would not care if that honor is assailed by others. We might then wonder if honor even requires a conferring group in the first place. Thus, the view of honor as a personal trait is even more implausible because it erodes the basic idea of honor as a notion with both external and internal senses.

My conception of internal honor based on merit is more accommodating than both of the prevailing views of internal honor. My version better distinguishes between internal honor and external honor, while also illuminating the connection between these two senses. When the individual sees himself as worthy of the group's positive regard, he expects the group to treat him as such. Confirmation of his worth in the eyes of the group begets his own positive sense of self-worth. Internal honor based on merit reveals a powerful link between the group's opinion of the individual and the individual's opinion of himself. It is this connection that explains why individuals adhere to honor, even when its demands strike us as preposterous or appalling (e.g. Wyatt-Brown, 1982; Cairns, 1993; Nye, 1993; Johnson & Lipsett-Rivera, 1998). Anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers describes this internal sense of honor that I am embracing as an acknowledgement of an individual's value seen through not only his own eyes, but also through the eyes of the group. He writes that a person's internal sense of honor "is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* to pride" (Pitt-Rivers, 1966, 21). In fact, a common translation of 'honor' in Greek is *timé*, which expresses the value of the individual in both his own eyes and the eyes of society (Cairns, 2011, 29). The next section builds upon this idea by demonstrating that the synthesis of external and internal honor can be best explained in terms of respect.

## **1.2. Key Features of Honor**

### **1.2.1. Respect and the Group**

I share the viewpoint of those who find that honor is essentially connected to **respect** (e.g. Stewart, 1994; Welsh, 2008; Appiah, 2010). Broadly speaking, to show a person respect means to offer that person some form of regard because of something about that person. When we offer our seat to an elderly man on a train, we show him respect in virtue of his advanced age. We show respect

to our classmates as equal participants in a learning environment when we raise our hand to speak instead of blurting out our thoughts. Relatedly, we take offense when a coworker insults us, or when a person scuffs our shoe without apologizing, because the offenders fail to show us the amount of respect that we feel we deserve. In order to understand how the notion of respect connects to honor, it is helpful to examine philosopher Stephen Darwall's influential work on respect as that which has two kinds. *Appraisal respect* is the positive regard in which one is held according to a certain standard. This kind of respect is all about grading. The closer the individual is to the perfect embodiment of a certain standard the more appraisal respect he is given. An individual can garner appraisal respect for being the best playwright, or for having the highest batting average on his baseball team. *Recognition respect*, on the other hand, is to give appropriate weight to some fact about a person in the course of our deliberations (Darwall, 1977, 38-41). If my software engineer coworkers tell me to improve my diet and start exercising because they think I am at risk for a heart attack, I might offer a curt reply advising them to stay in their lane and reserve their judgements for my JavaScript coding. But if my doctor tells me the same, I am going to seriously consider following her advice. I grant this recognition respect to my doctor because unlike my coworkers, she is an educated, trained, and certified medical professional. Recognition respect is also the kind of respect shown between group members; the fact that is given appropriate weight is membership in that group. Chefs privilege the culinary judgements of other chefs over those of restaurant patrons, just as Navy SEALs place the most value on the combat insights of fellow SEALs. Unlike appraisal respect, recognition respect is qualitative; it is either given or it is not. This appraisal-recognition distinction offered by Darwall is considered central to the philosophical work on the notion of respect (Dillon, 2022).

Both kinds of respect relate to honor in the same way. To say that we honor a person is to say that we respect that person because they have a right to, or are worthy of, our respect (Stewart, 1994, 21). Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah holds a similar view, plainly stating that, "Having

honor means being entitled to respect” (Appiah, 2010, 13). Appiah conceptualizes honor within a group as arising from Darwall’s two kinds of respect. Appraisal respect is the esteem given to a person for meeting a certain standard. The individual is entitled to the group’s respect because he displays some excellence that the group values. Recognition respect, on the other hand, involves a positive regard for a person in virtue of shared membership status in an honor group. A group member acknowledges the demands of membership and expects other members to adhere to those same demands (176). The military is a good illustration of how these two streams of respect manifest as honor within a group. In the military, appraisal respect is meted out formally and informally. Rank is one of the formal methods by which the military confers appraisal respect upon its members. The resulting esteem comes in the form of pay and benefits. A private makes roughly \$30,000 per year and lives in a crowded barracks, while a general makes six times that amount and is furnished with a lavish single-family residence. Servicemembers also grant appraisal respect informally to those whose achievements are especially impressive. A soldier who earns the Medal of Honor – the military’s highest possible decoration for valor – merits more of the group’s esteem than the soldier who spends his time in a combat zone filling sandbags. Whether it is done formally or informally, the conferral of appraisal respect captures an important point: esteem is conferred upon members in a manner that the group deems commensurate with a member’s accomplishments.

Recognition respect, on the other hand, is the positive regard for a group member in virtue of the fact that it recognizes (14). Within this honor group, the salient fact for members to recognize and respect is each other’s shared status as military servicemembers. Members of the military might consider a scout sniper to be ‘more badass’ than a supply clerk, but the former is not a member of the military to any greater extent than the latter. So long as a soldier’s membership in the military is in good standing, he is worthy of his fellow soldiers’ respect. All soldiers are entitled to an equal share of the honor that emanates from this recognition respect in virtue of their status as members of the

military. However, if a soldier fails to adhere to the demands of the service, then he should expect contempt from the rest of his fellow soldiers who are working hard to uphold their honorable status. Anyone who has worked on a group project with a team member who did not pull their own weight can appreciate this dynamic. We are incensed at the individual who goofs off and does no real work, yet insists that his name appear on the title page along with the names of those who fully contributed to the project. If I do what is expected of me as a member of the group, then I am entitled to the group's respect. If I do not, then I am deserving of the group's contempt.

It is the honor that comes from recognition respect, which captures the sense of being worthy of the group's respect as a full-fledged member, that governs the interactions among honor peers. Accordingly, I find that recognition respect constitutes a more robust sense of honor than appraisal respect. This is not to say that I find anything qualitatively bad about the honor that comes from appraisal respect. An honor group is continuously engaged in appraising its members, often in ways that are far from incidental or trivial. We would certainly not find the Medal of Honor or the Nobel Prize to be frivolous trinkets of a dubious stream of honor. Rather, I perceive that most of the deep philosophical problems that people have with honor, which stem from honor's ability to influence the actions of a group, are linked to respect as recognition.

At this point, I formalize what I have already alluded to several times in this chapter: honor is fundamentally a **group notion**. Still, it must be acknowledged that respect – this thing to which honor is essentially connected – can also exist outside of an honor group (see *Figure 1*). It should be likewise obvious that membership in an honor group is not a prerequisite for receiving respect. People can grant appraisal respect to a child for being especially brave before undergoing a surgical procedure, or to an Olympic triathlete for being the paragon of physical fitness. Members of the public can also grant recognition respect to a judge in virtue of her position as an arbiter and deliverer of punishment, or to a pregnant woman in virtue of her parturition discomfort and stress. All of these examples are

undoubtedly instances of showing respect. However, a show of respect does not automatically mean that honor is in play. Once again, I acknowledge that I am departing from the ways in which many people use the term honor in an everyday setting. Yet in all of the above examples, I do not find the attitudes or sentiments that involve regard for another to be diminished if we just stick with the term ‘respect’ instead of ‘honor.’ If honor admits the ability of any person to admire any excellence or recognize any fact in another, it is difficult to achieve meaningful progress in addressing honor’s problems. I do not consider honor as that which can be given by anyone, to anyone, for any reason. Honor demands a system that spells out exactly how people gain the right to respect. Simply put, honor demands a code.

*Figure 1 – Honor and Respect*

	Within an honor group	Outside an honor group
Appraisal Respect	Respect that the group gives an individual group member for success in meeting a group standard <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- conferred formally or informally</li> </ul>	Respect that <i>A</i> gives <i>B</i> , according to how <i>B</i> measures up to <i>A</i> ’s standard
Recognition Respect	Respect that group members give each other in virtue of their shared membership in the group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- governs interactions among group members</li> </ul>	Respect that <i>A</i> gives <i>B</i> because of <i>A</i> ’s recognition of some fact about <i>B</i>

**1.2.2. The Honor Code**

The most important aspect of an honor group is the group’s **honor code**, which is the shared set of that group’s norms. An honor code need not be an encyclopedic listing of every single rule that group members must follow. In his study of honor in the Berber ethnic groups of Algeria, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes that honor norms can be felt, experienced, or otherwise understood so deeply that they need not be formally codified. The ability to adhere to such norms, Bourdieu explains, is similar to the ability to identify an error of language without possessing a comprehensive

understanding of all the governing rules of syntax (Bourdieu, 1966, 231-232). But what is common across all honor groups is that the honor code establishes the norms that group members must follow in order to receive the group's respect. She who abides by the honor code respects the members of her group who do the same, and vice versa. Correspondingly, she treats those group members who fail to live up to the code with contempt (Stewart, 1994, 23-24, 54-55; Appiah, 2010, 175-178; Hacker, 2017, 203-206; Sommers, 2018, 31-36).

In addition to espousing norms that apply to all group members, the honor code can also make different demands based on individual identities within the group. In the military, both the private and the general must keep a clean uniform, refrain from illicit drug use, and obey the precepts of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Despite the fact that the honor code makes additional demands on the general in virtue of the general's positional responsibilities, uniformity of position or ability is not necessary for members of an honor group to respect a shared honor code. As Appiah writes, members of an honor group "acknowledge the demands the code makes of them in virtue of their identity and expect others to do the same" (Appiah 2010, 176). Henceforth, when I refer to honor, I mean the respect to which a member of an honor group is entitled in virtue of his membership in that group, as constituted by his adherence to the group's shared honor code.

The operationalization of honor within a group via the honor code reinforces the idea that honor cannot exist in isolation (Stewart, 1994, 54; Sommers, 2018, 17). A member of an honor group cannot independently declare her honor; it is the group that bestows honor upon her, contingent upon her adherence to the honor code. Similarly, an individual outside of an honor group cannot independently decide to be a member of that group, even if she submits to the group's honor code. The group decides who gets admitted and the criteria by which they are admitted. Membership in an honor group, however, is not unconditional. The honor group also decides if members should be expelled. Thus, honor derives much of its subjective value from its ability to eject people from the

group. The members of an honor group who understand and accept the honor code are motivated and constrained by its content. This mutual respect between honor peers who uphold the code is central to how individuals view not only other group members, but also themselves. The honor code is the mechanism that mediates the relation between the group's opinion of the individual and the individual's opinion of herself. The person who cares about her honor cares about following the honor code in order to be considered worthy of the group's respect. If she falls short of that code, the group downgrades their respect for her and she feels a corresponding degradation of self-respect (Welsh, 2008, xv, 9-10; Appiah, 2010, 16-20).

### 1.2.3. Reputation

Lastly, honor is essentially connected to **reputation**. A person's reputation is simply the opinions of that person that are held by other people. When we think of a person who acts to maintain his reputation, our judgments tend to take a pejorative tone. Caring about reputation seems to smack of a shallow desire for popularity and social approval, regardless of whether it is trivial or harmful to others ('If I go to the party wearing a dress from last year, my reputation as a fashionista will be ruined'; 'As the captain of the football team, I have a reputation to protect – I can't be seen hanging out with a bunch of nerds'). As Aristotle notes in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), he who craves this kind of esteem does so in order to be flattered, or to reap the rewards that accompany his success (Aristotle, 2019, NE 1159a13-21). It might seem difficult to distinguish this kind of superficial concern for reputation from the honorable individual's concern for reputation. Within an honor group, the collective opinion of the group confers respect upon the individual according to his adherence to the honor code. So, in a sense, the honorable individual's motivation to maintain his reputation is identical to that of fashionistas and football captains: do what the group demands in order to be seen well by the group.

Within a system of honor, however, this desire to be regarded by the group is hardly superficial. Those who crave honor, according to Aristotle, submit to the judgements of their discerning peers in order to ensure that they are living their lives in a manner worth being respected by good people:

Those, however, who desire honour from good people familiar with them are seeking to have their own opinions of themselves confirmed; they enjoy honour, then, because they are confident of their own goodness on the strength of the judgement of those who say they are good (NE 1159a22-25).

For those who embody this Aristotelian desire, reputation functions as a reward (“I do what honor demands in order to gain a good reputation”). But we should bear in mind that this is only half of the picture. A group member might instead follow honor norms in order to avoid the group’s scorn (“I do what honor demands in order to avoid a bad reputation”). This kind of concern for reputation in order to avoid sanction is admittedly more difficult to embrace. People, especially those in liberal democratic societies, instinctively recoil at the idea of using opinion-based sanctions to influence a person’s behavior. Reputation as incentivization seems to cohere with our notions of agency and free will, whereas reputation as sanction smacks of compliance under threat of ridicule.

Within an honor group, however, I do not consider reputation as sanction to be unduly harmful or otherwise objectionable. Honor groups plainly seek to elicit certain behaviors from their members. In order for the group’s opinion to act as a prospective rudder that steers individual actions in alignment with group norms, honor groups must sensitize members to their reputation. In order for members to appreciate that their standing in the group depends upon adherence to the honor code, there must necessarily be consequences for falling short of that code. Sanction is simply a necessary complement to reward – the proverbial stick to the Aristotelian carrot. Philologist Alexander Welsh notes that without prospective sanction for failing to live up to the group’s standards, there is “no constraint on the moral agent who cares first and foremost for respect, nothing within to inform the agent what he must *not* do” (Welsh, 2008, 35). Acting to earn a good reputation might

sound more pleasant to modern ears than acting to avoid a bad reputation. However, both cases reflect the individual's adherence to norms for the sake of the group's approval.

To recap, my provisional account of honor focuses on four features:

- ◆ Honor is fundamentally a *group notion*
- ◆ Honor is essentially connected to *respect*
- ◆ Honor is essentially connected to *reputation*
- ◆ Honor is dependent upon adhering to the norms of an *honor code*

Although people might mean different things when they refer to honor, my inquiry focuses on honor as the respect to which a member of an honor group is entitled according to his reputation, which is determined by his adherence to the group's shared honor code.

### **1.3. Honor is Not Inert**

With my provisional account of honor established, the next step is to address two views on honor that portend to undermine the legitimacy of its defense. The first is that honor is an inert notion. As I mentioned early on in this chapter, honor is neither generic nor necessary for a life well lived. Though we all know what it is to esteem an individual for her skill, very few of us live our lives within the socially complex organization of an honor group. Honor thus presents as a rarefied notion. Furthermore, when it comes to those remaining few who do belong to honor groups, it seems plausible that we can attribute their conduct to notions other than honor. If honor is inconsequential to the masses and lacks a unique function within its purported domain of an honor group, then there is a natural worry that honor is inert. If this is the case, then honor hardly seems a notion worth defending.

I argue that the worry over honor as an inert notion dissipates when we examine its connection to the more well-known and philosophically robust notion of shame. Shame, broadly speaking, arises when others see us as we do not want to be seen (Williams, 1993, 78; Calhoun, 2004, 127-128). We

have all experienced shame at some point in our lives, likely when our shortcomings or inadequacies were exposed in a public forum. Natural reactions to this kind of exposure include hiding our face, blushing, or turning away from the crowd. As Martha Nussbaum writes, “Shame is the painful emotion that responds to that uncovering. It brands the face with its unmistakable signs” (Nussbaum, 2005, 260). Similar to my earlier claim that not all conferrals of respect are tied to honor, I find that not all instances of shame are tied to honor. One may feel shame because his cousin is incarcerated, or because he was born in a country with a poor track record of human rights. Even within a group, an individual may feel shame for reasons that have nothing to do with transgressing norms or failing to uphold a code. Philosopher J. David Velleman offers the example of a teenager who feels shame when his friends see him out in public with his parents. The teen’s shame does not arise from his behavior, nor from the behavior of his parents, who are no more awkward or embarrassing than any other parents. Rather, he feels shame because a social spotlight now shines brightly on that which he wanted to keep hidden, despite that what has been unearthed is the remarkably common fact that a teenager is not completely independent from his parents (Velleman, 2001, 44-45). A person can even feel shame when he represents the idealized version of the group’s norms. He who is respected by his friends for his impressive physique can still feel shame when those friends accidentally see him naked in the locker room. These instances of shame can be seen as unintended disclosures of that which the individual would have preferred to keep hidden, i.e. failures of privacy. Shame arising from these involuntary states still involves being seen in an unfavorable light, though it has no direct association with honor.

The kind of shame that better connects to honor is shame as a form of social appraisal, which allows us to register the opinions of ourselves that are held by others. We might feel compelled to acknowledge the automaticity of shame on the part of the receiver, which would seem to distance shame from honor. However, for both notions, it matters greatly just who exactly the judging others

are that comprise the group. Although shame is a common human experience, we should recognize that it does not work in all contexts. We do not grant all persons the authority to shame us. This would make our lives unproductive, if not unbearable. A certain measure of coordination between group and individual is required in order to make shame coherent. The group must believe strongly enough in their norms to shame any would-be transgressors, while the individual must acknowledge (perhaps unconsciously) the authority of his shame-givers. A teenager, for example, might dress a certain way in order to ensure that he is not the recipient of shame from his fellow teens. The teenage peer group values the norm of adhering to the latest fashion trends strongly enough to sanction those who violate this norm; the teenager recognizes his group's authority to sanction, so he complies with the norm in order to avoid that sanction. On the other hand, the teen feels no shame if his teachers upbraid him for kowtowing to group norms, or if his grandparents find his mode of dress to be outlandish. It is the laughter of his peers, not outsiders, that the teenager fears.

Similarly, we do not endow all persons with the authority to grant us honor, nor are we universally eligible to receive honor from all persons. Honor functions within the context of an honor group because there is coordination between the group and its members. The group chooses those individuals upon whom to confer the status of group member. The group then displays its commitment to the demand that members shall uphold group norms by bestowing their regard upon those who comply and sanctioning those who fall short. The member recognizes the group's authority to do so and gains a sensitivity to his reputation, which depends upon adhering to norms set forth in the honor code. Shame is thus a valuable ally to honor at a general level because it reveals our commitment to group-oriented notions. No one would consider striking shame from our social milieu to be rational, let alone possible. Given that shame and honor confront similar issues that ground in the judgements of others, it seems odd not to extend the same consideration to the latter as we do the former.

We can further appreciate the significance of honor through the lens of shame when we understand that within an honor group, shame as sanction acts as a corollary to honor as respect. Shame is what follows from a reduction in status in the eyes of those whose opinions we value. We want our judging peers to view us favorably, so we strive to avoid those behaviors that would invite their disdain. The individual, as anthropologist J. G. Peristiany puts it, “is forever courting the opinion of his ‘equals’ so that they may pronounce him worthy” (Peristiany, 1966, 11). It is this kind of shame that mediates the relations among individuals of equal status that is present in honor groups. In any group or society where honor is dominant, shame exists as a complementary form of social evaluation (Miller, 1993, 117-119). Many authors use the terms ‘shame-culture’ and ‘honor-culture’ interchangeably, depending on which notion is being emphasized. Examples of these shame/honor-cultures include Ancient Greece (Adkins, 1960; Cairns, 1993), medieval France (Nye, 1993), feudal Japan (Benedict, 1947; Ikigami, 1995), the Iberian colonies of Latin America (Johnson & Lipsett-Rivera, 1998), the Bedouins of North Africa (Abou-Zeid, 1966, 243-259; Cunningham, 2013, 26-35), and the antebellum American South (Wyatt-Brown, 1982; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). In all of these societies, the motivations for adhering to social norms were the accrual of honor, the upkeep of status, and the avoidance of shame.

Aristotle writes that shame can be thought of “as a kind of fear of disrepute” (Aristotle, 2019, NE 1028b11-12). An appropriate synonym for disrepute in this context is dishonor. He who fails to uphold the norms contained in the group’s honor code can expect “loss of face, ignominy, and ostracism” (Hacker, 2017, 203) – in a word, shame. If shame is engrained deeply enough into the social fabric of the group, an individual can feel shame for transgressing the group’s norms even without the actual presence of his judging others (Miller, 1993, 118). Given that shame – a notion that we take to be significant – has an undeniable role in honor groups, it seems incorrect to declare that honor is inert.

I can imagine that some might dismiss my approach of rescuing the significance of honor by appealing to the significance of shame as mere semantic trickery. After all, honor not only shares those features of shame that we take to be significant, but the interplay between shame and honor within the context of an honor group appears to have an inverse relation. So, one might suppose that we can dispense with all this talk of honor and instead explain everything in terms of shame.

However, despite the similarities and challenges that shame and honor share, the asymmetry between these two notions dictates that shame cannot be a surrogate for honor. Right off the bat, the epistemic component of this shame-honor asymmetry is easy enough to appreciate: shame is part of the human condition, whereas honor is not. There is something primal about shame that makes it an inescapable part of our existence. In the realm of common human experiences, shame goes deeper than suffering a broken bone or enjoying the smell of a sweet flower. We all feel shame, even though we tell ourselves that it does not matter; shame is as unavoidable as it is unwanted. Honor does not have such ubiquity. On a continuum of the appraisal of others, we are all by default united at shame's pole. Very few, however, can claim common ground on the far end of that continuum where honor resides. Shame is universal, primal, and inescapable; honor is none of these things. Therefore, in terms of epistemic access, it is incoherent to claim that shame can serve as a proxy for honor.

The shame-honor asymmetry is also apparent when we examine the role of these two notions in the relationships external and internal to honor groups. When it comes to judging outsiders, the members of honor groups do not treat shame and honor as perfectly opposing vectors. While shame indeed attaches to a member of an honor group if she does not meet the group's standards, the group does not extend the same treatment to nonmembers. If shame was the mirror opposite of honor, then the members of an honor group would shame all outsiders who, by definition, are not entitled to the group's respect. But this is clearly not how honor groups treat outsiders. The 0.4% of Americans who serve in the military do not unequivocally attach shame to the remaining 99.6% of the

nation, just as all Nobel Laureates do not confer shame upon their colleagues who have not earned a Nobel Prize.

The shame-honor relation is also asymmetric within an honor group. However, the fact that shame can motivate individuals to uphold the group's standards when it is difficult or unpleasant to do so can create the false impression that shame does the same work as honor. For example, Medal of Honor recipient James Stockdale, a naval aviator who spent more than seven years as a prisoner during the Vietnam War, found shame to be a powerful motivator for adhering to honor norms that governed a soldier's conduct in captivity. Stockdale knew that his brutal torture would cease if he revealed classified information to his captors, signed a confession, or denounced America's war efforts in Vietnam. A simple introspection, however, nullified such capitulation: "I could stop the misery at any time by becoming a puppet; was it worth the shame?" (Stockdale, 1995, 23). This prospective shame helped Stockdale and his fellow prisoners maintain their honor, despite the horrible circumstances they endured. "Broken bones," writes Stockdale, "were, in comparison to shame, totally insignificant" (181). Although we would be hard-pressed to dismiss the prisoners' motivation as trivial, some might nevertheless take this example as evidence that honor has no unique function. If shame explains why these prisoners upheld the norms of their group, then it would appear that invoking the notion of honor is unnecessary.

But despite shame's role within a system of honor, the asymmetry between shame and honor remains. Although it is useful to conceptualize shame that operates within an honor group as a negative corollary to honor, these two notions are not equivalent. Recall the carrot-and-stick argument from the previous section's discussion about reputation. Within an honor group, sanction is an unavoidable aspect of getting individuals to submit to group norms. A system of honor is built upon the group's respect for the individual in virtue of her adherence to the norms contained in the honor code. Acting to avoid prospective shame is a naturally occurring side-effect of this system of norms;

but this does not entail shame's equivalence to honor. In virtue of this asymmetry, honor is not wholly explainable in terms of shame. A roughly analogous undertaking would be trying to explain the game of football only in terms of defense. Although defense is a critical aspect of the sport, it arises as a necessary side-effect of a system in which the team that scores the most points wins the game. Accordingly, it would be incoherent to explain the entirety of the sport solely in terms of not allowing the other team to score.

Similarly, a system of honor in which one adheres to group norms in order to gain the respect of the group cannot be characterized purely in terms of the avoidance of sanction. Honor acquires its special significance because it governs the relations between the individual and those with whom she shares the same status. She submits to the judgements of this specialized group of peers because she desires to be worthy of their respect – a respect that she finds meaningful because she wants to live her life according to their standards. Accepting the group's ability to sanction is part and parcel of striving to be worthy of that respect. It would be absurd, however, for the honorable individual to fully credit shame for who she is and how she endeavors to live her life. Although shame has an important role in governing the interactions of honor group members, it still has an asymmetric relation to honor. Thus, it is incorrect to assume that we can do away with honor and use shame in its place.

To summarize, appealing to shame rescues honor from the charge of inertness. Shame and honor share similar features and confront similar issues. The fact that we consider shame to be significant suggests that we should likewise find honor to be significant. The asymmetry that exists between shame and honor extends the idea that honor is unique rather than inert. The broad notion of shame is a universal human experience, whereas honor is not. Furthermore, although it is helpful to conceptualize shame within an honor group as a negative corollary to honor, these two notions are not identical. Shame and honor are related, yet different. This asymmetry precludes explaining the

entirety of honor in terms of shame. Therefore, shame's significance, along with its asymmetry to honor, reveals that honor is not an inert notion.

#### **1.4. Honor is Not Archaic**

The previous section demonstrated that honor is not inert. However, the uniqueness of a particular notion does not automatically entail that that notion has social value. Honor's inexorable link to the societies of old suggests that it is an archaic notion. On this view, honor – though it may have held sway over knights and nobles hundreds of years ago – is an old-fashioned notion that has no currency in today's world. Accordingly, honor should not be defended; rather, it should be ignored and confined to the dustbin of history. As an analogy from the entertainment industry, consider the old performance art of vaudeville. Wildly popular in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, vaudeville was a form of theatrical entertainment that blended song, dance, wit, acting, and physical comedy. But by the end of the 1930s, despite its uniqueness, vaudeville had become a bygone form of entertainment. Vaudeville would certainly influence future entertainers (who can forget Donald O'Connor's uproarious performance of "Make 'Em Laugh" in the 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain?*). But as a standalone form of performance art, vaudeville had lost its value among the American public. No one considered vaudeville as something that was worth resurrecting. So, it was simply left in the past.

Many find that honor has suffered a similar fate. The aggregation of sociological and anthropological studies of honor societies throughout history paints a convincing picture of honor as a powerful social lever. Any defense of honor will, to some extent, rely on these honor society 'case studies' to highlight just that. However, any defense of honor must also grapple with the sobering reality that none of these honor societies survive in modernity. The Homeric society in which honor and shame figured prominently bears little resemblance to life in the present-day republic of Greece. France and England have been without knights for 500 years. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, two of

the most paradigmatic honor societies – the samurai of Japan and the aristocratic gentry of the American South – had disappeared. Honor’s retreat from social prominence is generally taken as evidence that honor has no place in contemporary society. This position is underwritten by a simple counterfactual: if honor was useful to us, then we would be using it.

The diminished presence of honor in our world leads many to label honor as a musty-smelling notion of yesteryear. The critic who best embodies the view of honor as an archaic notion is sociologist Peter Berger, who in 1970 penned an influential essay entitled *On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor*. On Berger’s view, honor represents not only an outmoded form of social interaction, but also a primitive view of morality that we as a society are better for having overcome. He notes that the decline of honor, which began around the Enlightenment, was met with a corresponding rise in the concern for the rights of the individual. “Honor,” Berger writes, “occupies about the same place in contemporary usage as chastity...At best, honor and chastity are seen as ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes” (Berger, 1970, 339). Berger finds honor to be a pre-modern notion that is incongruous with any contemporary society that values the rights of the individual. He maintains that this is why notions like liberty and equality are enshrined in our laws, but honor is not.

A helpful way to work through Berger’s oft-cited objection to honor’s modern relevance is to consider both the descriptive claims about honor’s modern compatibility and the normative assessments of those claims. We can first ask ourselves if honor is able to accommodate changes in social values. If not, then honor is immutable; if so, then honor is adaptable. Once we characterize honor as either immutable or adaptable, we can then make a normative assessment of that claim. Either we should reject honor – that is, deny honor a place in our society where it can govern the interactions of those under its purview – or we should do the opposite and accept honor. Four possibilities emerge:

- (1) Honor is immutable; reject honor

- (2) Honor is adaptable; reject honor
- (3) Honor is immutable; accept honor
- (4) Honor is adaptable; accept honor

Position (2) strikes me as untenable. Those who purport to reject honor on the basis of its adaptability, i.e. because it coheres with the values of our modern social system, would be forced to explain why other adaptable (and perhaps more popular) social notions should not also be rejected. No serious critic would see this as a reasonable platform for denouncing honor. Hence, I will not bother with this view any further.

Position (1), however, stands as a formidable obstacle to embracing honor in the modern day. The proponents of (1), with Berger as their standard bearer, argue that we should leave honor in the past, rather than attempting to square its antiquated practices with our modern values. Things that honor seems to promote, such as disparaging attitudes towards women and sharp social divisions that protect the status of aristocrats (340-341), are out of sync with our modern social values.

I agree with the claim that many honor practices indeed run afoul of our modern morality. Proponents of (1), however, take this as evidence that honor is irredeemable. Their reasoning is tempting. If we all agree that a particular honor practice is immoral, it seems only natural to want to get rid of the notion that allows groups to propagate such a practice. For many, backing down from this position is difficult. If we adopt an anti-realist perspective of honor, we may then find ourselves anchored to a normative position that makes us uneasy. We perhaps do not wish to distinguish the morality that we espouse in polite company from the actual operation of social notions like honor. If our social group uniformly condemns honor killings, most of us would not proclaim ‘I agree, but that does not mean we should get rid of honor, without which this heinous practice would not be possible.’ Although it may be psychologically challenging, I do not see stepping away from (1) as any sort of normative betrayal. Defending honor does not require that we support honor killings. What those

who endorse (1) fail to understand – and what I state for a third time – is that a defense of honor does not extend to all of its innumerable instantiations. Likewise, a condemnation of honor does not follow from a condemnation of horrible honor practices. Therefore, position (1) founders because it cannot be that descriptive claims about honor entail normative claims that endorse its rejection.

Having defused these concerns over honor's rejection, it must be decided down which of the remaining two paths my defense of honor should proceed. Position (3) requires conceding that honor cannot adjust to changing social values, yet still has a modern role. Position (4) finds that honor is adaptable; honor has always had a role to play, i.e. it has been with us the whole time. Philosopher Bernard Williams comes to an analogous crossroads in his essay *Moral Luck*. Williams considers the example of a truck driver who accidentally runs over a child. Though the driver was in no way responsible for this accident, nor could he have in any way prevented the accident, he still experiences what Williams calls "agent-regret" (Williams, 1981, 27). From a first-person perspective, Williams' notion of agent-regret does not cohere with our moral conceptions of control or intention. The driver who feels this form of regret represents the persistence of the ostensibly primitive institution. However, we would feel troubled by a driver who experiences no tinge of regret after killing a child, blameless though he may be. Williams notes that we should question the moral agency of such a person who is "too blandly or readily moved to that position" (28). Here Williams shows us the fork in the road. It might be the case that ancient notions are actually worth defending, or it might be the case that we never actually left these notions behind.

Similarly, any defense of honor will proceed down one of the two paths towards which Williams gestures. Our first option is position (3), which argues for the acceptance of honor despite its inability to adapt to new social values. Unfortunately, by conceding honor's immutability, proponents of (3) find themselves in a position that is difficult to defend. If the honor that governed the conduct of samurais and knights during the Middle Ages has been unaffected by the last 800 years

of changes in social values, then it seems correct to think that we have either outstripped the usefulness of the system of interpersonal relationships that honor supported, or we have overcome certain aspects of morality with which this archaic notion was associated. These are precisely the reasons why Berger and his ilk want to keep honor out of the modern space. Even armed with the ‘is-ought’ distinction that was the failure of (1), position (3) breaks down because its adherents must explain why this notion that society saw fit to discard should be resurrected and shoehorned into modernity. More importantly, I contend that position (3) is a poor strategy for defending honor for the simple reason that honor is not immutable. As such, my defense of honor takes the second path of position (4): honor is adaptable; we should accept honor.

Those like Berger are content to stick honor in history’s attic, but they do not allow for the possibility that they are confused about the role that honor plays. I argue that it is an illusion that we have left honor in the past. Changing social values have obscured the reality that honor has been with us all along. Williams makes a similar point in a different work of his entitled *Shame and Necessity*. He remarks that shame has its place in our modern society, just as it had its place in ancient Greek society. On its face, this seems far-fetched. After all, the ancient Greeks applied shame to values that we do not embrace. For our part, we accommodate shame in a system that recognizes other notions, such as guilt, that the ancients would not have valued. Yet, as Williams writes, “[S]hame continues to work for us, as it worked for the Greeks, in essential ways” (Williams, 1993, 102). This same sentiment applies to honor. As an adaptable and relevant notion, honor can weather shifts in social values. This is plain to see when we consider the reality that honor has been an important social notion across a wide array of societies with vastly different values. Even if such societies survive only in the pages of history books, we should not think that honor has suffered the same fate. Honor’s dominion is certainly not as expansive as it once was – but this does not make honor archaic.

An easy way to appreciate honor's relevance in our world is to examine those concepts to which honor is intimately tied. Shame, reputation, and respect are all notions that we consider relevant. If you are shaming an individual to influence his conduct, following group norms to maintain your reputation, or reacting with indignation when you are not shown the respect that you feel you deserve, then honor is not far behind. We would not claim that respect, for instance, is an outdated concept. So, if we can grasp honor's essential connection to respect, we can better appreciate the reality that honor is relevant, rather than archaic. As Welsh notes, "If you think of honor as respect, self-respect, and kinds of motivation dependent on respect, then it should be evident that it is not just some relic of the past" (Welsh, 2008, x).

### **1.5. The Main Issue: Honor's Other-Regarding Core**

Thus far, I have established my account of honor, demonstrating that honor is neither inert nor archaic. All of this groundwork was necessary in order to thrust honor into the philosophical spotlight. Now the real work begins. As a group notion, honor is necessarily linked to the opinions that others have of us. Accordingly, I find that the primary obstacle to a successful defense of honor is its other-regarding core. The person who submits to honor necessarily concerns himself with the opinions of his honor group when making moral deliberations. The worry is that this outsourcing of moral norms to the group encumbers the honorable individual's own reasoning. If those under honor's influence act a certain way merely because the group demands it, then it is difficult to see how honor could be a positive influence on our social relations. Instead, we are filled with a sense of trepidation at honor's potential to produce moral corruptibility and social destruction. Opponents of honor contend that an inseverable reliance on the opinions of others gives us good reason to reject honor as a notion that can govern our social interactions. Addressing these substantial objections that arise from honor's status as an other-regarding notion will be the focus of the next chapter.



## **Chapter 2: Confronting the Challenges of Honor**

This chapter serves as the ‘negative’ phase of my inquiry into honor. As mentioned at the conclusion of Chapter 1, the most substantial criticisms of honor result from the fact that honor is an other-regarding notion. Honor’s deference to the opinion of the group gives rise to three major objections. First, honor produces practices that are immoral and socially undesirable; second, honor facilitates problematic social hierarchies; third, and most importantly, honor’s essential connection to reputation deprives honor of moral significance. Each of these objections seems to suggest that honor is a notion that is unsuitable for governing the interactions of individuals in our society. Ultimately, I find that honor can withstand all three of these objections. Therefore, the ensuing rejections of honor on the basis of these objections are void.

### **2.1. The Dark Side of Honor**

A perennial criticism against honor is that a host of terrible practices have been, or are still, carried out in its name. Any serious defense of honor must explain why we should embrace a notion that propagates odious norms like honor killings, ritualistic suicide, revenge, and misogyny, to name a few. Saving honor in light of its foul practices is even more challenging when we consider that the moral status of these practices is not up for debate. No reasonable defense of honor could claim that honor killings are desirable, let alone excusable. All sides agree that these depraved representations of honor, which I collectively refer to as honor’s ‘dark side,’ have no place in our society. The seemingly obvious remedy for our shared distaste for honor’s dark side is to reject honor – that is, to reject the idea that honor can be counted among those notions that we consider to be appropriate influences on our social interactions. We can all grasp the attractive inference here: if we reject honor, then no bad things can be committed in the name of honor. This ‘dark side rejection’ of honor, as I refer to it, is not the position of one particular scholar or critic. Rather, this is a collective position of those who

maintain that if honor produces certain foul and immoral practices, then our society is better off without honor (e.g. Sabine, 1859, 360-361; McAleer, 1994, 45-48; Pinker, 2011, 183; Oberwittler & Kasselt, 2014, 654-665; Brown, 2016, 182-184). Nevertheless, I will show in this first section that rejecting honor because of its dark side is indefensible.

Before exposing the underlying flaws of the dark side rejection of honor, I wish to first draw attention to a more general downside of this approach. Rejecting the notion of honor because of its destructive practices means that we also lose out on its socially beneficial practices. At the United States Air Force Academy, for instance, honesty is a central aspect of the cadet honor code. The code plainly states “We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does” (USAFA, 2023). The enshrining of honesty in this honor code is designed to sensitize cadets to the fact that the respect they receive as members of their honor group depends upon conducting themselves honestly. The aspiring fighter pilots and nuclear missile officers who comprise this group embrace the virtue of honesty that their code demands because they want to be worthy of the respect of their peers who also commit themselves to this nation’s defense. This is an overtly positive instantiation of honor that provides a benefit to our society. Advocating for the rejection of honor, however, is a scorched-earth move that also erases the commendable norms that honor can produce.

Hence, my first observation of the dark side rejection of honor is that it is at odds with how society deals with notions that can be both beneficial and harmful. To wit, I maintain that when our society confronts a normative notion whose moralized assessments range over a variety of applications, we do not precipitously cast that notion aside. Consider the normative notion of desert, wherein a person is said to deserve something in virtue of some feature about that person (Feldman & Skow, 2020). Claims such as ‘I deserve to win the race because I ran the fastest’ or ‘I have worked at the company the longest, so I should get the best parking spot’ are both claims of desert. Like honor, desert operates within a social structure that involves status among others. Also, like honor,

desert can manifest in troubling ways that may cause us to contemplate its rejection. One domain in which the notion of desert is contentious is that of retributive justice, or the system of criminal justice that punishes offenders. One of the most important tenets of retributive justice is that it is unfair to punish an offender more than he deserves. Our society does not sentence jaywalkers to life imprisonment, nor do we castrate those who drunkenly urinate in public. Nevertheless, many feel uncomfortable with criminal punishment because they fear the potential that an offender may suffer more than he deserves. For one, mitigating circumstances may make it the case that an offender is not deserving of what would otherwise be a suitable punishment for his crime. Perhaps he committed the crime unintentionally, or he was coerced into wrongdoing by another. Furthermore, even after a convicted felon has satisfied the terms of his sentence, he is still the recipient of widespread social censure. His employment prospects are limited, certain constitutional rights that he once enjoyed are now curtailed, and his neighbors are likely resentful that they have an ex-con living in their midst. If a convicted felon experiences these additional hardships on top of his formal sentence, then it appears he is indeed being punished more than he deserves. Accordingly, one might argue that if desert undermines the fundamental tenet of retributive justice that it was meant to uphold, then we should reject desert. However, it would be reckless to summarily dismiss desert on these grounds. For one, excessive suffering is simply not the definitive outcome of a system of desert-based retributive justice. Also, it is not clear that our society would be better off if we embrace alternative notions in the redressing of criminal wrongs. Bad conduct should be met with appropriate retribution. Dispensing with desert could result in wanton criminal acts being unfairly under-punished, as well as an overall diminished capacity to deter future crimes. The potential that offenders might endure more punishment than intended is not a reason that we would consider sufficient for rejecting desert.

I use the example of desert to stress that when a normative notion becomes a source of social anxiety, we engage in due consideration of *all* instantiations of that notion before putting it on the

chopping block. In so doing, we avoid hastily rejecting a notion before fully appreciating what our society would look like in its absence. I consider this to be an important check against well-intentioned but short-sighted efforts in the name of social progress. Those who advocate for a dark side rejection of honor, however, flout this social process by calling for the rejection of a notion merely on the basis of its harmful practices. This rejection denies honor the due consideration that we generally find prudent to extend to contentious social notions. Thus, we cannot take a dark side rejection of honor at face value.

### **2.1.1. Dark Side Rejections of Honor: Bottom-up vs. Top-down**

Now that we are moved to doubt that honor's dark side can be sufficient cause for its rejection, I set about investigating two different approaches that motivate the critic's dark side rejection of honor. By the end of this section, I will have demonstrated that both approaches are incoherent, thus allowing us to call the dark side rejection of honor defeated.

The first approach is a *bottom-up approach*, which is a rejection of honor in virtue of its morally objectionable norms. I argue that the individual who employs this approach is confused about what he actually aims to reject. If we imagine a certain honor code that espouses infanticide and senicide, the bottom-up critic would advocate for rejecting honor on the grounds that killing infants and the elderly are morally impermissible acts. Although wanting to quash the practices of infanticide and senicide seems downright sensible, a rejection of these wicked honor norms does not entail a rejection of honor itself. The error in this approach is a failure to distinguish the *category* of honor from the *content* of honor. I use the terms 'category' and 'content' in the nontechnical, everyday senses with which we are all familiar. If we take music to be a category, for example, then its content is comprised of all things that are instantiations of the category of music, such as Brahms' violin sonatas, doorbell chimes, Buddhist chants, and songs by Led Zeppelin. The category of honor similarly admits a wide

variety of content, such as honor killings, a captured soldier's refusal to divulge secrets to the enemy, the samurai practice of *seppuku*, and obedience to wise elders. The master list of honor's content, though it would be nearly impossible to collate, can be conceived of as every element of every honor group's honor code. Once we cleave honor from the long list of practices committed on its behalf – that is, once we distinguish category from content – we discover that it is inappropriate to decry this robust notion on the basis of a select few instantiations. With this distinction in mind, it is clear that the bottom-up approach fails. A categorical rejection of honor would have to be motivated by some defect in the category itself. This is not the case in the bottom-up approach; the categorical rejection of honor instead results from the infelicitous extension of a disdain for certain honorable content. Just as it is inappropriate for me to reject the category of music because of certain problematic musical content – say, my son's cacophonous middle school choir concert – it is inappropriate for someone to reject the category of honor in virtue of certain despicable content. What this approach more accurately reflects is an over-generalization of honor based on deplorable honor practices. Thus, the bottom-up approach to rejecting honor is indefensible, owing to the failure to respect the category-content distinction.

The second approach that one may take to a dark side rejection of honor, however, is not as easily trounced. This alternate *top-down approach* also begins from the position that certain honor practices are immoral and socially undesirable. But unlike the bottom-up approach, which rejects honor merely in virtue of bad content, the top-down approach rejects honor because its bad content suggests something fundamentally defective about the category of honor. Like rotten fruit that falls from a diseased tree, we should see honor's offensive content as the predictable expression of a flawed category. Thus, the rejection of the category of honor seems lucid because it is motivated by a categorical flaw. The categorical flaw in question, honor critics argue, is a sensitivity to the opinions of others (Berger, 1970, 339; Brown, 2016, 32-33). Members of an honor group must do that which

the group demands in order to maintain their honor. This gives rise to the concern that the subjective value of honor within a group can enable wrongdoing in a manner that is uniquely resistant to opposition. If unethical practices become part of the honor code, the honorable individual must either perform these ethical transgressions or suffer the group's contempt. The historical catalog of immoral honor practices dating back to antiquity strongly suggests that the psychology of honor drives its adherents to the former. History continually reasserts that when it comes to honor, the individual is willing to transgress morality if that is what the code says will grant him the group's favor. The resultant reprehensible honor norms are the evidence that honor's hypersensitivity to the opinions of others is a categorical venom that poisons its content. Thus, the critic concludes that in virtue of this dangerous categorical defect, honor should be expunged. Because this approach is more coherent than its bottom-up counterpart, the remainder of this section deals with countering the top-down approach to rejecting honor.

I do agree that the top-down approach is structurally correct; that is, the rejection of the category of honor is motivated by a perceived categorical defect. However, I disagree with the diagnosis that sensitivity to the opinions of others is a categorical defect of honor. To support my position, I examine a specific immoral honor practice that is generally taken to be a lamentable consequence of honor's hypersensitivity: the duel. The critic who employs a top-down approach views the practice of dueling as evidence of this proposed categorical flaw of honor. He argues that if the influence of the group's judgements makes it the case that insults are treated as a dire threat to one's reputation, which can only be neutralized by a radical escalation to deadly violence, then we should find that influence to be fundamentally defective. In plain terms, the critic argues that the practice of dueling reveals honor's categorical flaw of sensitivity to the opinions of others, in virtue of which honor should be rejected.

### **2.1.2. Dueling and the Misperception of Social Deference**

In the following examination of dueling, I argue that merely being sensitized to the opinions of others, even though it may produce regrettable content like dueling, is not a categorical flaw of honor. Sensitivity to the opinions of others not only has positive applications for honor, but it is also just a generic feature of how moral concepts are operationalized. Because sensitivity to the opinions of others is not a categorical flaw of honor, it is an inappropriate basis for a categorical rejection of honor.

Before rescuing the category of honor from the specter of dueling, a brief explanation of this practice is in order. Although its rules and customs varied throughout Europe and the Americas, the duel was essentially a scripted form of one-on-one combat with deadly weapons. With its popularity ironically coincident with the Enlightenment era, the duel was an honor norm that governed how the members of an honor society (typically, wealthy aristocrats) responded to insults. The pages of history are replete with noteworthy individuals who engaged in this practice. Baroque composer George Fredrich Handel was nearly killed in a duel when he refused to give up his seat in an opera. Russian poet Alexander Pushkin died from a bullet wound sustained in a duel with a man who attempted to court Pushkin's wife. French artist Édouard Manet fought a duel with one of his art critics, which ended in a draw. And before he was elected President of the United States, Andrew Jackson killed a man in a duel who insulted Jackson's wife. Renowned or otherwise, duels were a response to insults, either actual or perceived. If a gentleman's reputation in the group was assailed, questioned, or otherwise threatened, the offended gentleman would challenge the offender to a duel. For the offended gentleman not to issue the challenge, or for the offender not to accept the challenge, would be tantamount to declaring that his honor was less important to him than the rest of the group, all of whom were willing to stake their lives on their honor. This failure to uphold the honor code would result in scorn from one's honor peers, leading to the individual's diminished standing in the honor

group. As Pitt-Rivers writes, “To leave an affront unavenged is to leave one’s honor in a state of desecration, which is equivalent to cowardice” (Pitt-Rivers, 1966, 26). The combined blow to the fallen gentleman’s honor would be severe, both in terms of his internalized self-worth and the loss of social benefits following his reduction in status (Greenberg, 1996; LaVaque-Manty, 2006).

Be that as it may, dueling strikes most of us as a violently disproportionate response to minor social slights. It is understandable that we might be concerned about honor’s deference to the group’s opinion if it incites individuals to engage in a farcical employment of deadly force to resolve trivial disputes. This is the criticism that David Hume offers in his essay *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*.

The point of honour, or duelling, is a modern invention, as well as gallantry; and by some esteemed equally useful for the refining of manners: But how it has contributed to that effect, I am at a loss to determine. Conversation, among the greatest rustics, is not commonly invested with such rudeness as can give occasion to duels, even according to the most refined laws of this fantastic honour...By separating the man of honour from the man of virtue, the greatest profligates have got something to value themselves upon, and have been able to keep themselves in countenance, tho' guilty of the most shameful and most dangerous vices (Hume, 1994, 293).

It seems we can all agree that dueling is an irretrievably bad honor practice. No rational defender of honor would adopt the radical anti-Humean view that a duel gets a moral pass because it was committed for reasons of honor. Even the practitioners of dueling did not seek moral absolution for this odious practice that their honor code demanded; moral arguments against dueling were as well-known to duelers as they are to us today (Appiah, 2010, 28-29). The savvy critic who embraces the Humean position, though he too finds dueling to be immoral, does not offer up dueling itself as a basis for rejecting honor. As I have already shown, this bottom-up approach is easily toppled by appealing to the category-content distinction. Instead, this critic finds that by examining the duel, we can ascertain some fatal flaw of honor that can serve as justification for its top-down rejection. He argues that the practice of dueling reveals honor to be a notion that hypersensitizes the individual to

the opinions of others to the point that he cannot respond to insults in a normal manner. On this view, sensitivity to the opinions of others, as evinced by the duel, is the categorical flaw of honor, in virtue of which honor should be rejected (Sabine, 1859, 45-46; Bacon, 2002, 304-306).

I actually agree with most of the top-down approach. I agree that dueling is wrong; I agree that sensitivity to the opinions of others is an inescapable feature of honor; I agree that this sensitivity is responsible for the honor norm of dueling. However, I disagree that sensitivity to the opinions of others is a categorical flaw of honor, given that it is also the wellspring for praiseworthy honor norms. Critics like social psychologist Ryan Brown attack honor for hypersensitizing its adherents to their reputation, arguing that wild overreactions and gratuitous violence are predictable outcomes (Brown, 2016, xi, 185). However, I find that those like Brown misinterpret honor's social deference as a categorical flaw; as such, any rejection of honor on the basis of this apparent flaw is misplaced. The source of this misinterpretation, and thus the undoing of the top-down approach, is, once again, a failure to distinguish category from content. To understand where critics like Brown go wrong, we must first recall that both virtuous and vicious instantiations of honor come from the same motivation: the individual's desire for the respect of the group. The individual who adheres to the honor code is viewed favorably by the group, who in turn bestow their respect upon that individual. Though the norms of honor may vary from group to group, they all emanate from honor's other-regarding core. So, the mere fact that we respond to honor's social influence cannot be bad, given that the opinions of the group can also direct us to perform actions that are good. I acknowledge the obvious truth that dueling exposes honor's acute responsiveness to the opinions of the group. However, the subsequent move of diagnosing this responsiveness as a categorical flaw of honor is incorrect, given the reality that honor's regard for the opinions of others can steer individuals to perform praiseworthy actions. It would be nonsensical to assert that the honor norm of extending hospitality to strangers, for example, is the result of honor's categorical flaw. The top-down rejection is only tenable if the

reason offered for rejection can be uniformly and intelligibly applied across the entire category. The diagnosis of social deference as a categorical flaw fails this simple requirement. Therefore, the top-down rejection of honor is void.

The real spirit of the critic's position, I argue, is more accurately expressed by the Humean criticism of honor's divergence from virtue. This critic only finds honor's sensitivity to the opinions of others to be a defect when the resultant norms are those that we judge to be wrong, like dueling. This inconsistency reveals a failure to distinguish category from content. The underlying concern is not that honor has a fatal flaw of social deference, but rather that certain honor norms arising from this deference are morally wrong. As previously argued, a rejection of honor based on certain blameworthy content is indefensible. So, the top-down rejection of honor collapses because those who would employ this approach fail to respect the category-content distinction.

I can imagine that a persistent critic of honor's social deference might attempt to save his position by arguing that a sensitivity to the opinions of the group is still sufficient cause for rejecting honor if this feature yields a preponderance of blameworthy practices. The imagined critic who employs this more nuanced version of a top-down rejection does not find caring about the opinions of others to be inherently bad. He can acknowledge that honor's regard for others can indeed produce praiseworthy practices; hence, he need not advocate for the categorical rejection of all instantiations of honor. Armed with history's catalog of harmful honor practices, however, he finds that honor's sensitivity to the opinions of others goes awry too often. The critic concludes that if this feature of honor produces more harm than benefit for our society, then we should find the notion of honor to be unsuitable for influencing our social interactions. But I argue that this mode of criticism is fundamentally misplaced. Any good moral notion operates by sensitizing people to a range of considerations. Built into that sensitization is the reality that moral impulses can be amplified, dulled, or otherwise hijacked for nefarious purposes. There is no guarantee against people being improperly

sensitized; it is an ever-present risk when it comes to the operationalization of moral notions. Therefore, it is nonsensical to reject honor in virtue of this generic feature with indissoluble risk. Justice, for example, sensitizes people to a variety of considerations: certain behaviors deserve punishment, certain punishments are excessive, judicial proceedings should be defensible, punishments must be assigned and overseen by qualified officials, etc. Unfortunately, there is the risk that people get sensitized to considerations of justice in the wrong way; for instance, when racial discrimination incites people to perform acts of extrajudicial punishment like lynching. Still, it would be improper to assert that we should reject justice in virtue of its potential to go awry; this is no different than rejecting justice merely in virtue of its ability to sensitize us to justice-related considerations. If justice did not sensitize people to these considerations, we should find it to be an unintelligible and capricious moral notion. What we really care about are those instances in which people were sensitized incorrectly, which led to twisted and deplorable instantiations of justice like lynching. The same reasoning applies to the notion of honor. Rejecting honor in virtue of the potential that people get improperly sensitized to the opinions of others – which is to say, merely in virtue of its ability to sensitize us to the opinions of others – is just a nonsensical rejection of a generic feature of operationalizing honor. It turns out that once again, the source of our troubles are those instances where honor's social deference has gone wrong and given a home to deplorable norms like dueling. So, the modified version of the top-down rejection of honor also collapses because of a failure to distinguish category from content.

With the top-down rejection of honor defeated, let us return to the practice of dueling. We can now see that the main issue revealed by this immoral practice is not mere sensitization to the opinions of others, but rather that it stands as an instantiation of sensitivity to the opinions of others gone wrong. So, the remaining question to answer is *'what went wrong with dueling?'* I contend that the inclusion of dueling in certain honor codes is not the unavoidable outcome of honor's sensitivity to

the opinions of others, but rather the result of contingent circumstances. The honor code of the antebellum American South is a fitting example of such a contingency. In its early years, the South was a sparsely populated agrarian society with scarce resources (e.g. crops, livestock) that were easily plunderable. These economic dangers were exacerbated by ineffective state protection. So, having a reputation as one who was quick to utilize violence was an effective way to gain respect in Southern society. The man who did not respond with overwhelming force when his honor was challenged was seen as an easy mark for cattle rustlers and bandits. Such a man would endure not only economic misfortune, but also shame for his inability to protect his family, his property, and his livelihood. Although shooting a man for setting foot on your property uninvited is unquestionably illegal and immoral, it would nonetheless cement your reputation as a person who is not to be trifled with. In a short time, aggressive and violent retaliations became a normalized response to anything that might threaten a man's status in Southern society (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996, xv-11; Sommers, 2018, 99-106). When we reflect upon these circumstances, we begin to see that the inclusion of dueling in the Southern gentleman's code of honor is not the inevitable result of honor's heightened degree of social deference. Rather, the contingent circumstances surrounding the formation of this honor society and the various precepts of its honor code were such that a sensitivity to the opinions of the group manifested in the extreme practice of dueling as a response to insults.

There is one more lesson about honor that can be extracted from an examination of the duel. What dueling shows us, in a roundabout way, is that honor can adapt to our moral system. As I argued in Section 1.4, honor is not the invariable expression of an archaic system of morality. Honor certainly has its share of problematic applications; nevertheless, there is room within honor to recognize and respond to these moral challenges. The honorable individual is necessarily sensitive to the opinions of others because they determine the status of his honor; hence, a sensitivity to challenges to one's status is intrinsic to any system of honor. But this does not mean that all honor groups are destined

to become dueling societies. Prominent codes of honor can operate without resorting to dueling as a means of adjudicating insults. The strongest evidence that dueling is not required to maintain a system of honor can be found in the existence of honor groups that once embraced dueling, but now repudiate it. The United States Navy is an excellent example of such a group. In the Early Republic, it was common for naval officers to answer an insult with a challenge to duel. There are definitive accounts of 82 duels among naval officers and midshipmen during the first fifty years of the U.S. Navy from 1798 to 1848. Thirty-six of those participants were killed in their duel, a figure that represents two-thirds the number of naval officers killed in actual combat during that same time period (Paullin, 1909, 1157). But over the next century, that component of the honor code that demanded an insult be met with a duel was phased out in favor of adherence to a transparent, equitable, and defensible system of resolving disputes. This system that attaches to the honor of the modern naval officer is known as the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). This change does not indicate that today's naval officers are any less deferential to the opinions of their peers than were their honorable predecessors. Instead, this Oresteian transformation of the naval officer's honor code shows that when it comes to insults, preserving discipline and a respect for the rules is more valuable to the group than a rash introduction of violence. This reveals the ability of honor to rescind an immoral practice like dueling and still maintain its influence within a group. I offer the following brief hypothetical scenario to motivate this point:

A Navy lieutenant despises the leadership style of his commanding officer, a captain who is three grades his senior. As the two officers cross paths on the pier one morning, the junior officer stuffs his hands in his pockets in a deliberate refusal to salute his senior. A salute is a required military courtesy given as an outward display of respect to senior commissioned officers. Thus, the lieutenant's refusal to render a salute is unquestionably an insult to the captain.

In this imagined yet highly plausible scenario, the lieutenant's insult is a challenge to the captain's honor; it is a claim that the captain does not merit the regard in which the group holds him. In virtue

of his membership in an honor group, the captain is necessarily concerned with challenges to his honorable status. To defend his honor, the captain must respond to the lieutenant's insult as the honor code of naval officers directs. The appropriate and honorable response for the captain is to court-martial the lieutenant. Per the UCMJ, "Any person...who behaves with disrespect toward that person's superior commissioned officer shall be punished as a court-martial may direct" (UCMJ, 1958, Art. 89). If this incident had transpired 200 years ago, a duel would have almost certainly been the captain's response to the lieutenant's brazen affront. However, if today's captain chose to embrace his inner Stephen Decatur and challenge the lieutenant to a duel, the captain would be violating the UCMJ, which states that "Any person...who fights or promotes, or is concerned in or connives at fighting a duel...shall be punished as a court-martial may direct" (Art. 114). Because the honor code of the naval officer demands obedience to the UCMJ, a duel in the modern Navy is not only inappropriate, but dishonorable. The captain's lack of a response would be similarly dishonorable, as not initiating court-martial proceedings against the lieutenant in response to the offense would be failing to uphold the UCMJ. Formally, the captain would likely be subjected to court-martial himself for dereliction of duty or failing to uphold regulations (Art. 92), which, independent of any punishment levied by that court-martial, would likely cost him his command. Informally, the group's reaction to the captain's lack of fortitude in upholding their shared honor code would be a downgrading of their respect for the captain. Thus, dueling as an erstwhile honorable practice among naval officers illustrates that honor can require its adherents to respond to social influence without demanding that they do so violently. There are more or less reasonable ways to respond to honor's inherent sensitivity to challenges to one's status. Dueling is not a paradigmatic expression of this characteristic, but rather a pathological one.

To recap, I have shown that rejecting honor because of its dark side is indefensible. The bottom-up approach of eliminating honor in virtue of its morally objectionable practices is incoherent

because it conflates content with category. The top-down approach of rejecting honor in virtue of a categorical flaw revealed to us through certain problematic honor content is similarly void. The claim that sensitivity to the opinions of others is a categorical flaw of honor was shown to be false, once again resulting from an inability to distinguish the category of honor from its more problematic content. This misstep was made clear through an examination of dueling, which revealed that although sensitization to the opinions of others is an unavoidable feature of honor, this feature is not a categorical flaw that can be considered sufficient for rejecting honor. Dueling is an example of sensitivity to the opinions of others gone haywire as the result of contingent circumstances; it is not the case that all honor groups inevitably normalize dueling as a response to insults. Moreover, the decline of dueling among naval officers supports my argument from the first chapter that honor is a notion that can adapt to changing social values. Honor can shed those practices that clash with modern social values, such as dueling, without losing its influence within the group.

## **2.2. Honor and Social Hierarchies**

In *The Spirit of Laws*, Baron de Montesquieu describes the role of honor in socially stratified monarchies:

A monarchical government supposes, as we have already observed, pre-eminences and ranks, as likewise a noble descent. Now, since it is the nature of honor to aspire to preferments and titles, it is properly placed in this government (Montesquieu, 2011, 25).

As honor is the principle of a monarchical government, the laws ought to be relative to this principle. They should endeavor to support the nobility, in respect to whom, honor may be in some measure, deemed both child and parent...All these privileges must be peculiar to the nobility, and incommunicable to the people (53-54).

On this view, honor not only affirms the status and privileges of nobles, but also ensures that these benefits remain the province of the social elite. This interpretation of honor gives rise to this chapter's second objection: honor, fueled by its other-regarding core, promotes deplorable social hierarchies.

### **2.2.1. Our Antipathy Toward Social Hierarchy**

In this chapter, I use the term ‘social hierarchy’ to indicate a rigid, pyramidal social order in which a small number of social elites enjoy disproportionately greater status and affluence than the remaining majority in the lower social strata. I acknowledge the truth that nearly all social organizations have a more or less hierarchical structure. When people coexist under a common affiliation, the reality is that some people enjoy greater prosperity, status, and influence than others. However, the social hierarchies I am targeting are those in which the hierarchical structure serves to grant overwhelming benefits to the social elite at the expense of the remaining social majority, e.g. a medieval European society organized under feudalism. Henceforth, when I refer to social hierarchies, I am referring to these kinds of societies in particular. I am not denouncing any society imaginable just because it may have a generic hierarchical feature.

When we call to mind the societies in which honor played a prominent role, it is generally the case that those societies employed a fixed social ordering. In hierarchical societies like Shogunate Japan, or England under the House of Stuart, honor heavily influenced the conduct of the nobility. Moreover, the power and affluence of the noble classes in these societies often came at the expense of the lower social classes. This repeated pairing of honor and the aristocracy gives rise to the charge that honor is a tool used by the social elite to perpetuate a system in which aristocrats thrive while the masses suffer (Paley, 1825, 21-22; de Tocqueville, 1957, 231-234; Berger, 340, 1970; Hume, 1994, 294; Bowman, 2006, 54). The aristocratic tang of honor seems even stronger when we consider that the global decline of the aristocracy in the wake of the Enlightenment was met with a proportional decline in honor. This section aims to disentangle honor from the aristocracy in which it has so often found a home. Ultimately, I conclude that honor is not a precursor of unequal social relations, nor is honor

necessarily linked to high social status. Therefore, I find the rejection of honor on these grounds to be indefensible.

To appreciate why an extrication from the aristocracy is crucial to honor's defense, it is necessary to understand why we find the social hierarchies that emboldened these aristocracies to be so offensive. Beyond our surface anxieties with tribalism and in-groups versus out-groups, there are two deeper reasons why we detest social hierarchies. First, a social hierarchy suggests that a human being's worth is commensurate with his social echelon. Accordingly, those anointed as the social elite may find it permissible to exact harsh treatment upon the members of lower social echelons whom they consider inferior. As political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson remarks, social hierarchies "generate, and were thought to justify, inequalities in the distribution of freedoms, resources, and welfare" (Anderson, 1999, 312). Unequal social ordering has been a necessitating factor in societies that have tolerated oppressive ideologies like slavery, racism, and misogyny. Honor seems disturbingly conducive to this kind of maltreatment, given that members of an honor group prioritize the judgements of the group over the judgements of outsiders. In the case of an honor-driven aristocracy, the opinions of fellow aristocrats are privileged over the opinions of the socially downtrodden majority. The worry here is that honor acts as a catalyst for a wicked social system in which the aristocracy are exalted at the expense of all others. This concern is echoed by political philosopher Charles Taylor, who writes that honor is "intrinsically linked to inequalities" (Taylor, 1994, 27) and thus not compatible with democratic societies. So, honor appears to actualize this Andersonian fear that unequal social relations lead to the marginalization and oppression of the lower echelons of society.

The second reason that we abhor social hierarchies is because their tiers are impermeable. In a rigid social ordering, a person occupies her social echelon because of some particular fact about herself that she did not choose, such as her race, the city in which she was born, or her father's

occupation. If she happens to be atop the social ordering, she can reap vast benefits simply in virtue of her high social standing. Elements of the aristocratic honor code, such as marriage standards, patrilineal succession plans, and political duties, help to guard her benefits and ensure that the spoils of society continue to flow to noble families like hers. On the other hand, if she happens to be on the bottom of the social heap, no amount of determination or hard work can elevate her status; her life's prospects are limited by her social echelon. Americans in particular have a reflexive disdain towards a system that limits the prospects of the masses while locking the aristocracy into an exclusive network that cannot be penetrated from beneath. As excerpted by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his seminal essay *Self-Reliance* (Emerson, 1993, 19), the ideal that "man is his own star" (Fletcher, 1839, 499) is an important element of our shared American identity. We love it when the resolute night janitor works his way up the corporate ladder to become the company's vice president. And although we may tolerate certain social realities, such as the daughter of a billionaire hedge fund manager who has her choice of Ivy League schools to attend, or the son of a state governor whose future as a congressman seems to be a forgone conclusion, we cannot abide a social organization in which these opportunities are unavailable to everyone else. In short, we detest a social system with impermeable tiers because it clashes with our egalitarian values. If honor is a tool that reinforces the cloistered existence of the aristocracy within a social hierarchy, then honor appears to be troublingly anti-egalitarian. On this view, honor is not only an affront to our widely-held social values, but to our national consciousness as well. As historian Gordon Wood argues, this kind of honor stood in stark contrast to the newly independent United States of America and other developing democracies during the nineteenth century:

Honor made sense only in an unequal society...Honor was exclusive, heroic, and elitist, and it presumed a world very different from the world that was emerging and from our own, a hierarchical world in which a few could unabashedly claim a moral superiority over the rest (Wood, 40, 1992).

The frequent pairing of honor with the elite strata of social hierarchies that we find to be so despicable leads some to conclude that honor facilitates an iniquitous social ordering. So, the next step in my defense of honor is to show that in spite of the perpetual historical coupling of honor and the aristocracy, the two are in fact not inextricably linked. I make no attempt to downplay the striking connection between honor and aristocracies, nor do I seek to justify the ills of the hierarchical societies in which these aristocracies thrived. Nevertheless, I argue that honor is not an exclusively aristocratic tool that engenders a contemptible social ordering. First, I disagree that honor is hostile to our modern social values; codes of honor can adapt to accommodate egalitarian norms. Second, despite the recurrent appearance of honor in aristocracies throughout history, I maintain that there is no necessary connection between honor and high social status. To support my position, I offer a brief analysis of the monarchy of France, a hierarchical society in which honor dominated the lives of the aristocracy. When we consider honor strictly within the confines of pre-revolutionary French nobility, it has all the appearances of a tool that reinforces a deplorable social hierarchy. However, when we widen the scope of our deliberations beyond the temporal and cultural confines of the *ancien régime*, it becomes clear that honor is neither irretrievably anti-egalitarian nor necessarily aristocratic.

### **2.2.2. Honor Among the French Nobility**

William Nye's study of French aristocratic honor highlights many of the aforementioned concerns over the union of honor and aristocracy (Nye, 1993, 15-30). In France during the early Middle Ages, honor was simply a matter of possessing land and money. Accordingly, the most basic element of this honor code was the inheritance. Family wealth was transferred to the oldest male offspring, with other offspring receiving sizable settlements or dowries. Still, families had to closely control the marrying of offspring in order to maintain, and hopefully increase, family holdings. This made the honor society of the French aristocracy virtually inaccessible to outsiders. The head of a

French noble family would not allow his offspring to be wed to someone of other-than-noble birth. Given the transactional nature of noble marriage, allowing noble offspring to marry someone of lesser socioeconomic status would be akin to accepting unfavorable terms in a business deal. This would be particularly unwise if a noble family had few or no male heirs. Promising a daughter to the ‘wrong sort’ could be disastrous, as any male offspring that resulted from such a union would threaten this system of patrilineal inheritance. Even if a commoner had amassed a respectable fortune through hard work, such an individual would still be deemed an unworthy suitor. Honor was transferred via inheritance; a livelihood earned through labor was seen as indicative of low birth and base character.

In order to preserve this system of private noble family dynamics, it was necessary to educate the heir-apparent as to the convoluted responsibilities and practices that would ensure his family’s prosperous lineage. By internalizing that honor depended upon the maintenance and growth of family assets, each incoming generation of nobility effectually committed themselves to the group’s honor code. This is what allowed a system of sustained generational wealth, impregnable against threats of intermarriage, to thrive among the French aristocracy from the early Middle Ages until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a complement to private family practices, noble superiority was further promulgated through elements of the honor code that were outwardly recognizable to the public. The most significant of these practices was the nobleman’s vocation of military commander, or knight. Knights maintained castles, commanded soldiers on the battlefield, and accrued prowess in horse-riding and armed combat. Nye argues that “the kind of self-regulating behavior that helped noble families perpetuate their lineage in the early Middle Ages was complemented by the virtues demanded by noble knights” (20). Membership in the military officer corps quickly became a province reserved for nobility, allowing nobles to claim that the qualities knighthood demanded were unavailable to the rest of society. This intertwining of private and public honor practices “reduced the chasm between nature and culture and effectively naturalized noble ‘qualities’” (21). Other practices that were subsumed

under the honor code of the French aristocrat, such as tournaments of arms, courtly manners, and lavish dress, served to further the nobles' superiority over the remaining 90% of French society, most of whom could scarcely afford to feed their own families.

The honor society of the French nobility exemplifies all of our anxieties regarding social hierarchies. Given that elements of their honor code ensured that nobles reaped a disproportionately high share of wealth and influence in France for nearly eight centuries, it seems appropriate to brand honor a despicable tool that favored the social elite. However, I see two flaws in this criticism. First, it reflects a myopic view of honor. I concede that within the narrow scope of this honor society, honor is in tension with our normative ideals regarding egalitarianism. It is unlikely that the principle of equality of opportunity, for example, could have existed within the honor code of the French aristocracy 400 years ago. This seems obvious when we consider military officership, which was the exclusive domain of the nobility. The honor code of French nobles was based on immutable characteristics *viz.* birth. Accordingly, an equality of opportunity that would have permitted peasant farmers, craftsmen, and females to apply for membership in this honor group would have been considered absurd. Nevertheless, this does not indicate that honor is necessarily hostile to egalitarian ideals. As I have demonstrated at several points throughout this dissertation, codes of honor are not fixed conventions. Honor in the French Army has undergone significant transformations since the French Revolution. Nowadays, equality of opportunity is very much compatible with membership in the officer corps of the *Armée de terre*. Men and women of all races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds can compete for admission to the *École spéciale militaire de Saint-Cyr* ('the special military school at Saint Cyr', which is the French equivalent of West Point). Enlisted soldiers can also apply to become officers. This opportunity is even available to soldiers from the foreign legion corps, whose ranks include those who are not of French nationality. This example illustrates that an honor code

can admit new values like equality of opportunity and discard its outmoded precepts, such as membership based on birthright. Therefore, honor and egalitarianism are not mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, I find it prudent that we take care not to be unduly influenced by arguments in favor of egalitarianism. Although we despise social hierarchies in virtue of their anti-egalitarian structure, a successful defense of honor does not require that all aspects of honor be strictly egalitarian. Criticisms of inegalitarian institutions like feudal aristocracies are *prima facie* commendable on the basis that striving for social equality is a good thing. However, objecting to honor on the basis that it propagates a harmful social order implies that normative systems exist to uphold egalitarian ideals. Though I certainly do not advocate for a rigid social ordering, I firmly reject that all of our ideals and institutions must be wrapped around an egalitarian core. A refusal to accept inegalitarian structures can quickly devolve into a summary dismissal of even the most modest claims of merit. The unfortunate result would be the distortion or destruction of those ideals that society wished to promote. For instance, I find it to be a very good thing that a system of higher education insists that its students be evaluated based on the quality of their work. To demand the contrary – that students are entitled to their diploma regardless of academic performance – would be damaging to the value of education. The same consideration should be extended to honor. Honor, like many other important normative notions, has positive anti-egalitarian features. We should not want to erase the special status that honor grants to groups like firefighters, for example. The status given to members of this honor group, which requires its members to rescue citizens from burning buildings, should be a source of social ease, not anxiety. Relatedly, we should prefer a world in which Navy SEALs and emergency room physicians privilege the judgments of their fellow group members over outsiders; equating these two kinds of judgements would jeopardize the specialized services that these groups provide. Thus, we can accept certain anti-egalitarian features of honor without worrying that it will create unequal

social relations. In other words, honor can be friendly to an egalitarian society without having to be completely egalitarian.

The second reason that it is inappropriate to classify honor as an aristocratic device is that honor has no necessary connection with high social status. It is undeniable that honor has been a prominent social lever among many aristocracies throughout history. Though I agree that the connection between honor and the elevated social status of aristocrats is not coincidental, I disagree that this connection is necessary. I acknowledge that there is an undeniable structural feature of status when it comes to honor. In the *ancien régime*, aristocratic honor amplified the social ordering, reflecting a status that commoners could not hope to achieve (Krause, 2002, 13). People who desire membership in an honor group want to value what the group values and be respected as peers for doing so. Historically, this desire has often revolved around wealth and elevated social status. Nevertheless, this connection between honor and high social status is completely contingent. I argue that honor can establish standards and conditions for membership in any group in which membership is desirable, even if that group is completely disassociated with high society. In Miguel de Cervantes' seminal work *Don Quixote*, the character of Sancho Panza remarks, "[T]he old proverb still holds good, 'Thieves are never rogues unto themselves'" (Cervantes Saavedra, 1906, 321). The proverb to which Sancho refers is that of 'honor among thieves.' This seemingly paradoxical sentiment asserts that even among a group of criminals, honor can effectively propagate norms and regulate the conduct of its members. The demands of the thieves' honor code might include not stealing from a fellow thief, not plundering that which another thief has already expressed an intention to steal, or not informing on other thieves to the police. Abiding by these demands ensures that a thief enjoys the benefits of membership – a membership which is highly desirable, considering that his vocation is at odds with social and legal norms. So, like the aristocrat, the thief seeks a certain status that accompanies being a full-fledged member of his honor group. The idea that honor can grant special status to thieves

surely strikes many as bizarre. However, the status gained by members of any honor group (even an honor group centered around criminal conduct) is relative to the status of the group's surrounding social organization. Because members adhere to the group's honor code, they gain the benefits of membership; consequently, they enjoy a certain status that all those external to the group do not. So, we may say that honor gives both thieves and aristocrats a bump in their *relative* status, even though the *absolute* status of these two groups lies on opposite ends of the social spectrum. This case of honor among thieves reveals that there is no necessary connection between honor codes and high social standing. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to reject honor on the basis of such a connection.

Lastly, some may worry that my characterization of the relationship between honor and status weakens my overall defense of honor. I acknowledge that under my view, honor can be harnessed by any group in which membership is desirable, even if that group's designs are less-than-praiseworthy. The criminal world offers us no shortage of such groups, including the Mafia, drug cartels, and gangs like MS-13, Crips, and the Aryan Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the objection that my position permits honor to be weaponized by depraved groups in pursuit of destructive ends does not threaten my account. This objection is merely a regression to the previously defeated objection that the category of honor can manifest as problematic content; hence, it does not undermine my defense of honor.

### **2.3. Honor and Reputation**

In William Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, the uncouth and drunken knight Falstaff levies the following charge against honor:

What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No...Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon (Shakespeare, 2008, 5.1.133-139).

Falstaff equates honor with a badge or heraldry that one shows off so that others may think highly of him. On this view, honor is no more than moral window-dressing designed to obscure its less-than-noble purpose of gaining a favorable reputation. Despite the somewhat cynical nature of his tirade, Falstaff's words naturally prompt some concerns about the praiseworthiness of reputation as the honorable individual's motivation for action. Recall from Chapter 1 that honor is essentially connected to reputation, a term which I use in the everyday sense to mean the opinion of the individual as seen through the eyes of others. In any social organization in which we desire participation, we generally seek the group's favor rather than its scorn. Consequently, we act in accordance with group norms in order to be seen well by other group members – that is, in order to gain a favorable reputation. In the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*, for example, Scarlett O'Hara (played by Vivien Leigh) dances with Rhett Butler (played by Clark Gable) at a hospital charity ball. During their waltz, she remarks, "Another dance and my reputation will be lost forever!" (Fleming, 1939, 0:44:40). Scarlett's reputation is how she is seen in the eyes of her social circle of well-to-do Atlantans. Since her reputation would certainly suffer for violating the standards of her group by keeping company with such a scoundrel (especially when she should still be in mourning for her late husband), Scarlett rebuffs Rhett's advances. Similarly, one's reputation in an honor group is mediated by adherence to norms contained in the group's honor code. When she follows the code, her reputation is favorable and the group bestows their respect upon her. However, this means that she who cares for her honor necessarily makes the opinions of the group the priority influence over her actions. Thus, her motivation to act in service of her honorable reputation displaces her motivation to perform an action because it is morally right or refrain from an action because it is morally wrong.

This privileging of reputation as motivation for action exposes honor to a substantial philosophical objection. Many philosophers argue that a person is not creditworthy unless she acts for the right reasons, even if her action is one that we would deem to be morally praiseworthy. This

is commonly expressed in terms of ‘moral worth.’ We generally consider an action to have moral worth if it is the right thing to do and if it is done for the right reasons. Most, however, would deny that a concern for reputation can satisfy this second condition. On this view, an action motivated by the upkeep of one’s honorable reputation, even if that action is morally permissible, cannot be considered as deserving of moral worth. This gives rise to the most significant objection to honor thus far, which is that an essential connection to reputation deprives honor of moral significance. Those who maintain this objection would contend that honor is unfit to govern the interactions of individuals in our morally complex society. On the heels of this objection, we face what I consider to be the central dilemma of honor: either we accept honor as a notion that requires deference to the opinions of the group, or we reject honor. As a defender of honor, I maintain a firm grasp on the first horn of this dilemma. But before arguing for my position, it is vital to understand the arguments employed by the opposition. My opening move is to elucidate the everyday concerns we have with notions that rely on the opinions of others. I then apply these specific concerns to honor so that they may serve as a catalyst for understanding the substantial philosophical position that supports the second horn of the dilemma.

### **2.3.1. Understanding Heteronomy**

As a notion that is dependent upon the opinions of others, it is appropriate to characterize honor as *heteronomous*, meaning that which is subject to a law external to itself. The individual who acts for heteronomous reasons acts not according to a standard he sets for himself, but rather according to some standard that exists outside of himself. Philosopher Marta Jimenez succinctly captures why this might strike us as a disquieting prospect:

[H]onor and reputation are always given by others, the worry of heteronomy goes, so if we take honor or reputation as the goal of our actions, we make our values and our behavior depend too much on the opinions of others. Moreover, if the focus of our

concern for reputation is just appearing to be good in the eyes of others, then this concern is hardly conducive to true goodness (Jimenez, 2020, 120).

We need not be steeped in moral philosophy to recognize our unease with submitting to a notion wherein we adopt a mode of reasoning that privileges the opinions of others. I offer the following example in order to illustrate that an overarching concern with heteronomy can be refined into specific problems that are more manageable to address. Imagine that you and your friend are deciding on a movie to watch. You suggest the 1942 film *Casablanca*, to which your friend replies, “That’s a great idea, I really like that movie!” When you ask him why he likes that movie, your friend echoes the film’s popular acclaim: “It won three academy awards”; “All the top film critics consider it the best studio movie of all time”; “*Casablanca* boasts six of the 100 most memorable movie quotes ever, according to the American Film Institute” (American Film Institute, 2025). Although you would not expect your friend to have an entirely original opinion on a film that was released more than 80 years ago, the reasons he gives for liking the movie are bound up in the opinions of others to such an extent that something seems askew with his reasoning. Perhaps it is the case that your friend has no genuine opinion about the film and simply adopts the popular viewpoint. Or, it may be that he has his own opinion – say, a dislike of the film because of its romantic gloss on marital infidelity – but he finds that society’s overwhelming fondness for *Casablanca*, though it runs counter to his own stance, gives him the most reason to adopt a positive view of the film. These two possible explanations for your friend’s social deference are indicative of two distinct problems of heteronomy: the problem of *inauthenticity* and the problem of *excessive regard*.

As evinced by this plausible scenario, the problems of heteronomy are those to which we are already sensitive in our day-to-day social interactions. Admittedly, popular influence over one’s opinion of *Casablanca* is no appreciable threat to the social order. However, when heteronomy is yoked to substantial social notions like honor, the ensuing problems can have potentially destructive

social impacts. Thus, I slightly amend the phrasing of our central dilemma: either we accept honor as heteronomous, or we reject honor. In the next portion of this section, I examine these two problems of heteronomy in order to motivate our unease with honor's reliance on reputation. Although our apprehensions with honor's social deference borne out in these problems end up being relatively minor, they pave the way for our understanding of the profound philosophical objection to heteronomy.

#### 2.3.1.1. The Problem of Inauthenticity

A straightforward objection to heteronomy comes from what I refer to as the problem of inauthenticity. In this context, I use the term inauthentic to describe the person who adopts the opinions of others rather than thinking for himself. Generally speaking, we expect people to have genuine opinions that indicate a defensible system of values and internal reasoning; in the moral domain, we might call this a person's 'moral core' or 'moral compass.' The inauthentic individual, however, is unnervingly unburdened by critical thought. When asked to defend his stance on a certain issue, the best that this person can muster is some form of 'Well, that's what they say.' Such individuals usually strike us as less than impressive. We roll our eyes at our coworker, for example, when he parrots sound bites from talk radio personalities regarding issues of national importance. What the problem of inauthenticity boils down to is our displeasure with an individual's reliance on a callow heuristic that undercuts the human capacity for reasoning.

Given this displeasure, it might seem appropriate to cast aspersions on those whose conduct prioritizes a concern for their reputation. After all, she who is moved to act by others' judgments necessarily relegates her own reasoning to a secondary form of motivation. However, at the outset of our foray into heteronomy, it is important to disentangle the problem of inauthenticity from our judgements of those who act merely to appease their social group. When we reflect upon this latter

dynamic, our minds might snap to our own experiences with high school popularity, or alternatively, the plot of any 1980s John Hughes movie. A classic trope in this world of teenage social relations, whether real or fictional, is the individual who makes a concerted effort to carefully craft her behavior in order to avoid the ignominy that accompanies a bad reputation among her social group. As adults with the benefit of hindsight, we shake our heads in righteous pity at those who act merely to please others in order to maintain their social reputation ('If only the captain of the high school football team could see that there is more to life than being popular'; 'I should have been proud to be in the drama club, rather than trying to conceal my interest in theater from my classmates'). However, she who acts to maintain her reputation – even a superficial reputation like high school popularity – is not guilty of inauthenticity. Acting in service of your reputation means that you necessarily care about how you are seen by others. Consequently, the opinions of those judging others become a significant influence upon your actions. Even sycophants and prom queen hopefuls have to engage in self-assessment and reasoning in order to determine which behaviors will result in the approval of their respective circles. Conversely, the inauthentic individual bypasses her own reasoning completely. Whether due to immaturity, apathy, or ignorance, she forfeits personal deliberations in favor of blind reliance on public opinion. The problem of inauthenticity is not that a person acts merely to please the group; rather, it is that she does not think for herself.

Bearing in mind this distinction, it is clear that the problem of inauthenticity, though certainly heteronomous, is not applicable to honor. She who acts in order to maintain her honorable reputation does so because she desires to be worthy of the group's respect. Maintaining her reputation in the group is not possible if she adopts an inauthentic posture and eschews reflective deliberation altogether. It is nonsensical to suppose that she can abide by the group's honor code, yet insulate herself from the reasoning that produces in her the necessary motivation to do so. Although the problem of inauthenticity is not directly germane to honor, it is nonetheless a valuable stepping stone

to understanding the critic's unease with heteronomous honor. Not only does this first problem provide us with a valuable bit of ground clearing, but it also indicates our brewing discomfort with the influence that the group's opinion can have on the individual's conduct.

#### 2.3.1.2. The Problem of Excessive Regard

Another objection to heteronomy surfaces when we examine the problem of excessive regard. This problem is similar to the previous problem of inauthenticity in that it also indicates an abnormality in an agent's reasoning. The inauthentic agent bypasses his own reasoning completely; cogitations of right and wrong never enter into his decision-making. The agent who succumbs to this new problem of excessive regard is able to engage in reflective moral deliberation and form his own opinions; however, his heightened sensitivity to the group's opinion results in a weak or unstable articulation of his own position. I take this to be a familiar moral phenomenon that lends itself to multiple diagnoses.

One explanation for why an agent would give an inappropriately high weight to the opinions of others is *akrasia* – the Greek word that expresses the condition of acting contrary to one's own better judgement. This condition, commonly expressed as 'weakness of will' or 'lack of self-control,' is that which applies to the high school popularity seekers in my previous examples. The akratic agent who finds himself preoccupied with his reputation will perform the action his social group demands, even if he judges that action to be wrong, because he grants excessive regard to the opinions of the group. There are a couple reasons that we find this dynamic unsettling. First, we as humans tend to think of ourselves as completely capable of setting our own ends, making our own decisions, and calling upon reason that accords with some set of values. Electing to instead privilege our reputation seems like a willful undercutting of those important human abilities. This does not mean that we must always abjure the demands of reputation. Parents, doctors, or teachers, for example, may cultivate a

certain reputation within their domain in order to contribute to the welfare of those under their charge. So, we can allow for a limited suppression of one's own judgements in favor of the heteronomous reason of acting for reputation in certain contexts. But when heteronomy expands beyond these controlled domains, acting in service of one's reputation subdues our distinctive human ability to reason. Such an expansion quickly becomes an affront to our views on personal freedom and self-determination. Furthermore, if a heteronomous concern for reputation displaces a person's moral reasoning, then we should doubt that person's ability to comply with a system of morality. At a minimum, we may take morality to be a set of principles that governs human behavior. In virtue of this governing function, moral principles carry a special weight that apply to all members of a society (Strawson, 1961, 4-8). The standards of behavior that arise from these principles are what we refer to as moral norms. We ought to obey the moral norm of 'do not murder', for example, because it arises from the moral principle that murder is wrong. However, if an individual's motivation to act in accordance with the group's demands surpasses his motivation to act from freely chosen moral principles, we can expect this person to violate moral norms when the two motivations conflict.

A hypothetical scenario helps to illustrate the danger of the akratic agent. Suppose that Darius is a professional hockey player who cultivates a reputation of being quick to violence. Off the ice, Darius would never utilize violence against another human being unless he found himself in a life-threatening scenario. But within the confines of hockey, players who incline towards violence are respected by their teammates for being able to strike fear into the opposing team. So, we can tolerate a concern for reputation that manifests in Darius' aggressive checking of opposing players because that reputation's influence is limited to a game with rules, officials, and willing participants. This limited heteronomous system does not problematically impede Darius' ability to act in accordance with his moral judgements, nor does it pose any significant threat to morality at large. However, if the importance of maintaining his reputation as a hockey player expands to exert a certain dominance

over other considerations in Darius' life (paramount among them moral considerations), then we quickly encounter trouble. Suppose now the group demands that *all* of Darius' interpersonal conflicts are to be met with violence in order for him to be deserving of the group's respect. Most of us would consider this to be a state of affairs in which Darius should not give too much weight to the judgement of the group. If an akratic Darius finds himself in disagreement with another person, his motivation to act in service of his reputation will supersede his motivation to adhere to the moral norm of not inflicting undue harm upon others (woe betide the elderly woman who cuts in front of Darius in line at the bank, or the supermarket cashier who gives him the incorrect amount of change). Akrasia speaks to the worry that when a heteronomous concern like reputation becomes excessive – that is, when one gives too much weight to the opinions of others – one's motivation to act in accordance with his own moral reasoning is dashed by his motivation to act in accordance with the demands of the group. The person who submits to this kind of excessive heteronomy is in danger of becoming a defective moral agent.

Another way a person can err in giving excessive regard to others' opinions is by simply failing to recognize that he is doing so. This failure is more subtle than the akratic individual's breakdown in moral agency. On this alternative diagnosis, the individual grants a heightened deference to the opinions of others as a result of some characterological or epistemic flaw. This person is one who is unduly influenced by another's high status, expertise, or convincing rhetoric to such a degree that he willingly alters his position. Although this failure seems more innocent than a weakness of will, it is an equally concerning manifestation of heteronomy's problem of excessive regard. We should find it disquieting if the opinions of others, which can be idiosyncratic, ephemeral, or downright despicable, can be counted among that special stuff that overpowers a person's reasons for doing right and avoiding wrong.

Unlike the problem of inauthenticity, the problem of excessive regard is applicable to heteronomous honor. Ironically, however, we must take care not to give this problem more weight than it is due. First, it is important that we not conflate the problem of excessive regard with the problem of right-making. A pertinent example of the latter comes from the famous series of interviews of President Richard Nixon by British journalist David Frost in 1977. In part three of that four-part series (Birt et al., 2008), Frost asks Nixon to what extent a president may do something illegal when it is in the interest of national security. Nixon offers a terse reply: “Well, when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal” (Ibid). The purported right-making feature of executive authority is our source of anxiety over this remark. We are unsettled over the assertion that a wrong action is permissible so long as it is performed by an individual of heightened authority. Applied to our examination of heteronomous honor, the problem of right-making would speak to an aversion to social deference as morally constitutive. But I do not see this as a legitimate concern, owing to the implausibility of popularity as a right-making feature. Returning to the second iteration of our scenario involving our excessively deferential hockey player, it would be absurd to classify Darius’ violent behavior as moral merely because it coheres with the judgements of the group. The same reasoning applies to honor. Recall from Section 2.1 that honor has no ability to alter the moral status of its practices. As we saw in the example of dueling, individuals may even be cognizant that certain actions committed in the name of honor run afoul of morality. Popular opinion simply does not have the ability to consecrate moral norms. The problem of excessive regard is not that the opinions of the honor group rewrite the moral status of the norms contained in its honor code, but rather a worry that those who embrace honor give too much weight to the opinions of their honor group.

Second, although the problem of excessive regard seems like a legitimate objection to heteronomous honor, it is ultimately superficial. I do not mean to say that giving in to extreme deference is permissible, but rather that these cases do not reflect the deep problems that are essential

to honor. To assert that undue deference to the opinions of others is a prominent moral failure of honor is to neglect the reality that many other notions permit similar moral failures. This is another instance of unfairly singling out honor for that which we do not disparage in other notions. The problem of excessive regard is no less pronounced in the notions of friendship or love. For example, it is reasonable to chastise a friend whose love for his wife manifests in defaulting to her every opinion; however, it is incorrect to state that this is an attack on love as such. It is more accurate to say that you are criticizing your friend for adopting a mode of practical reasoning that inappropriately skews his deliberations. Thus, the problem of excessive regard, though it presents as a natural criticism of honor, is actually a superficial concern that is not at all distinct to honor. The value in examining this problem, as I explained at the top of this section, is that it serves as a catalyst for understanding the forthcoming deeper philosophical criticism of heteronomous honor.

### **2.3.2. The Philosophical Objection to Heteronomy**

Before proceeding, allow me to briefly chart our progress in working through this chapter's fundamental objection to honor. First, in light of honor's essential connection to reputation, i.e. the inseparability of an individual's honor from the group's opinion of that individual, honor was appropriately characterized as heteronomous. This terminology helped frame our central dilemma: accept honor as heteronomous, or reject honor. Next, I introduced the problems of heteronomy in order to motivate our intuitive anxieties over the incongruity between honor's reliance on the opinions of the group and morality. Reflecting upon these problems offered us an initial appreciation of the second horn of the dilemma; still, this only scratched the surface of the deeper arguments that endorse rejecting honor in virtue of its heteronomy. Thus, our present position in the analysis of the fundamental dilemma of honor is only a superficial appreciation of the issue that we are about to tackle. As any project manager or general contractor can attest to, underestimating the demands of a

proposed venture leads to the inadequate allocation of resources that inevitably fails to get the job done. Similarly, it is important to understand the full force of the critic who maintains a grasp on the second horn of the dilemma before attempting to refute that position. The critic's rejection of honor derives from his assertion that honor's heteronomy, borne out in reputation, makes it unsuitable for operation within our system of morality. For the philosophically uninitiated, this assertion derives its strength from arguably the most influential moral theory of the past three centuries. It is at this juncture that I turn to moral philosophy in order to uncover the deeper source of the opposition to heteronomy that supports the second horn of the central dilemma of honor.

#### 2.3.2.1. Kant and Autonomy

The best way to understand the philosophical arguments against heteronomy is by exploring the contrasting view of *autonomy* – that is, according to a law given to oneself. Philosophers that favor autonomous moral reasoning argue that in order for a person to determine what morality demands of him in a particular situation, his reasoning must be free of outside influences. When our moral reasoning is unencumbered, we can determine for ourselves what is morally right and modulate our behavior to align with those freely chosen moral standards. Autonomous moral reasoning not only coheres with our Emersonian distaste of impediments to self-governance, but it is *prima facie* appealing for any society that desires its citizens to act from a shared set of defensible moral principles. The linking of autonomy and morality comes to us from the immeasurably influential deontological moral theory of Immanuel Kant. To put it in terms that align with our dilemma, Kant's moral theory epitomizes the philosophical objection to heteronomy. Therefore, our intermediate task of appreciating the full scope of the second horn of our dilemma can be achieved through an understanding of the Kantian opposition to heteronomy.

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant's aim is to uncover the fundamental principle of a moral system that applies to all persons. He begins this project by stating upfront that the only unconditional good is a good will (Kant, 1996, 4:393). There are many other things in this world that we might find good or desirable, such as courage, talent, wealth, or love. But these things are not goods themselves; they all have limits and they can all be employed to wicked ends. Kant argues that even happiness, which many influential philosophical traditions take to be the ultimate good, is conditionally good. We can clearly identify these ersatz goods because they all eventually conflict with reason. On the Kantian view, human beings are endowed with reason that directs us towards the pursuit of the ultimate good. So, if reason conflicts with those things we commonly label as good, it must be the case that our reason is driving us towards a higher purpose. That higher purpose – what Kant refers to as “the true vocation of reason” (4:396) – is the formation of a good will. The way that reason leads to the establishment of a good will is by helping us to realize our moral duty. On the Kantian picture, our actions only have moral worth if they are performed for the sake of our moral duty. Other motivations, such as inclination or conformity, may produce an action that is morally permissible or even identical to that which the moral duty demands. Nevertheless, such an action is devoid of moral worth because it was not motivated by duty. Accordingly, the agent who performs such an action gets no moral credit because he did not act solely for the sake of his moral duty. Kant illustrates this point through the example of a shopkeeper who considers overcharging a naïve customer. The shopkeeper decides not to overcharge the customer, as doing so would harm his business (no one wants to buy from a merchant who cheats his customers). In judging the shopkeeper's action, it is correct to say that he did the right thing by not swindling his customer. However, Kant argues that the shopkeeper is not creditworthy because his action was motivated by self-interest rather than adherence to his moral duty (4:397).

To recap the somewhat abstruse Kantian sequence explained in the previous paragraph, it is reason that helps us to discover our moral duty; acting exclusively for the sake of our moral duty establishes our good will, which is the sole unconditional good that applies to all persons. However, the mere fact that we are human beings endowed with reason is no guarantee that we will act in accordance with our moral duty. As Kant explains, “[D]uty is the necessity of an action from respect for law” (4:400). When we choose to act in accordance with our moral duty, we reveal our respect for the moral law. He writes,

[N]othing other than the *representation of the law* in itself, *which can of course occur only in a rational being*, insofar as it and not the hoped-for effect is the determining ground of the will, can constitute the preeminent good we call moral, which is already present in the person himself who acts in accordance with the representation and need not wait upon the effect of his action (4:401).

Hence, acting morally requires that we choose to impose the moral law upon ourselves. In other words, acting morally requires that we act autonomously. “Autonomy of the will,” says Kant, “is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself” (4:440). It is through autonomy – that is, choosing to act solely for the sake of our rationally determined moral duty – that we establish our good will. In order to ensure that we are accurately capturing the correct moral law that should inform our moral duty, Kant offers us his supreme principle of morality known as the Categorical Imperative. As the name straightforwardly indicates, the Categorical Imperative is an unconditional moral command that applies to all persons in all circumstances. Still, a brief etymology of this term is helpful. Any potential objective principle, the obedience of which necessitates our rational will, can be thought of as an *imperative*, i.e. a command that urges agents to abide by that principle. An imperative, according to Kant, can command in one of two ways. An imperative that commands *hypothetically* is one that commands only in virtue of us wanting some end, rather than our willing some end; it is an imperative that is conditional. An imperative that commands *categorically*, however, applies to us unconditionally

simply because we are human beings with rational wills, independent of any other desires, inclinations, or ends that we may embrace. Kant writes that “if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself confirming to reason, as its principle, *then it is categorical*” (4:414). To apply the Categorical Imperative, we first articulate the proposed subjective principle, or maxim, that drives our action. If our maxim does not conflict with itself, then it can be considered a universal moral law that applies to all persons at all times. Kant advises us to “*act in accordance with maxims that at the same time have as their object themselves as universal laws of nature*” (4:437). Obedience to such a maxim reflects our moral duty, which establishes a will that is unconditionally good. When we adhere to the Categorical Imperative, we can be sure that we are choosing to act in accordance with our moral duty; that is, we are choosing to impose the moral law upon ourselves. It is through the Categorical Imperative that Kant welds autonomy to morality:

An absolutely good will, whose principles must be a categorical imperative, will therefore, indeterminate with respect to all objects, contain merely the *form of volition* and such and indeed as autonomy; that is, the fitness of the maxims of every good will to make themselves into universal law is itself the sole law the will of every rational being imposes upon itself, without having to put underneath it some incentive of interest as basis (4:444).

Still, we must bear in mind that autonomy is a choice. Just as we can choose to adopt a rational determination of our will, we can also choose a determination of our will based on inclination, desire, or some other outside influence; in other words, we can also choose heteronomy. Kant writes,

If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law...*heteronomy* always results” (4:441).

Kant’s use of the phrase ‘anywhere else’ to describe the origins of heteronomous influence warrants a brief digression. Despite the characterization of the law that heteronomy responds to as ‘other,’ it is incorrect to conceive of heteronomy as merely the distinction between ‘agent’ and ‘others.’ We can engage in solitary moral deliberation and nevertheless choose to act on our own instincts or emotions.

Such departures from a rational determination of the will are decidedly heteronomous, yet not the product of external influence. Though all forms of heteronomy steer an agent's will away from reason, heteronomy is not necessarily external to the agent. Although the focus of this section is a heteronomy that is clearly external to the agent, I wish to make clear that honor's deference to others does not exhaust the category of heteronomy.

That being said, Kant's position is clear: that which is heteronomous is necessarily deprived of moral significance. Through the Categorical Imperative, we confirm the universality of our autonomously derived moral principle. In so doing, we establish our good will, which is the only unconditional good, and thus the only suitable grounding for a system of morality. Our good will must therefore reflect what Kant calls "its own commanding authority as supreme lawgiving" (4:441).

With heteronomy, however, this is not possible:

Whenever an object of the will has to be laid down as the basis for prescribing the rule that determines the will, there the rule is none other than heteronomy; the imperative is conditional, namely: *if* or *because* one wills this object, one ought to act in such or such a way; hence it can never command morally, that is, categorically (4:444).

When we adopt a determination of our will based on heteronomy, we are endorsing an influence on our will that does not belong to our will, which means that we are no longer being motivated by duty alone. *This is the deep Kantian objection to honor.* When we respond to honor's heteronomous concern for reputation, we are sanctioning an influence on our will that is not rooted in duty alone.

The Kantian would also point out that responding to concerns of honor could yield actions that are morally impermissible, though he would not claim that this is necessarily so. As Kant illustrates in his example of the shopkeeper, it is possible to act as duty demands without being motivated by duty. However, unless we are moved to act solely from duty, the Kantian asserts that our actions do not have moral worth. Accordingly, the agent who performs the right action out of concern for his honorable reputation is no more creditworthy than the agent who performs that same

right action accidentally. For the Kantian, any action resulting from the external influence of honor is necessarily devoid of moral worth. Therefore, on the Kantian view, honor cannot be a morally significant notion.

### **2.3.3. Defending Heteronomous Honor**

Recall the central dilemma of honor: accept honor as heteronomous, or reject honor. The critic, emboldened by Kantian views on heteronomy, rejects honor as an unacceptable departure from a system of morality wherein rational agents should perform the right actions solely from a position of moral duty. Conversely, I maintain that honor is a moralized notion. Even though honor is inseparable from the opinions of others, there are nevertheless morally relevant reasons for responding to its considerations. I argue that we can accept honor as a notion that holds sway over our social interactions without worrying that responding to considerations of honor renders our actions morally inconsequential. My positive account of honor will be detailed in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to say that this Kantian critique threatens my account of honor as a morally significant notion. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to rebutting the suggestion that Kantian views on heteronomy deprive honor of its moral significance.

Defending moralized honor does not require rejecting Kant's moral theory outright. In fact, I find that Kant's central point about responding to duty alone captures an important aspect of our ethical lives. Generally speaking, we find it appropriate to criticize those who are motivated to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. We are bothered by the churchgoer who drops a \$100 bill in the alms box because he wants others to think him magnanimous, or the woman who signs up for a stint in the Peace Corps not because she wants to help others, but because she wants to use it as a résumé bullet when she runs for public office. Our unease with these individuals is not that they are acting immorally (giving to the poor and joining the Peace Corps are clearly morally permissible), but rather

that they lack the proper motivation that we would expect good moral agents to have. I find this to be an accurate observation of our everyday moralized assessments. If you are performing an action to make yourself look good rather than because it's the right thing to do, we can all appreciate that this seems misguided. So, there is a natural critique against honor, inspired by Kantian views on heteronomy, that deserves to be taken seriously. However, I contend that the persuasiveness of this critique dissolves when we draw a distinction between considerations that are morally significant and those that are morally fundamental. Kant offers up the Categorical Imperative as the fundamental constituent of our moral universe. On his view, in virtue of the fact that we are humans endowed with reason, the only moral right is obeying the Categorical Imperative, i.e. acting solely from one's moral duty. Still, it seems reasonable to interpret this fundamental moral consideration as consistent with the idea that there exist other morally significant considerations to which we can respond. We can acknowledge the moral relevance of categories like friendship, love, and loyalty without committing ourselves to considering them fundamental constituents of our moral universe. Similarly, rescuing the moral significance of honor does not require that we classify honor as morally fundamental. I do not consider honor to be a rival notion of morality that tracks some essential human interest or pursuit. Honor is a moralized notion, but not one that is morally fundamental. Therefore, the moral significance of honor is not compromised by concerns of heteronomy.

Obviously, honor can still go awry. As I stated in the opening pages of this dissertation, honor is not impervious to moral failure. Accordingly, I do not maintain that adherence to an honor code is intrinsically good. It is not the case that acting out of a motive of honor automatically confers moral worth upon one's actions. Even so, this does not entail that honor is merely instrumentally good. Honor is more complex; it has an important ethical role to play, but it requires the right conditions in order to do so. The same can be said for other notions with which we have a greater familiarity, like friendship. We would not judge the notion of friendship using binary criteria of either 'intrinsically

good' or 'instrumentally good.' On the one hand, it would be absurd to claim that I can do no wrong so long as I act from a position of friendship. If concern for being a good friend drives me to maintain my friendship with a wicked individual and assist him in the performance of immoral acts, then friendship under these conditions has clearly gone awry. On the other hand, it does not follow that friendship is a trivial or instrumental notion. Within the right conditions – for example, a shared pursuit of a life well-lived, or a mutual encouragement to engage in virtuous activity – friendship can have an important and valuable role to play in our ethical lives.

The same holds true for honor. Under the right circumstances, one can privilege the influence of honor in a way that is morally significant, even though he is not immediately responding to the mere influence of moral duty. For example, suppose that honor drives a soldier to race across the battlefield, retrieve his wounded comrade, and carry that comrade back to safety, all the while exposing himself to ceaseless and withering enemy fire. It is uncontroversial to say that the soldier's action is morally permissible. The Kantian, however, denies that the soldier's action has moral worth, as it was motivated by concern for his honorable reputation instead of his moral duty. I agree that the soldier's motivation cannot be twisted to conform with Kantian moral duty. Even so, I maintain that honor can withstand a Kantian attack that would classify the soldier's motivation alongside genuinely objectionable heteronomous motivations like glory or popularity. Recall that the person who cares for his honorable reputation desires to be seen as worthy in the eyes of those who also commit to those standards. Though it lacks a direct connection to moral duty, there is still room for considering this influence as one that is deserving of moral credit. As philosopher Anthony Cunningham argues, this motivation can be congruous with a commitment to morality:

[T]he ethical foundations of a sense of honor – the intrinsic and abiding interest in embodying excellence within a community that respects and admires the same...are at the heart of putting together a life and self for creatures who yearn to measure up self-consciously as worthwhile people" (Cunningham, 2013, 159).

So, it seems incorrect to state that there is nothing morally significant about the soldier who is motivated by honor to carry his wounded comrade across the battlefield to safety. Moreover, embracing this position of mine does not require a total repudiation of all things Kant. On the contrary, I find that recognizing the moral significance of honor is consistent with much of the Kantian moral picture. I agree that it is desirable to maintain a system of morality in which rational agents are properly motivated to act rightly. I acknowledge that the wrong motivation can result in an act that has no moral worth. Also, I do not consider honor to be a fundamental constituent of our moral universe. As such, my insistence on the moral significance of honor does not threaten that which the Kantian takes to be morally fundamental. So, capturing the moral significance of honor does not demand a total Kantian takedown. That being said, I do not wish to decouple honor from morality. Considerations of honor should not be likened to considerations of, say, aesthetics, which can be significant in their own right, but are ultimately disconnected from morality. Instead, considerations of honor are more like considerations of friendship or loyalty. Even though they are not morally fundamental, it would be strange to pretend that responding to these considerations cannot be morally significant.

I recognize that there is an uncompromising interpretation of how Kant's fundamental discussions about morality relate to morally adjacent concepts – namely, that looking to others can never be a source of moral significance. There is no denying that my account of honor remains open to such an attack. However, this is not an issue that is unique to honor. The Kantian critic casts honor alongside *all* notions that do not involve acting from a pure adherence to moral duty, yet still have an intuitive kind of moral significance. The example of the soldier acting from honor to save his wounded comrade is but one in a wide range of cases in which adopting an unyielding Kantian stance erases the moral worth from notions that do not involve acting from a pure position of moral duty, yet from a commonsense position still seem morally significant. As one philosopher puts it, the

Kantian view is “unacceptably narrow: we seem to recognize a great many actions as morally worthy that do not have duty at their source” (Isserow, 2018, 255). Again, I do not wish to launch a broadside attack on Kantian morality. I have no intention of resolving disputes of moral significance between those who cling to strong Kantian assumptions and those who maintain a more commonsense moral view. Rather, given the broad swath of commonsense moral notions that the Kantian would consider incapable of producing acts of moral worth, it is enough to simply point out that this does not constitute a fundamental objection to my account of honor. Instead, honor finds itself in the respectable company of love, friendship, and other notions with certain considerations that we find appropriate to invest with moral significance. Among the broader population who would find it bizarre to claim that all acts of a loving mother, a loyal friend, or an honorable soldier have no moral worth, my position remains intact.

#### 2.3.3.1. Williams, Shame, and the Kantian Critique

The philosophical fleshing out of my position utilizes an admittedly oblique strategy. Given the scarcity of philosophical literature on honor, it is regrettable, though not surprising, that explicit arguments on the subject of honor’s heteronomy are nowhere to be found. Fortunately, modern philosophy has much to say about the heteronomous foundations of shame. As I established in Section 1.3, though shame and honor are not perfectly symmetrical, they are complementary. It is the common other-regarding core found in both shame and honor that permits us to leverage arguments for the former in defense of the latter. The most influential work on the defense of heteronomous shame is Bernard Williams’ *Shame and Necessity*, specifically the chapter entitled ‘Shame and Autonomy’ (Williams, 1993). Herein we find a renowned philosopher defending a notion that can be diagnosed as heteronomous, yet still seems to carry enough moral significance to give pause to those who would exile it from the moral realm. Because Williams’ essay fends off the Kantian critique that heteronomy

deprives shame of its moral significance, it is an ideal piece of philosophy to leverage in my defense of heteronomous honor from the same such critique.

I disagree with the Kantian critic who insists notions like honor are morally inadmissible because they allow the opinions and attitudes of others to influence our reasoning. I argue that it can be morally worthwhile to do things for reasons of honor that eventually link up with human goods, even if those reasons are not immediately motivated by Kant's Categorical Imperative. Before I introduce Williams into the mix, however, I wish to make clear that my argument does not imply that one can *never* be honored for nonmoral reasons. In accordance with the stipulations in my provisional account of honor in Chapter 1, I am not focusing on these nonmoral aspects of honor because they do not offer much meaningful insight into honor's most substantial critiques. Recall that it is not a pure feature of honor that any response to its considerations is automatically endowed with moral significance. Our everyday experiences with honor are typically that thin sense of appraisal respect, which is the positive regard in which we hold another for his achievements. There is nothing blameworthy or insincere about statements like 'I honor baseball Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith for his athletic prowess,' or 'Each Thanksgiving, I honor my grandmother by cooking her famous potato gratin.' Nonetheless, merely invoking the concept of honor does not endow either of these examples with moral significance. These showings of respect that we colloquially refer to as honor might stimulate trivial haggling over semantic issues, but they do not offer any insight into the philosophically meatier issues centered about honor's heteronomy. The kind of honor that does allow us to explore these concerns, which is the prominent subject matter of this dissertation, is the honor that governs the interactions among members of an honor group. Even so, not every instance of this more robust form of honor can be ascribed to the moral domain. Any honor code invariably contains nonmoral elements, such as standards of physical appearance. For example, if a military servicemember does not keep a tidy uniform, he will be seen as less worthy of respect in the eyes of his fellow soldiers. But

we would not claim that the moral praiseworthiness of a soldier is mediated by the shininess of his shoes, just as we would not claim that the military is a morally upright organization in virtue of its uniform standards. It is just a practical reality that any system designed to influence interpersonal relations has nonmoral aspects. The multifarious considerations that affect how we conduct ourselves on a daily basis are not all part of the moral realm; the same goes for considerations of honor within an honor group. It is not the focus of this dissertation to outline the normative criteria for moral and nonmoral aspects of a system of honor. Moreover, nonmoral considerations are not the source of the most philosophically robust objections to honor. Hence, I will focus on those considerations of honor that do affect the moral realm, which are the collective target of those who subscribe to Kantian views of heteronomy.

In the opening pages of 'Shame and Autonomy,' Williams argues that our modern conceptions of morality lead us to draw incorrect judgements about ancient Greek societies governed by norms of shame. Although shame certainly regards the opinions of others, Williams argues that excising shame on these grounds would negate complex and profound aspects of our ethical experience. To illustrate his position, Williams draws on prominent figures in ancient Greece as revealed to us by the likes of Homer and Sophocles. The heroes in these works boldly assert their intentions: Ajax must commit suicide; Achilles cannot accept gifts from the embassy; Oedipus must rule. In each of these cases, the character's motivation is one of unflinching resolve; in other words, these Homeric heroes are expressing a necessity. Unfortunately, as Williams observes, our modern moral systems – chief among them the Kantian construct – cause us to project our sense of necessity on to the ancient Greeks.

What necessity are they expressing? It is an important question, and it is easy to go the wrong way towards answering it. The influence of modern morality and Kantian ideas encourages one to ask first whether this is the "must" of duty, the categorical imperative of morality (Williams, 1993, 75).

Owing to our modern moral sensibilities, we cannot help but view these expressions of necessity in Kantian terms, i.e. imperatives. To the Kantian, the imperatives of these Homeric heroes are all hypothetical. Each imperative is relevant only to the agent who utters it, regardless of whether he is cognizant of its underlying desires, fears, or psychological pressures. Hence, Kantian views on heteronomy deem these pursuits as detached from morality. Pressed to articulate an account of ethics among the ancient Greeks, we seem forced to conclude that Greek society was largely “pre-moral” (77). Williams, however, refuses to accept this uncharitable analysis of an ancient Greek society that is no more morally developed than children in a nursery.

What does concern us, and should concern the Kantian, is that in the Greek nursery itself people were able to realise that mere self-indulgence and fear were not all that were expected; they recognised, for instance, virtues of courage and justice. If that is so, there must be options for ethical thought and experience that the Kantian construction conceals (77).

Williams’ preeminent example of a notion subdued by Kantian views on heteronomy is shame, the characteristic experience of which is being seen by others in a state in which we do not wish to be seen. Through the examples of Homeric heroes, Williams paints a picture of an ancient Greek society in which necessity was tied to how one would be judged by others, i.e. shame. This certainly departs from our modern conceptions of necessity. Still, we may say that in general, a sense of necessity helps to establish norms and provide practical guidance. So, it should hardly be surprising that different societies had different senses of necessity to govern the conduct of their populations. This basic fact about human civilizations should alert us to the folly of projecting our modern sense of necessity onto a society that preceded our own by roughly three millennia. Williams entreats us to see the serious error in evaluating ancient Greek norms of shame through a modern moral lens. Though it might be descriptively accurate to state that shame in ancient Greece did some of the work that today we ascribe to morality, the ancients’ distinctly different sense of necessity meant that their notion of shame was

not couched in moral terms. Thus, shame in ancient Greece can never be reconciled under Kantian morality because shame's heteronomy disqualifies it from being counted as a Kantian necessity.

The hasty shame critic, however, ignores this incongruity and asserts that shame's reliance on the judgements of others permanently disqualifies it as a moral notion. This begets a straightforward conditional: if shame is no part of morality, then there is no need for investigating how shame might govern our ethical relations. The predictable result, Williams observes, is that "conceptions of what shame has to be, and of how ethical relations that are importantly governed by shame have to work, are all incorrect" (78). We are all too eager to characterize the individual driven by shame as one who fears a public uncovering of her shortcomings, or one who merely seeks to enhance his social status through competitive successes at the expense of others. But even though the Greeks did not have a morality that looked like ours, Williams argues that their shame-based system of norms is none the worse for it. The shame-inspired pursuits of our Homeric heroes cannot be dismissed as the stuff of mere personal desire. Prospective shame – that is, the envisaged unfavorable reaction to an agent's conduct by judging others – was a powerful source of motivation for Homeric figures who found themselves in serious situations. Ajax rouses his soldiers by encouraging them to keep shame in their hearts, lest they be thought of as lesser men for not fighting. Nestor similarly motivates his troops by encouraging them to imagine what their family members would think of their conduct. Hector stays to face Achilles because he cannot bear that his countrymen might think less of him for avoiding a confrontation with the Achaeans that was his own reckless design. Williams contends that these reactions to shame are not merely the popularity-seeking behaviors of an archaic peoples, but rather morally significant reactions that we should recognize as applicable to our own lives.

What we have discovered about the Greeks' understanding of these reactions, that they can transcend both an assertive egoism and a conventional concern for public opinion, applies equally well to what we recognize in our own world as shame (88).

Still, one might assert that if an agent's decision to take up arms is motivated by the external influence of others' opinions, then that decision is necessarily disconnected from morality. Under this Kantian view, roles for shame as intimated by the ancient Greeks cannot have a moral dimension in virtue of shame's heteronomy. Yet, we have reason to doubt the plausibility of this position when we ponder the varying degrees of heteronomy that this critique roundly rejects. Suppose that Hector's decision to face Achilles was instead motivated by a base desire to make female onlookers swoon at his manliness. Against Hector's original motivation, this alternative motivation is morally hollow. Yet, the Kantian critic is equally dismissive of these motivations because they are both heteronomous. This troubling equivalency, Williams argues, is one that we should not so casually accept.

The Greeks' understanding of shame, I have claimed, was strong and complex enough to dispose of the familiar criticism that an ethical life shaped by it is unacceptably heteronomous, crudely dependent on public opinion (97).

Kant, on the other hand, would assert that there is no difference between a Hector who faces Achilles out of prospective shame and a Hector who faces Achilles because he wants to impress Trojan women. From a Kantian standpoint, either motivation deprives Hector's act of moral worth. But this equalizing of base desires and commendable considerations of shame casts much doubt on the position that shame cannot have any moral significance merely because it defers to the opinions of others.

To recap, my goal here is to rebut the suggestion that Kantian views on heteronomy make it the case that honor cannot be morally significant. Again, this does not put my account of honor squarely at odds with the whole of Kantian moral theory. I do not interpret Kant as trying to expunge considerations of honor, love, loyalty, or friendship from the moral universe. Rather, I favor the more collegial interpretation that such categories, though not morally fundamental, nevertheless have moral significance in virtue of the role they play in promoting other human goods (how honor does so is

discussed at length in the next chapter). Still, I acknowledge that my position will likely not assuage the concerns of the uncompromising critic who finds the moral significance of the actions of loving mothers and honorable soldiers to be antithetical to the Kantian moral picture. But on this view, honor is in no more jeopardy than the multitude of other notions that the critic rebukes but that we generally take to have a kind of commonsense moral significance. I will not expand upon either aspect of this disjunctive stance any further. Instead, it suffices to state that saving the moral significance of honor does not cost us a total rejection of Kantian moral theory. My aim is simply to ward off Kantian attacks that honor cannot have moral significance merely because of the fact that it defers to the judgements of others. In this regard, Williams is my ally; he frames the issue of shame similar to how I frame the central dilemma of honor. Both of us are defending a heteronomous notion against those who would expel that notion from the moral realm for appealing to the judgments of others. Williams demonstrates that our inclination to shoehorn Homeric shame into our modern moral picture inexpediently dismisses the value of shame to the human ethical experience. His account of shame supports my account of honor insofar that both other-regarding notions have a moral significance that seems odd for the Kantian to deny. In both domains, we see the implausibility of a Kantian critique that claims a heteronomous notion cannot be morally significant. Williams' arguments for shame therefore serve as sound philosophical reinforcement for my refutation of the claim that Kantian views on heteronomy deprive honor of moral significance.

## Chapter 3: The Value of Honor

This final chapter is the ‘positive phase’ of my inquiry into honor. Thus far, I have offered a detailed account of honor, argued for the relevancy of honor in modernity, and shielded honor from objections of increasing philosophical import. What remains is to explain the unique value of honor that makes it a notion worthy of defending. In a sense, all the material in the previous chapters has been leading up to a very straightforward question: *what is so special about honor?* The answer, I argue, is honor’s unmatched ability to promote a group’s values and ideals. Drawing on the powerful example of honor among U.S. prisoners during the Vietnam War, this chapter explores three ways in which honor demonstrates this valuable ability. First, honor acts as a distinct form of motivation. Under circumstances that exhaust other normative and generic moral notions, honor retains the ability to motivate its adherents to the values and norms contained in its code. Second, honor is uniquely adept at aiding in the projection of our values. Honor is the mechanism by which we can ensure that institutions with important social functions reflect society’s values. We can further appreciate this ability when we recognize that an absence of honor would seriously alter the values that we project. Third, honor enables moral resilience. When an individual deviates from the code, honor can help that person reform as a member of the group. Honor also facilitates the resilience of the group itself, ensuring that the group does not lose its direction. In the final section, I briefly examine honor’s connection to morality in order to defuse a lingering concern that the value of honor seems dependent on its moral content.

### **3.1. Honor in Action: American Prisoners of War in North Vietnam**

Before investigating the special value of honor, I wish to highlight a compelling historical example of honor in action. Many do not have a firm grasp on the core phenomenon that I am trying to capture, while others may be expecting that I am gearing up to defend practices like duels, *tameshigiri*, and honor

killings. To overcome these misapprehensions, I draw upon the collective experiences of American prisoners during the Vietnam War. This powerful case study helps to ground my arguments in the subsequent sections about how honor promotes the values and ideals of a group. Moreover, the conduct of these American prisoners of war highlights the significance of honor in a way that even the staunchest critic will find difficult to deny.

From 1964 to 1973, 766 Americans were known to have been held as prisoners of war (POWs) in North Vietnam. With an average duration in captivity just short of five years, 684 of these POWs returned home alive (Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, 2017). Firsthand accounts confirmed that the treatment of POWs at the hands of their North Vietnamese captors was particularly harsh. Prisoners were starved, denied medical attention, and subjected to periods of prolonged isolation. Nearly half of all POWs endured solitary confinement for periods of more than six months; some were isolated for years. POWs were also subjected to routine torture, including beatings, waterboarding, and an especially painful practice that POWs referred to as ‘the ropes,’ where a prisoner had his hands tied behind his back and was then suspended with ropes by his bound wrists (Hunter, 1978, 192). This excruciating method of torture caused shoulder dislocation, bone fractures, muscle tears, and nerve damage. The intent of this brutal regimen was getting prisoners to sign confessions or make public statements denouncing America’s war effort. These in turn would be utilized as propaganda to destabilize both domestic and global opinion about American involvement in Vietnam. Honor, however, motivated POWs to conduct themselves in a manner that the military and the nation would consider praiseworthy.

Because military honor serves as a touchstone example throughout this chapter, a brief examination of its inner workings is warranted. To begin, the United States military does not have an explicit honor code. Nowhere does there exist a comprehensive catalog of all the rules and standards to which members of the military must adhere in order to merit their comrades’ respect. But as I

mentioned in the opening chapter, an honor code need not be an encyclopedic listing of all norms to which group members must adhere. Whether the norms of a group are written down, felt, or experienced is immaterial, so long as all group members understand that they must adhere to those norms in order to be worthy of the group's respect.

As the purpose of the military is defense of the state, the foundational precept that governs military honor is service. Beginning in basic training, recruits are imbued with the mindset that the well-being of others always comes before their own. This entry phase of military service is not merely a program of pushups and marksmanship skills. Basic training is an institutional effort aimed at reshuffling the recruit's priorities to ensure that 'self' eventually sinks to the bottom. For example, when a new recruit runs an obstacle course for the first time, he does so with the intention of finishing as fast as possible. But when he crosses the finish line with a fast time, he is not congratulated. Instead, he is admonished by his drill instructor for leaving his struggling peers behind. Eventually, recruits internalize the notion that military service demands placing the welfare of others ahead of their own. In his famous address to the cadets of the Indian Military Academy in 1932, British Field Marshall Philip Chetwode eloquently expresses this ordering of priorities for all those who aspire to join the profession of arms.

First, the safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. Second, the honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Third, your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time (Chetwode, 2012, 153).

It is the wellspring of service from which the elements of the military honor code flow. Consequently, the honor norms that grant servicemembers the respect of the group have a duty-like quality that grounds in prioritizing others over self. Although these standards of the military honor code all emanate from the core concept of service, they can nevertheless take different deontic forms. Some elements of the military honor code are absolute duties, such as the prohibition on harming

noncombatants. The conduct that these absolute standards prescribe or prohibit is unambiguous, regardless of circumstance. Other parts of the honor code fall under the deontic category of an ideal, which represents the perfection of a standard to which the servicemember should strive to attain. The *ne plus ultra* conduct that embodies this ideal may be associated with the deeds of a certain individual, or it may remain unarticulated. Whether a certain element of the honor code is an absolute or an ideal cannot be judged merely by its grammatical structure. Instead, this distinction depends on whether the honor code is conveying an inviolable duty or the perfection of a standard to which one should aspire.

Both of these deontic categories have a role to play in the military honor code. The inclusion of absolutes is necessary to deter certain conduct that the group deems unequivocally shameful. Conversely, when it comes to elements of the honor code that are meant to be interpreted as ideals, there is room for judging how well an individual responds to those ideals, given the totality of his circumstances. The parts of the military honor code that govern the conduct of those who become POWs are expressed as ideals. Nearly a decade before U.S. military action in Vietnam, the military expanded its honor code to include the Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Services of the United States. Signed as Executive Order 10631 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955, the Code of Conduct outlines standards of behavior for servicemembers in captivity (see *Figure 2*).

**Figure 2 – Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States**

*(Executive Order No. 10631, 1955)*

<b>Article I:</b> I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.
<b>Article II:</b> I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender my men while they still have the means to resist.
<b>Article III:</b> If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.
<b>Article IV:</b> If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.
<b>Article V:</b> When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.
<b>Article VI:</b> I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

It is the context in which the Code of Conduct emerged, rather than its formal status as an Executive Order from the Commander in Chief, that resulted in its rapid inclusion into the military honor code. In the months leading up to the Armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953, the U.S. began repatriating nearly 4,000 individuals who had been held as POWs. During this process, it was discovered that the techniques used to exploit POWs was a radical departure from what American prisoners experienced in previous wars. The Chinese and North Koreans utilized executions, torture, and starvation in order to get POWs to collaborate with their captors, denounce America's war effort, and betray their fellow POWs. Most astounding was the fact that 21 U.S. servicemembers refused repatriation and elected instead to remain in China (Daland, 2011).

In order to avoid a repeat of these shameful events in future conflicts, the Department of Defense set about determining the best way to get servicemembers to uphold military values while in

captivity. The resulting Code of Conduct was subsumed into the military honor code because it expressed ideals designed to inspire conduct consistent with military service. The ideals contained in the articles of the Code of Conduct (e.g. “never surrender of my own free will”, “resist by all means available”) might strike outsiders as absurd or quixotic. However, POWs are not required to meet the highest degree of these honorable ideals at all times. Instead, the group metes out respect to the individual based on how well he adheres to the ideal in light of his circumstances. Given the horrific conditions that POWs endure, there is much room for supererogation. By having a collection of ideal honor norms towards which to strive, POWs had a way to avert shameful conduct and keep their honor, even in the bleak environment of captivity.

These ideal-striving elements of the honor code have a kind of characterological flavor. This is evident when we consider that the Code of Conduct starts and ends with a reminder to the servicemember that he is an American. These parts of the Code are not just wasted ink on an obvious reminder to U.S. soldiers; the “I am an American” bookends contained in the Code of Conduct gesture toward a decidedly characterological aspect of military honor. This portion of the honor code establishes that being an American means valuing a way of life that is distinctive and important. The servicemember is expected to not only value that way of life as an American should, but also to live up to the ideals contained in this portion of the military honor code that are required to defend that way of life. It is a simple, yet profound way of invoking the strongest kind of ideal towards which the members of this honor group must strive.

When I recount the experiences of prisoners in North Vietnam throughout this chapter, I do so through the account of Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale. Not only did Stockdale endure one of the longest periods of captivity in North Vietnam (seven and a half years), but he was the senior naval officer among all POWs. Along with the other senior service officers, Stockdale was responsible for organizing and leading the POW resistance against his North Vietnamese captors. He also served as

the embodiment of the POW honor code. When he learned that his captors planned to exploit him on television, Stockdale disfigured himself – first by cutting his scalp, then by beating his own face with a chair until it was swollen – so that he could not be put on public display for propaganda. When Stockdale feared that an impending torture session might cause him to reveal information about POW resistance efforts, he sliced his wrists with a large shard of glass so that he would die before compromising his honor; guards discovered Stockdale and he was subsequently revived. For these efforts, Stockdale was awarded the Medal of Honor (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2020).

### **3.2. The Value of Honor**

We now return to that blunt yet incisive question on which my defense of honor hinges: *What is so special about honor?* I argue that it is honor's unmatched ability to promote a group's values and ideals. This ability of honor, which constitutes its inimitable value, is revealed in three different ways. First, honor is a distinct form of motivation. Second, honor is uniquely adept at aiding in the projection of our values. Third, honor enables moral resilience.

The first subsection, which explores honor as a distinct form of motivation, captures the value of honor as it applies to individual members of an honor group. This is arguably the most intuitive way to conceptualize the significance of honor. However, the value of honor does not ground solely in its ability to motivate those under its purview. If that were the case, then honor would be indistinguishable from any other body of laws or rules designed to elicit certain behaviors among a group of people. However, as the subsections on projection of values and resilience illustrate, honor also provides value at the institutional level – that is, honor provides value for the society in which the honor group is situated. It is the aggregate of these contributions at the individual and institutional levels that give honor its special value.

I consider distinct motivation, projection of values, and enabling moral resilience to all be instrumental features of honor. Naturally, there is a lingering concern as to whether these features are actually valuable independent of the content of honor. Some might doubt that a defense of honor can be coherent if the honor group in question has detestable values. But I do not consider this to be an insurmountable obstacle to my successful defense of honor. Much like a defense of friendship can survive the reality that people keep friends with debaucherous or vile individuals, my defense of honor can withstand the usage of honor in groups with contemptible values. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will revisit this issue and argue against the value of honor as a function of its content. For now, I stipulate that these three features of honor are content-neutral.

### **3.2.1. Honor as Distinct Motivation**

The first way that honor demonstrates its value is as a distinct form of motivation. Honor can motivate adherence to values enshrined in its code under circumstances that exhaust other normative and moral notions. The honor group of the military has numerous devices, including regulations, orders, traditions, and loyalty, that can elicit desirable behavior from servicemembers. Being a POW in North Vietnam, however, was a situation that quickly exhausted these devices. Striving to uphold Army regulations, carrying on naval traditions, or being a loyal servant to the nation are practically alien contrivances to those who are regularly isolated, starved, and tortured during years of captivity. As Stockdale explains, even the experiences of former POWs and basic presumptions about international humanitarian law were innocuous prophylaxes against the hardships one would face in a North Vietnamese prison camp.

[S]even and a half [years] in prison – *not* “languishing,” *not* “sitting out the war,” as used to be said when American POW’s had Geneva Convention protection, but fighting a torture battle, four of those years from a solitary cell in a penitentiary (Stockdale, 1995, 90).

Enduring captivity in Vietnam was an unprecedented experience for U.S. servicemembers. In such a physically and psychologically crippling environment, tools that typically ensured a servicemember's laudable conduct were ultimately useless. Honor, however, retained its ability to motivate POWs to conduct themselves in accordance with their code, rather than giving in to self-preservation. As it turns out, the plight of POWs in North Vietnam was the latest episode in the vast chronicles of military history in which honor shone as an inextinguishable source of motivation. It is a well-known phenomenon among military members (perhaps equally well-known to those who devour military history or watch lots of war movies) that when a soldier is beset by chaos, carnage, and fear, the prospect of how his actions will be seen by those alongside whom he fights gives the soldier an enduring motivation to act rightly. As I explained in Chapter 1, members of an honor group share a collective identity. Group members respect one another in virtue of their membership, a constitutive element of which is adherence to a shared honor code. Thus, it is honor – or perhaps more accurately, the threat of dishonor – that motivates the soldier to conduct himself as the code directs. S.L.A. Marshall, the U.S. Army's chief combat historian during World War II, develops this idea in his influential book *Men Against Fire*. Marshall readily acknowledges that professional soldiers, disciplined though they may be, are not immune from the normal human impulse of recoiling from danger. However, the soldier's fear of personal harm is countered by his fear that not meeting the demands of honor will lose him the respect of his comrades.

[M]en commonly are loath that their fear will be expressed in specific acts which their comrades will recognize as cowardice. The majority are unwilling to take extraordinary risks and do not aspire to a hero's role, but they are equally unwilling that they should be considered the least worthy among those present...[P]ersonal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men (Marshall, 1947, 149).

To many, this is a perplexing conflation of necessity and contingency. But recall the example from the previous chapter in which honor drives a soldier to race across the battlefield under enemy fire in

order to rescue his wounded comrade. The soldier could obviously choose not to go after his comrade, electing instead to remain hunkered down and safe from harm. However, the psychology of honor is such that the honorable soldier would not even consider that to be an option. Just as Ajax must go and Oedipus must rule, the soldier must rescue his wounded comrade. Once he is imbued with the mindset of necessity, even the threat of death may not be enough to get the honorable soldier to relent. As the character of Hector proclaims in William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*,

Life every man holds dear, but the dear man  
Holds honour far more precious-dear than life (Shakespeare, 2003, 5.3, 26-27).

It is in this spirit that countless military units, from the French *Régiment de Bretagne* formed during the Thirty Years' War to the U.S. Army's 174<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion in World War II, proudly bore the motto 'Death Before Dishonor.' It is this same mindset of necessity that enabled POWs to stick to their honor code, despite the steep personal cost they paid for doing so. The most resolute display of this commitment to honor came from Stockdale himself, who attempted suicide to avoid transgressing the demands of his honor code. Stockdale acknowledges that most outsiders cannot comprehend why POWs in North Vietnam kept their code and continued to resist in the bleakest of circumstances. But for Stockdale, the alternative was equally unfathomable.

I have a reputation to uphold with them. I can't let them down. They are my country. They are my family. I'm not a kid stranded in the bus station trying to minimize the pain while I wait for my mother country to come and pick me up (Stockdale, 1995, 11).

Relenting to his captors would be falling short of the standards that the members of his honor group demanded of one another. The result would be a loss of respect in the eyes of the group – an unthinkable end for the honorable individual. Recall that the person who values honor willingly submits to the judgements of the group because he desires to live his life according to what the group values; he wants to be *worthy* of the group's respect. The only way to earn that respect is to uphold

the group's shared honor code. Honor's motivational mechanism can be conceived of as a recurring challenge issued to the individual by the group: 'If you want to call yourself one of us and value what we value, then you must follow the code – otherwise, you are not worthy of our respect.' This unique motivational ability of honor helps the group member maintain his pursuit of a well-lived life, the prize for which is the respect of the group. As Appiah writes, "Respect will be one of the rewards of a life worth living and it will strengthen the self-respect of those who live well" (Appiah, 2010, 179).

I am sure that some might agree with my arguments in principle, yet doubt that honor could actually be an effective motivating strategy in the face of real-world hardships. In the case of POWs, however, it turns out that honor was actually a remarkably successful form of motivation. Stockdale writes that less than five percent of the POWs in North Vietnam turned their backs on honor while in captivity. These were men that did not have faith in their comrades, refused to join the POW resistance network, scoffed at the Code of Conduct, and could be counted on to aid in their captors' propaganda efforts against America (Stockdale, 1995, 197). But the remaining ninety-five percent of POWs did live by their honor code during the duration of their captivity. These men returned home with their spirit and honor intact (218). Around eighty percent of them resumed their military careers upon returning to the United States (National Museum of the United States Air Force, 2025). These compelling figures support my position that honor is indeed a distinct and powerful form of motivation.

We can realize additional value in honor's ability to motivate when we consider that the intertwining of respect, reputation, and honor code acts as a self-enforcing set of behavioral guardrails to those in an honor group. A chief concern of anyone who has responsibility over a group of people (e.g. coaches, managers, teachers) is how to get those under her charge to behave in a certain way. Yelling, motivational speeches, threats, and the signing of pledges not only have limited effectiveness, but they require constant and deliberate reinforcement. Honor, however, creates a collective identity

among members of an honor group that breeds a strong sense of collective responsibility. In his book *Why Honor Matters*, philosopher Tamler Sommers explains:

The more we value esteem from others, the more incentive we have to earn that esteem. When we don't care what people think about us, the incentives for costly cooperative behavior diminish accordingly. And thanks to the principle of collective responsibility in honor cultures, the concern for reputation extends to the group. If you act shamefully, you don't just sully your reputation; you sully the reputation of the group (Sommers, 2018, 84-85).

It is the members of an honor group who hold each other accountable, ensuring that even during the tough times, their honorable conduct reflects positively on the group. Furthermore, the honor group can organically promote adherence to the standards contained in its honor code by highlighting the reputation of those who are the ideal embodiment of that code. An honor group like the military does not require all members to be honor personified. Still, those like Stockdale, whose conduct did reflect the epitome of honor, receive the group's highest possible esteem and are burnished as the ideal of military service. This honorable ideal not only motivates existing members of an honor group to strive towards this distinctive praise of the judges to whom they willingly submit, but it also attracts prospective members who respond to the challenge of living their lives according to such an ideal.

Lastly, the group's promotion of an honorable ideal also motivates the group to ensure that the norms espoused in their code are indeed praiseworthy. If an honor group is not sensitive to this reverse-motivational effect brought on by the group's operationalization of honor, then the group will find it difficult to recruit and retain members. For example, the number of police recruits in both the United States (Charalambous, 2023) and the United Kingdom (Jackson, 2023) has declined significantly in recent years due to a negative reputation of police officers as those who harbor racial biases and utilize excessive force. If an honor group is going to promote the reputation of certain members, then it behooves the group to ensure that their standards are worthy of asking people to uphold.

### **3.2.2. Honor as Projection of Values**

Another way that honor establishes its special worth is through its capacity to aid in the projection of our values. This feature of honor provides an advantage at the institutional level – that is, it benefits the society in which the honor group dwells. This subsection explores the two different ways that we can recognize the benefits of this special capacity of honor.

#### **3.2.2.1. Exerting Indirect Control**

First, honor is uniquely adept at projecting social values into critical institutions where external control is needed, yet difficult. In our society, we recognize the need for institutions that provide critical services to our citizens. We also desire that the institutions providing these services do so in a manner that reflects our values. The military is a straightforward example of this kind of critical institution. Society authorizes the military to employ deadly force in the defense of our nation and its allies while also dictating the extent to which the military can exercise this awesome power. However, given the special domain expertise of servicemembers, imposing meaningful external control on the military is difficult. Navy fighter pilots, for example, are required to complete two years of flight school, another year of specialized tactical jet training, and a grueling aircraft carrier qualification syllabus before joining their first operational fleet squadron. It takes another three years in that first squadron to build up a pilot's proficiency in advanced weapons and tactics. Special forces soldiers, submariners, nuclear weapons specialists, and dozens of other military occupations have similarly lengthy and arduous training syllabi. Furthermore, all of these military echelons must be able to reliably execute their specialized skills in the chaos of battle. The average citizen cannot hope to gain the expertise required to competently supervise one of these warfighter subgroups, let alone the entire

military. This epistemic chasm makes it difficult for society to ensure a judicious use of military force that accords with our values.

The bigger concern, however, is that this epistemic chasm deters us from exerting reasonable control over our institutions. If we elect to abstain from this responsibility, we become unable to detect when an institution achieves a dangerous kind of autonomy or loses touch with the society to whom it should be beholden. A real-world example of this harmful dynamic can be found when we examine the history of the activities of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In the early years of post-World War II American society, citizens were largely unwilling to scrutinize the activities of the FBI, an organization imbued with special powers to conduct investigations for the U.S. Department of Justice for the purpose of safeguarding the lives of Americans. By the 1950s, the FBI had developed into a cadre of professional and scientifically-driven crime fighters who succeeded in combatting Nazism, Communism, criminal gangs, and subversive foreign agents. However, after the death of longtime director J. Edgar Hoover in 1972, the public gradually became aware that the FBI had used its special powers to threaten and manipulate citizens rather than protect them. Over the previous decades, the FBI was involved in countless incidents of illegally surveilling American citizens, blackmailing politicians, harassing civil rights and antiwar activists, and refusing to investigate organized crime (Cran, 1992; FBI, 2024). Americans were understandably shocked and outraged at the conduct of this institution designed to serve the public good.

In addition to the direct harms inflicted upon citizens, these cases of wayward critical institutions are especially caustic to a democracy – a form of government in which the power of the state is supposed to derive from its people. If the public eschews constraining its institutions that wield special powers, it risks creating the conditions that tempt abuse of those powers. This is tantamount to a willful undermining of our own democratic foundations. So, while crossing the epistemic chasm seems difficult, turning away from it seems dangerous.

A fitting way to conceptualize this predicament is the *principal-agent problem*. A well-known phenomenon in the business world, this problem arises from a conflict of interest between one party (the agent) who is empowered to act on behalf of a second party (the principal). The principal-agent problem is common in publicly owned corporations, where the principal is the collection of shareholders and the agent is the company's chief executive officer (CEO). Shareholders, who have a monetary stake in a company through their purchase of stock, desire that their corporate investment yield profits. Because stockholders are generally unable or unwilling to manage the demands of running a corporation, they appoint a CEO to run the company on their behalf. Tensions arise when the CEO directs the company in a way that does not best satisfy the shareholders' bottom line. For example, suppose a newly appointed CEO is passionate about the environment, so she alters the direction of the company in order to advance her ideological commitment. The CEO's new business plan is environmentally friendly, but it causes shareholder returns to dip sharply. By acting against the interests of the now angry shareholders, the agent has lost the confidence of the principal, thereby jeopardizing her tenure as CEO. Trust between principal and agent erodes, ultimately undermining the interests of both parties and threatening the stability of the company. To mitigate these tensions, both parties may enter into an agency agreement authorizing the agent to act on behalf of the principal, while also requiring that the agent be subject to the principal's right of control. The shareholders can now rest assured that the CEO will act in their best interests. If not, they can hold their wayward agent liable per the terms of the contract.

The principal-agent problem is a useful perspective from which to ponder how society might constrain its critical institutions. In the case of the military, society might contemplate the option of imposing negative reinforcement in the style of a corporate contract. However, the standard of fault in contracts is strict liability (American Law Institute, 1981, 309), which dictates that an agent is liable to the principal for all actions that constitute a breach of contract, regardless of circumstance or intent.

Although modern warriors necessarily adhere to rules and regulations, war is characteristic of novel, complex, and rapidly-changing circumstances that are not conducive to the standards of an elaborate legal charter. Hence, it is unreasonable to ask people to join the military and then require them to be strictly liable to society for any unintended consequences that may result from their actions.

Instead, we should keep in mind that a built-in feature of membership in an institution that serves the public good is the agent's assent to principal control. Soldiers not only accept that the foundation of their military service is adherence to socially-imposed constraints, but they are attracted to the military lifestyle for precisely this reason. The ranks of a modern all-volunteer force are continually replenished with those who respond to this structural feature of service to society, as are firefighters, nurses, judges, or members of any other institution that serves the public good. Hence, it is incongruous to direct the actions of those who naturally gravitate towards principled service to society with overwhelming negative reinforcement. On the other hand, it is completely reasonable to present military members with a set of values that we want them to project, encourage them to uphold those values, and assure them that they will not be held accountable if their best-faith attempt to do so goes awry. By cultivating certain values and reinforcing the reputation of the military as an institution that champions those values, we harness a desirable selection effect of attracting those who would be a good match for the military and repelling those who would not.

Given these advantages of value-based constraint, I argue that honor offers us a better way to deal with these principal-agent disconnects. Rather than trying to constrain critical social institutions with highly disjunctive *ceteris paribus* clauses or accountability to legal minutiae, we can instead look to influence those things that count as creditworthy among group members. By affecting the honor code of an institution, we promote respect among its members for doing those things that accord with our values, while undermining those things that do not. Society should therefore encourage the

institutional use of honor because it provides us with an effective and sustainable method of exercising indirect control over our critical institutions that lie across the epistemic chasm.

Employing honor as the mechanism of this value-based constraint is an advantageous strategy for a few reasons. First, it is a simple fact that when a critical institution operationalizes honor, society necessarily has a role in shaping the honor code of that institution. With regards to the military, it might seem *prima facie* odd that civilians should influence the honor code of soldiers. Yet, it is a general truth that certain elements of any group's honor code are naturally absorbed from the standards and norms of the society in which that group is located. Analogous to a young child who adopts the mannerisms of her parents, this kind of 'honor by osmosis' is a process organic to all honor groups. More importantly, society has a legitimate claim to decreeing the conduct of those institutions that it charters to provide critical services to the public. Because service to society is the overriding reason for the military's existence, society necessarily has a role in shaping the terms of that service. An added benefit to be realized from this relationship, as explained in the preceding paragraphs, is that military members readily embrace this aspect of principal control.

A second advantage of using honor to ameliorate principal-agent friction is that this approach leverages the inherent self-enforcing nature of honor among group members. With honor, there is no need for clunky external controls that require constant updating and oversight. The benefit to the principal is analogous to that of a basketball coach whose players have internalized desirable norms like sprinting back down the court after scoring and boxing out an opponent while rebounding, as opposed to the coach who must constantly yell at his players to elicit these behaviors. The former is hands-off and sustainable, whereas the latter is draining to both parties and susceptible to degraded effectiveness over time. Again, I acknowledge that an institution like the military cannot operate completely free of external motivation. Rules that prohibit torturing prisoners or intentionally killing civilians are good standards that should be made explicit to soldiers. Still, no set of rules can hope to

perfectly guide those who operate in the dynamic and chaotic domain of armed conflict. In a somewhat humorous codification of this point, the 1,254 page *Department of Defense (DoD) Law of War Manual*, which informs warfighters of their legal responsibilities while executing military operations, states in its opening section “This manual is not a definitive explanation of all law of war issues” (DoD, 2023, 1).

A stronger way to promote our value of not inflicting intentional harm upon those undeserving of such harm is to embed that value into the military’s honor code. The result is that soldiers internalize this value as necessary for being worthy of the groups’ respect. Consequently, they hold each other accountable to its adherence. Legal scholar Mark Osiel, writing on the challenges of motivating ethical conduct of soldiers on the battlefield, echoes this benefit of constraint via honor.

By taking seriously such internal conceptions of martial honor, we may be able to impose higher standards on soldiers than the law has traditionally done, in the knowledge that good soldiers already impose these standards upon themselves (Osiel, 2017, 32).

Furthermore, this feature of honor provides the principal public with undiminished constraint in situations where other factors overwhelm the normative force of the rules themselves. Osiel recounts the story of a young Marine in Vietnam bent on exacting revenge on civilians for the death of his comrades.

‘Marines don’t do that’ – so one officer told a recruit, discovered with his rifle at the head of a Vietnamese woman. This statement is surely a simpler, more effective way of communicating the law of war than threatening prosecution for war crimes, by the enemy, an international tribunal, or an American court-martial (23).

The officer’s pithy statement reminded this young man what honor demanded of him as a Marine. He subsequently snapped out of his barbarous state, lowered his rifle, and let the woman go. In these almost inconceivable situations where seemingly ironclad rules fail to guide, honor stands as a remarkably effective behavioral guardrail.

### 3.2.2.2. Death Before Dishonor?

A second way that we can appreciate honor's special ability to project our values is to consider how rescinding the demands of honor would alter that projection. The majority of those who live their lives outside of honor's influence may find it difficult to understand why its members adhere so vehemently to their code, especially when doing so results in disadvantage or harm. But I argue that jettisoning honor in these ostensibly self-destructive circumstances forfeits any advantage of using honor to project our values into an institution.

As I alluded to earlier in this chapter, one reason outsiders might be unable to wrap their heads around honor is that honor appears to represent a conflation of necessity and contingency. The psychology of honor is such that the honorable individual does not consider the demands of the code to be optional. To this person, the honor code is a collection of necessary behaviors. But to the comparative majority who exist outside honor's dominion, it remains a simple descriptive truth that members of an honor group can elect not to perform those actions that their code demands. Thus, many find it baffling that members of an honor group would willingly adhere to optional customs that would guarantee their own ruin. From this majority perspective, honor seems like an absurd form of idealism that blocks one's ability to engage in the sobering descriptive analysis needed to avert a harmful outcome.

One of the most famous cases that supports this position comes from Thucydides' "The Melian Dialogue" from his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In 416 BC, fifteen years into the conflict between Athens and Sparta, Athenian forces landed on the isle of Melos. As a small Lacedaemonian colony, the Melians were vastly outmatched by the Athenians. But before attacking Melos, the Athenians sent their ambassadors to plainly make their case to the Melian assembly.

We will merely declare that we are here for the benefit of our empire, and we will speak for the survival of your city: we would like to rule over you without trouble, and preserve you for our mutual advantage...[I]f you submit, you will save yourselves from a very cruel fate (Thucydides, 2021, 5.91-93).

If the Melians submitted to Athenian rule, the Athenians would preserve Melos and spare the lives of its citizens. The ambassadors further explain that permitting Melos' independence is not an option, as it would signal the Athenians' weakness to their collection of conquered territories. The Melians, however, are unmoved by the stark terms that the Athenians offer.

But we know that in war the odds sometimes are more even than the difference in numbers between the two sides, and that if we yield, all our hope is lost immediately; but if we hold out, we can still hope to stand tall (5.102).

In other words, the Melians' honor does not permit them to yield to the Athenians. The idea of 'standing tall' indicates that surrender without resistance is a course of action that Melians find dishonorable. Furthermore, the Melians are confident that their meager forces will be bolstered by an alliance with the Lacedaemonians, which constitutes a shared code of honor between them.

And as for power, what we lack will be supplied by the alliance we will make with the Lacedaemonians, who must defend us as a matter of honor, if only because we are related to them. So our confidence is not as totally unreasonable as you may think (5.104).

The Athenians are dumbfounded at the response of the Melians, who seem more interested in clinging to the self-destructive demands of their honor code than acknowledging the grave reality of their situation. After a brief back-and-forth, the Athenian ambassadors issue their closing remarks, which epitomize the realist position against holding fast to honor.

Your strongest points are mere hopes for the future, and your actual resources are too small for your survival in view of the forces arrayed against you. Your planning will be utterly irrational, unless (after letting us withdraw from the meeting) you decide on a more sensible policy. Do not be distracted by a sense of honor; this destroys people all too often, when dishonor and death stand before their eyes. Many have been so overcome by the power of this seductive word, "honor," that even when they foresee the dangers to

which it carries them, they are drawn by a mere word into an action that is an irreparable disaster (5.111).

In the end, the Melians did not accept Athenian rule and the two sides went to war. The Melians maintained a brief resistance, but their Lacedaemonian allies never came to their aid. When Athenian reinforcements arrived, Melos was overwhelmed and forced to surrender. The Athenians executed all military age males, enslaved the women and children, and resettled Melos with their own colonists (5.114-116).

Given that the Melians' decision to stand on honor resulted in the obliteration of their society, the tempting conclusion to draw from this dialogue is that honor is indeed a foolish and self-ruinous notion. However, I maintain that this hasty conclusion is incorrect. The lesson Thucydides is trying to impart is not that honor itself is foolish, but rather that the Melians' appeal to honor prevents them from engaging with the grave realities of their situation. The distinction here is between the intrinsic value of the category of honor versus how honest one should be about using this category as a substitute for strategy. The Melians look like fools because they disastrously misread their strategic situation and relied on honor for their deliverance. As the flabbergasted Athenians say to their stubborn interlocuters, "[I]n all this discussion you have never mentioned a single thing that people could rely on and expect to survive" (5.111).

On the one hand, Thucydides' lesson that 'honor is not a strategy' supports my framework of an honor code that allows for the wise and judicious application of ideals. The Melians refusal to acquiesce to the Athenians is tantamount to an unwavering embrace of 'death before dishonor' – a maxim that should not be categorically applied in all situations. If the hordes are at the gates with the express intent of annihilating everyone and burning the city to the ground, then fighting to the death and resisting to the last man seem appropriate. The Athenians, however, are not bloodthirsty conquerors. The purpose of their arrival is not wanton genocide, but rather to convince Melos to take

their side in a strategic conflict. As the numerically superior aggressor, the Athenians make the situation clear to the Melian assembly: ‘We are not persuaded by your honor. We are asking you to do something that we know you do not want to do. But if you do not comply, things will be way worse for you.’ This would have been an excellent time for the Melian leaders to think carefully about what might be the wisest course of action for their citizens whose lives hang in the balance. If they had given in to the Athenians, the Melians would have undoubtedly incurred some amount of shame by allowing themselves to be bossed around by a major power. Even so, I disagree that the Melian assembly’s capitulation in order to prevent the massacre and enslavement of its citizenry would have been an unrecoverable act of dishonor. The Melians are foolish because they take an absolutist approach to their honor when there is room for a more measured interpretation of their ideals, given the gravity of their situation.

On the other hand, Thucydides’ position appears to undercut my defense of honor. Accepting Thucydides’ lesson that the Melians were wrong to rely on honor in light of their strategic situation problematically suggests that we reach a similar finding in the case of POWs. This position does not reject honor out of hand, but rather suggests that the demands of honor be suspended if adherence to them would usher in a grim state of affairs. The two cases do share some similarities. The North Vietnamese (playing the part of the Athenians) made it clear that the harsh treatment of POWs would abate if POWs complied with their captors’ demands. Even so, POWs clung to honor and resisted their captors, resulting in their continued starvation, isolation, and torture with no end in sight. Drawing from the cautionary tale of the Melians, one might argue that the POWs’ reliance on honor similarly prevented them from engaging with the reality of their situation. Thus, if we align with Thucydides’ views on honor in “The Melian Dialogue,” it seems as though we must find fault with Stockdale and his fellow POWs’ for relying on honor.

I argue that this conclusion should be fiercely resisted. Even if we grant Thucydides' position on honor, it is not obvious that it can be exported in so straightforward a manner that would allow us to declare Stockdale foolish for not giving in to his captors. It is incorrect to state that the lesson here is to always abandon honor if its demands come at too high a cost. Thucydides' views on honor are more complex; they do not neatly transfer to the kinds of cases that I examine in this dissertation. In the dialogue, the Melian speakers who invoke honor and refuse to entertain the Athenian perspective are the members of the Melian Council, i.e. the civilian leaders of Melos. Although an analysis of the collective honor of an entire nation is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is clear that Thucydides is criticizing those who would appeal to national honor as a strategy for diplomacy. Leaders entrusted to uphold the honor of a nation may feel that anything less than the ultimate adherence to its ideals is a normative stab in the heart of its national consciousness. Thucydides, however, finds that this refusal to detach and gain a descriptive handle on one's circumstances is irrational. From his realist perspective, political leaders should think strategically about the choices they make instead of allowing things like honor to blind them to that which is in their best interest. Thucydides entreats us to see that 'death before dishonor' is a terrible strategy for the civilian leaders of Melos to employ because it needlessly condemns all Melian citizens to a terrible fate.

Such questionable appeals to national honor at the hands of those who make foreign policy decisions raises a different set of concerns than does a system of honor in which individuals might suffer for adhering to the norms contained in their group's shared honor code. So, although Melians and POWs alike faced steep consequences for standing on honor, the application of honor in these two cases is sharply distinct. In places like Hóá Lò (the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton'), extreme physical pain was the unavoidable price that a POW paid to keep his honor. As one of the leaders of the POW resistance, Stockdale covertly issued orders to his fellow prisoners to help them stick to the honor code, such as "Accept no amnesty, no early release, we all go home with the last man" (Stockdale,

1995, 49) and “Make them hurt you. Force them to inflict significant pain before you budge” (140). Understandably, outsiders who can scarcely imagine life in a North Vietnamese POW camp might judge this honorable mindset to be irrational. But unlike the Melian Council, POWs did not take an absolutist approach to honor that blinded them to the realities of their situation. Prisoners strived towards the ideals contained in the honor code, while acknowledging the reality that their challenging circumstances meant that reaching the perfection of these ideals was not always possible. Some, like Stockdale, did act in such a way that epitomized the ideals contained in the Code of Conduct. Nevertheless, honor did not demand that a POW must kill himself to avoid giving information to his captors. Accordingly, best-faith efforts that may have fallen short of the perfection of ideals contained in the code were not unrecoverable transgressions of honor, given the circumstances that these POWs endured while in captivity. Contrary to the Melian Council’s strategy of stubbornly clinging to the maxim of ‘death before dishonor’ regardless of outcome, the POWs’ approach to honor enabled them to weather unimaginable hardships in a way that preserved their respect in the eyes of the group.

Accordingly, we can accept Thucydides’ view of honor without denigrating the conduct of POWs who suffered for sticking to their honor. Given that my account of honor does not run afoul of Thucydides’ powerful realism, I argue that it would be unwise for honor groups to permit their members to shelve honor when its demands seem too extreme. For one, this would erode the advantage that honor’s ability to project our values provides. Imagine that POWs in North Vietnam rejected the demands that honor placed upon them in order to avoid physical abuse at the hands of their captors. In this alternative scenario, it is plausible to say that POWs who shunned resistance, collaborated with the enemy, or made statements disloyal to their country would have been treated much better. Yet, I have a hard time accepting that this would have been a better outcome for either the military or the society that it serves. We certainly do not wish that members of the military should endure horrible circumstances like being a POW, but neither should we want a military in which the

demands of honor can be overruled for the sake of self-preservation. Not only does this strike me as antithetical to the demands of military service, but it also diminishes honor's effectiveness as a form of indirect external control. The principal's projection of social values into an honor code is advantageous because it taps into honor's powerful ability to govern the interactions among group members. However, if honor codes are conditional, then the individual's adherence to those codes is no longer a necessary condition for earning the respect of the group. This means that when the going gets tough, group members can repudiate the demands of honor without suffering the group's condemnation. Additionally, the vagueness surrounding the allowable circumstances under which honor can be forsaken would likely lead to members selectively invoking honor only when it suits their own interests. Ultimately, honor becomes a wholly incoherent notion that fails to regulate the conduct of its members. As such, any advantage of honor as a mechanism to project social values into the institution is forfeit.

Furthermore, if we are projecting values in our critical institutions through honor, we hurt the stability of that institution if we permit its members to ignore honor when its demands are steep. Members of an honor group desire to live their lives according to the standards of the honor code and willingly submit themselves to the judgement of others who make that same commitment. Shirking the demands of that code, even in the harshest of circumstances, is a betrayal of the manner in which the honorable individual claims to live his life. Not only will the individual who fails to carry out the demands of his honor code plunge into disrepute, but the collective responsibility of the group's adherence to a shared honor code makes it the case that his failure also tarnishes the group's honor. For the honorable individual who privileges the opinion of his fellow group members over all others, this would be a devastating outcome. As Stockdale proclaimed, "shame is heavy, a heavier burden than any physical wounds" (180). To encourage the abnegation of honor, even with the best

intentions of keeping those under its influence from harm, serves to alienate the transgressors and erode the bonds between group members.

Lastly, undercutting the standards of honor in favor of self-preservation makes it all but impossible to produce a personification of the ideal of honor – that is, an exemplar whose conduct represents the ultimate adherence to the honor code. Recognizing a person or persons who represents this ideal is advantageous for a few reasons. In a very straightforward sense, burnishing the reputation of an individual who epitomizes the principal's values enshrined in the honor code allows the principal to reinforce desirable behavior among its agents. Our nation enthusiastically promotes James Stockdale as the ideal of military service, as captured in his Medal of Honor citation from 1976:

By his heroic action, at great peril to himself, he earned the everlasting gratitude of his fellow prisoners and of his country. Rear Adm. Stockdale's valiant leadership and extraordinary courage in a hostile environment sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2020).

To this day, the Navy lauds Stockdale as the paragon of military honor. The Leadership Research Center at the U.S. Naval War College, the Center for Ethical Leadership at the U.S. Naval Academy, and the Navy's annual peer leadership award all bear Stockdale's namesake. In 2008, the Navy named its newest 109-foot Arleigh Burke-class destroyer *USS STOCKDALE*. This continual reinforcement of Stockdale's legacy promotes an ideal version of military service that we want servicemembers to esteem and emulate. Capturing an ideal of honor also has an inspirational quality for future generations. Posters, commercials, money for college, and the promise of adventure are all military recruiting tools that have limited effectiveness; moreover, they do little to ensure that prospective recruits align with the values of an institution that exists to serve the public. An ideal of honor, however, attracts those who aspire to live their lives by those same values. Thus, honor that operates in groups like the military should not acquiesce to realism, lest we relinquish the powerful advantage of an ideal of honor to which existing and prospective honor group members respond.

To recap, honor's ability to aid in the projection of our values presents as a significant advantage on an institutional level. Honor is a remarkably effective tool that society can use to exert indirect control over its critical institutions, despite an asymmetry in both access and knowledge. In leveraging the essential features of honor, the principal (society) can ensure that its agents (critical social institutions) reflect social values, even in unforeseen or extreme circumstances. We can further appreciate the benefit of honor's ability to project values when we recognize that assenting to realist interpretations of honor would diminish the institutional advantage that honor provides.

### **3.2.3. Honor as Moral Resilience**

The third way in which honor promotes the values and ideals of a group is through honor's ability to enable moral resilience. Whether it is flunking a math test, not being able to pay your rent at the end of the month, missing a game-winning free throw, or getting dumped by a significant other, setbacks and struggles are unavoidable aspects of the human experience. Still, we should not want failure to be so psychologically crippling that it alienates us from our pursuits. Quite the opposite; we should desire to get back up on the proverbial horse, stronger for having overcome failure. Thus, it is desirable that human beings develop *resilience*. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as

the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands (APA, 2018).

In nearly every human endeavor, the pursuit of success does not require perfection. Sports is one domain in which we can appreciate the overcoming of unavoidable failure on the road to success. Babe Ruth is still today considered one of the greatest Major League Baseball players of all time. Ruth's record of 714 career homeruns, which stood unbroken for 39 years, has only been surpassed

by two players in the 100 years since it was set. Babe Ruth also held another baseball record: most career strikeouts by a batter. In fact, his total of 1,330 career strikeouts outnumbered the player with the second highest strikeout total by 531 (Major League Baseball, 2025). This tale of Babe Ruth's two seemingly juxtaposed records is meant to illustrate an obvious point: successful individuals can experience failure, learn from that failure, and continue undaunted in their pursuits. Successful individuals are, in a word, resilient.

Resilience can also apply to groups. A group comprised of resilient individuals can sustain high performance in spite of challenging circumstances or the shortcomings of individual members. In other words, the collective resilience of group members contributes to the resilience of the group itself. In their book *Managing the Unexpected: Sustained Performance in a Complex World*, psychologist Karl Weick and organizational theorist Kathleen Sutcliffe explore the traits of high reliability organizations (HROs) that maintain their structure and function in the face of unexpected change, constant stresses, or trauma. One common trait of HROs, according to the authors, is a commitment to resilience.

No system is perfect. HROs know this as well as anyone. This is why they complement their anticipatory activities of learning from failures, complicating their perceptions, and remaining sensitive to operations with a commitment to resilience...HROs develop capabilities to detect, contain, and bounce back from those inevitable errors that are part of an indeterminate world. The hallmark of an HRO is not that it is error-free but that errors don't disable it (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015, 12).

The notion of resilience also pertains to the moral domain. Professor of clinical ethics Cynda Rushton defines moral resilience as “the capacity of an individual to sustain or restore their integrity in response to moral complexity, confusion, distress, or setbacks” (Rushton, 2016, 112). Moral resilience helps us to act according to our values during the tough times. If we deviate from those values, moral resilience helps reorient us and return us to our ‘moral center.’ Moral resilience also applies to any group in which membership requires adherence to certain values. By combining Rushton's definition with Weick and Sutcliffe's take on HROs, we can consider the moral resilience of a group to be the capacity

of the group to sustain or restore its members' adherence to group values in response to those members' moral challenges or moral failures.

Honor is naturally suited to developing moral resilience in group members and in the group itself. This enabling of moral resilience is the third way that honor demonstrates its unmatched ability to promote a group's values and ideals. Pinpointing this institutional advantage of honor, however, requires some temporal demarcation. Honor's contribution to the forward-looking 'sustain' phase of moral resilience is the continuous conditioning of its adherents to act rightly, i.e. act in accordance with their honor code. In other words, honor ensures that members of the group abide by the group's values, even when they are faced with morally complex, chaotic, or extreme circumstances. These benefits of honor in this prospective temporal domain of moral resilience are indistinguishable from the previously discussed advantages of honor's distinct motivation and projection of values.

However, honor does offer distinct contributions to the backward-looking 'reform' phase of moral resilience. Although members of an honor group strive to live their lives by the elevated standards of their group's honor code, they are still human beings who are susceptible to emotions, self-preservation, and lapses in judgement. This is no devastating blow to honor; any group will inevitably experience failure and setbacks in virtue of the fact that its ranks are comprised of imperfect human beings. Given this reality, all groups have to be somewhat accommodating of their members' failures. Just as it is unreasonable for a baseball team to fire any player who strikes out, so too is it unreasonable for an honor group to eject any member who is not the perfect embodiment of the group's honor code. A resilient organization, irrespective of domain, is one that can endure the failures of its members and recover with minimal degradation in organizational performance. Weick and Sutcliffe suggest that a resilient organization can be conceived of as an object that is flexible rather than rigid.

[R]esilience requires two things. First, there has to be something that stretches without breaking. This is the property of elasticity. Second, whatever has been stretched then recovers some shape and does so slowly or quickly (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015, 97-98).

In the moral domain, this ‘flexing without breaking’ aspect of resilience allows those members who have fallen short of the group’s values to reform and reintegrate into the group without derailing the group’s performance. Honor naturally facilitates this desirable restorative aspect of moral resilience. The downgrading of the group’s opinion of an individual after he falls short of the group’s standards is not so much a punishment as it is a forceful reorientation of the demands of group membership. This relegation of respect is a clear message from the group to the individual: ‘This is what we value; you fell short of that. If you want to continue to call yourself one of us, then you must take responsibility for your action and regain our respect by recommitting yourself to our shared code.’ Moreover, the honorable individual *expects* to be held to the standards of the group’s shared honor code in this manner; he willingly submits to the judgement of the group and wishes to live his life according to the group’s values. So long as he still cares for his honor, he will earnestly seek to repair his reputation among the group. Hence, the individual’s deviation from the group’s shared code does not undercut the standards of the group; meanwhile, the group continues to operate while this restorative process occurs.

It is important to note that honor’s facilitation of moral resilience in the retrospective is not a form of amnesty that automatically forgives all manner of transgressions. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, different elements of an honor code can take different deontic forms. Some honor standards are absolute prohibitions, whereas others have a more ideal-striving quality about them. Violations of the former – for example, a military member’s intentional infliction of harm upon an innocent civilian noncombatant – are unrecoverable. On the other hand, when it comes to elements of the honor code that are interpreted as ideals, there is room for discussion about what might be acceptable or

remediable, given the totality of one's circumstances. Article V of the Code of Conduct, for example, states that "I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability" (Executive Order No. 10631, 1955). Stockdale's attempting of suicide rather than giving in to the enemy is considered to be the ideal of this aspect of military honor. Again, this does not mean that honor demands that all POWs attempt suicide to avoid divulging information to the enemy under torture. Accordingly, a POW's conduct that falls short of this ideal does not necessarily constitute an irreparable breach of his honor. Stockdale himself acknowledged that nearly every POW eventually breaks under torture. He also insisted that this did not make a POW's honor unrecoverable.

When his comrades, racked by the ropes, had "spilled their guts" and returned to their cells weeping in shame, Stockdale would comfort them via the tap code on the wall: We've all done it. Just make them work for it. Don't give away anything for free (Stockdale, 1995, 172).

To a new POW who was reeling from being broken by his captors, hearing these words was the start of what Stockdale called "the mending process" (181) – in other words, helping that individual to regain their status as a full-fledged member of the honor group. Honor's facilitation of this retrospective aspect of moral resilience does not grant absolution to POWs who capitulate to their tormentors, but rather allows these POWs to recover their honor and resume their pursuit of the group's honorable ideal. Years after his imprisonment, Stockdale would explain this idea to his students at the U.S. Naval War College by quoting from *Nicomachean Ethics* (172). In Book III, Aristotle explains that there is space in between praise given to those who suffer pain for that which is noble and blame given to those who disgrace themselves for that which is unimportant.

In some cases, not praise but pardon is given, when a person does wrong because of the things that strain human nature to breaking-point and no one would endure (Aristotle, 2019, NE 1110a24-46).

In a situation where a member of an honor group is judged by how well he responds to an ideal given the totality of his circumstances, such as being a POW, the powerful self-enforcing nature of honor is restorative to he who falls short of the group's ideals. We can make sense of this distinctive value that honor provides when we contrast it with how non-honor groups deal with their members' failures. Examples of these everyday instances of organizational violations would include an investment banker who inflates the number of hours that he worked on his clients' accounts, or a university professor who fails to credit an obscure editorial in a small town newspaper that was the genesis for her arguments in a recently published journal article. In these organizational contexts, couching accountability in terms of a downgraded reputation for failing to uphold the values of the group would surely be met with scoffs and sideways glances. After all, the desire to be worthy of the group's respect – a respect that is mediated by one's adherence to the group's shared norms – is not an overriding concern among the employees of an investment firm or the faculty of a university. So, formal policies and long lists of rules become the prevailing mechanisms of accountability.

Unfortunately, an organizational reliance on the avoidance of wrongdoing as outlined in an employee handbook or as judged by a committee chaired by vice dean so-and-so tend to ring hollow. Any punishment that may be handed down to an individual offender amounts to little more than a bureaucratic nuisance that does little to dissuade future wrongdoing. Moreover, it is unclear how an official reprimand in one's personnel file or censure at the hands of a committee could rehabilitate a rule-breaker and get him to genuinely recommit to the group. The practice in honor groups of articulating ideals and permitting fallibility, yet holding people accountable when they fall short of those ideals, is unavailable in the contexts of business or academia. There is simply no language to coherently express this notion, as appeals to core values and peer respect hold little currency in these groups. Accordingly, acting rightly in these organizational settings seems more like a perfunctory

internal process that does not connect to anything deeper than a generic aversion to embarrassment or getting caught.

In highlighting this incongruity, I am not suggesting that honor is a required ingredient for success. Obviously, members of groups that do not utilize honor can still succeed in their respective domains. Members of the financial sector can make sound investments, grow their companies, and earn lots of money; university professors can win grants, publish influential papers, and become sought-after speakers. Furthermore, I am not implying that an absence of honor marks a group or its members as morally deficient. For some groups, the threat of internal reprimand for violating formal rules is sufficient to ensure proper behavior among their ranks. We would not find the members of landscaping crews, symphony orchestras, or book clubs to be morally wanting merely because their interactions are not regulated by honor. As I stated in the previous chapters, honor is not generic. I am simply illustrating that the distinct value that honor offers when it comes to recovering from failure is unavailable to groups that do not utilize honor. Resilience does not make sense in non-honor groups that employ a list of behavioral dos and don'ts because resilience requires rehabilitation. As a college student or movie theater employee, if you get caught breaking a rule, you get punished. After you serve your punishment, provided that you have not been kicked out of the group, you resume abiding by the group's rules. Because your conduct as a member of the group does not go any deeper than obeying a formal set of rules, there is nothing to rehabilitate; you either follow the rules, or you get punished. The system of accountability in honor groups, however, is restorative as opposed to punitive. The notion of rehabilitation, which is critical in developing the retrospective aspect of resilience, is naturally at home among those ideal-striving and characterological aspects of an honor code. Looking back on failure through the lens of honor, an individual can appreciate that he was perhaps not properly sensitive to the significance of a certain norm, or that his conduct did not

embody an ideal to the extent that the group requires. Exemplars of honor like Stockdale make this rehabilitation even more concrete, as they give the individual a model of behavior to emulate.

Finally, in addition to promoting the resilience of individual group members, honor also creates a distinct sense of organizational resilience. I have already argued in Section 3.2.2.1 that honor's unique features make it an optimal mechanism by which society can exercise indirect control over its critical institutions. Honor's ability to enable resilience at the group level offers an additional layer of institutional value that is especially advantageous when it comes to preserving the integrity of these critical institutions. At the end of his book *The Honor Code*, Appiah notes that the powerful influence of honor in the military suggests that there is room for other institutions to utilize honor to sustain their values. The reality, he laments, is that our society seems unwilling to entertain this possibility. An unfortunate consequence of this turning away from honor is that our institutions lose their way and end up causing harm to society.

Teachers, doctors, and bankers, for example, all do many things where it is very hard or expensive for outsiders to keep an eye on how conscientious they are being. We have every reason to hope that they will do more than can be required of them by their contracts of employment. And, as we saw in the crises in the American economy in the first decade of this millennium, the behavior of individual bankers seeking to make profits can, in the aggregate, impose large costs on all of us (Appiah, 2010, 194).

In such cases, the result we can expect is the 'shocked principal syndrome' that I alluded to earlier in this section – those moments of revelation that we as a society have when our public institutions, left to their own devices, engage in conduct that is antithetical to their charter. Unfortunately, and frustratingly, our ire at such outcomes is as impotent as it is preventable. As C. S. Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man* "We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst" (Lewis, 1947, 16).

Honor can combat this seemingly recurring social phenomenon by enabling the resilience of an organization, thereby acting as a prophylaxis against degrading standards or the group becoming unmoored from its purpose. Honor does so by acting as a repository of ideals and values against

which the group can assess the actions of its members and ensure that transgressions of the code are counted as failures. Suppose that a platoon of Army soldiers is tasked with stopping the activities of terrorist insurgents who are hiding among civilians in a small village. The soldiers could rapidly accomplish their mission using any number of ruthless tactics, such as kidnapping the village children in order to force their parents to identify the insurgents, or executing all adult males, thereby guaranteeing that the village is terrorist-free. An action of this kind is not just reprehensible; it also represents a proposal for a revision to the group's values. Conceptually, it is as if a soldier is saying to the group, 'This action violates some of our values, but we are guaranteed to accomplish our mission quickly and with no danger to our own forces.' But even if such a brazen violation of noncombatant immunity is successful in some instrumental sense of achieving military objectives, honor ensures that the group will never confer respect upon the individual who commits such an act. The norms and ideals contained in their honor code allows the group to accurately assess that such an action does not meet the standards of the group; it is not to be accepted nor excused, but rather accounted as a dishonor and a failure. The collective judgements of the honor group would subsequently downgrade the reputation of the perpetrators, marking their conduct as shameful and dissuading the group from pursuing similar behavior in the future.

Thus, honor as a repository of values and ideals contributes to the resilience of the group by providing an articulable means of adjudicating failure among its members. This ensures that the group does not lose its direction or succumb to an erosion of values. It is the unique contribution of honor to this retrospective aspect of moral resilience that constitutes another layer of honor's institutional value.

### **3.3. Honor and Morality**

At the beginning of this chapter, I promised an answer to the question ‘What is so special about honor?’ The answer, as explained in the preceding sections, is honor’s unmatched ability to promote a group’s values and ideals. Honor acts as a powerful form of motivation within an honor group, gives us a way to project our values into that group to exert indirect control, and builds the moral resilience of the group members and the group itself. These unique features of honor are especially valuable in the context of public institutions that provide critical services to our society. Honor can positively shape these institutions and their members, which in turn benefits our society that receives these institutions’ services. The role of honor in our military supports this claim. It is reasonable to think that similar benefits can be realized if honor is embraced by other institutions like medicine, law, or civil service.

Still, there might be a lingering concern as to whether the value of honor is truly separable from the moral content of a particular honor system. The value of honor in the modern U.S. military seems easy enough to grasp. However, when we start talking about honor in the context of the Syrian Ba’athist regime or the Sinaloa Cartel, we might wonder if these advantages of honor still apply. Although the nature of honor’s connection to morality is ultimately tangential to my main effort of defending honor in virtue of its special value, a brief discussion of this relationship helps to clarify concerns about honor’s defensibility. I maintain that even though honor may be utilized by groups with loathsome principles, the value of honor as constituted by the features explained in this chapter is still worth defending. The explanation of my position in this final section serves as a fitting recapitulation of my arguments in favor of honor.

If we are apprehensive about defending honor against a background of awful values, our first move should be to clearly identify the source of our apprehension. As I argued in Section 2.1, this requires respecting the distinction between category and content. One can be passionate about music,

yet despise the shrill wailing of bagpipes or songs by the band Supertramp. We can similarly defend honor, yet reject problematic instantiations of this category at the hands of dictators and criminals. Relatedly, it is not a defect of honor that its fundamental feature of sensitivity to the opinions of others may be exploited by these deplorable organizations. As we saw in the case of dueling, such manifestations are not paradigmatic expressions of honor, but rather pathological ones.

Second, as I argued in Section 2.3, honor is not morally fundamental. Even though honor can be utilized by groups that have noble and wicked agendas alike, it is not the burden of honor to explain what makes acts right or wrong. As I have unabashedly acknowledged throughout this inquiry, honor can indeed go awry. But defending honor, even when it does go awry, does not require upending our ordinary moral thinking. Honor clearly has a foot in the moral domain, but it is not a fundamental constituent of our moral universe. Accordingly, we should not make the mistake of welding that which is honorable to that which is moral. As Appiah notes, “Honor isn’t morality; but the psychology it mobilizes can unquestionably be put in the service of human achievement” (187). Placed within the inimical landscape of an oppressive dictatorship or a ruthless criminal enterprise, honor is sure to manifest in destructive ways. However, we should not infer from those instances that honor is merely instrumentally good or otherwise morally inconsequential. Instead, we should bear in mind that honor needs the right conditions in order to act in a positive moral capacity. Military service is an example of circumstances in which honor can be worthwhile. The content of the U.S. military’s honor code is grounded in service to others; the organization itself is dedicated to defending citizens in a manner that reflects those citizens’ values. This is the kind of environment in which honor can play an important ethical role.

Lastly, as I have repeatedly demonstrated throughout this inquiry, honor’s misdeeds are routinely subjected to harsh scrutiny and offered up as justification for its rejection. However, honor need not be an unqualified good in order to be worthy of defending. Many of the things that we take

to be good in our world cannot be described as such independent of their applications and contexts. Creativity, for example, is a virtue that we would generally deem to be good. However, if a person uses their exceptional creativity to design a new chemical weapon with unparalleled lethality, we would likely not proclaim that creativity in this instance is still a good thing. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to reclassify creativity as a vicious notion. I contend that we would still encourage young children to develop their creativity, just as we would remain in awe of creative individuals like Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin, and Salvador Dali. We do not have to choose between these two ostensibly mutually exclusive stances because creativity is neither an unqualified good, nor a grounding of moral reality. The same is true for honor.

Unfortunately, we seem content to ignore the disparity between how we treat honor and how we treat other notions or virtues that can be similarly misused. This is at least in part due to the reality that the category of honor has become canonically associated with certain troubling instances. That this disparity persists is, I suspect, a consequence of the reality that honor is a philosophically underexplored notion. My hope is that the defense of honor that I have offered in this dissertation encourages us to subject our preconceptions about honor to some philosophical rigor. When we do so, we can illuminate the latent advantages that honor can offer our society.

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