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The Soul of Honour

Honour comes at a stiff and stern price which people seem increasingly reluctant to pay in our self-indulgent society. But if we do not start giving more thought to how to live by its tenets, we may pay an even greater price in terms of personal and social distress...

Is honour obsolete? One might almost think so. We have seen so little of it lately that it is natural to assume it has faded into history with the whalebone corset and the quill pen.

In this age of elastic ethics, we are distinctly short of recent examples of honour posing an obstacle to personal drives for wealth and power. The nightly news is rife with dishonourable deeds that lead to injustice, tragedy and horror. And whole generations have passed since practically every grown-up person in western society knew what was meant by "a woman's honour" and "doing the honourable thing."

But if honour is dead, or at least moribund, then why do we talk so much about it? The word is so ubiquitous and is used in so many contexts that it can be downright confusing at times. An honour roll has nothing to do with an honour system, and an honour guard does not guard anybody's honour. There is no connection between having an honours degree and doing the honours by carving the Christmas turkey. Honouring a debt and honouring thy father and mother are two different things.

It simplifies matters to remember that the two main meanings of the word are interconnected. The first is a guide to good conduct, as in "code of honour" and "keeping honour bright." The second is a distinction conferred on a person, an organization, or a family. The presumption is that if you behave with one kind of honour, you will be rewarded with the other. That is what social functions held in a person's honour are for.

In any case, the fact that people refer to it frequently does not necessarily mean that they grasp the fundamental concept of honour as a regulator of behaviour. If it seems out of style these days, that is because it does not fit easily into the psychology of a materialistic society which has little time for the things of the mind.

We in the western world tend to subscribe to the fallacy that phenomena with no physical existence have no existence whatever. We are conditioned to be sceptical about abstractions, or about anything that cannot be seen or touched.

Despite the fact that it exists only in people's minds, honour has proved a tremendously powerful force over the ages. Philosophers have been almost unanimous in declaring that its practice is essential to both individual and social well-being.

It has traditionally been viewed as a standard that towers above all other considerations — goals, desires, comforts, or whatever. Innumerable wise men and women have declared in all sincerity that their honour came before their very lives.

To understand honour as a way of life — and death — we must reach back to the dawn of history. The concept evidently was a key factor in the way people conducted themselves before written records of human activity were ever kept.

Homer's *Iliad*, written in the 7th century B. C. and thought to be the first true work of European literature, is all about the loss, achievement and vindication of honour. In the mythology on which the epic poem

was based, it was a quality conferred on humans by the gods, and was thus considered a sacred trust to be maintained at all costs.

To a large extent, honour is responsible for the democratic system of government, because democracy would be unworkable without the trustworthiness that accompanies it when it is practised sincerely. In ancient Athens, politicians and public officials were prevented from abusing the privileges of office by swearing out unbreakable oaths to the gods.

The Roman Empire officialized a variety of honour which has been with us ever since, that of a military unit. It suited the purposes of the empire's rulers to have their soldiers believe it was honourable to win in battle and dishonourable to lose. Later, leaders everywhere

*The parable
of the
two temples*

learned that calls to uphold "the honour of regiment" could move men to valiant exploits and harrowing sacrifice. Military honour is enforced in our own times by the threat of a dishonourable discharge, which people in

the armed forces still regard as the ultimate disgrace.

Even as Rome's fighting men were paying for honour in blood, Roman philosophers were examining its nature. Ovid, for example, concluded: "It is not wealth, nor ancestry, but honourable conduct and a noble disposition that make men great."

Legend had it that there were two temples in Rome, the temple of honour and the temple of virtue. It was impossible to enter the temple of honour without first passing through the temple of virtue. The lesson of this parable was that honour could not be inherited or purchased; it could only be acquired by good deeds.

Honour and goodness were inextricably linked in the minds of medieval Europeans. They believed that a man's sworn word was sufficient to establish his innocence or release him from civil liability. Under the law of compurgation, a defendant could be found not guilty by swearing out an oath and getting a required number of people to swear that they believed it. The principle, which seems impossibly naïve by modern legal standards, was that respectable people can be expected to hold honour so dear that they will not lie under oath even to save themselves.

The Middle Ages gave rise to chivalry, the code that ruled the lives of those famous figures, the knights in shining armour. They swore on their swords, which usually contained a saint's relic in the hilt, to serve as

defenders of the faith, upholders of justice, and champions of the oppressed. The most dedicated among them would disobey orders on the battlefield if they thought those orders would lead to dishonourable actions. It was the medieval equivalent of a person quitting a job or resigning from an office on a point of principle.

The spirit of chivalry was by no means confined to Europe. Elite warriors such as the Samurai of Japan and the Rajputs of India were famed for fighting for their honour to the death. Indeed, honour is a concept that has always been recognized around the world, even in the most primitive societies. This tends to prove that human beings, wherever they are, possess an innate sense of fairness and dignity.

Anthropologists have remarked on the similarities in traditional codes of behaviour practised on different continents. Without any contact between them, the ancient Celts and the Chinese both used the same word for honour — "face." If one Celt impugned another's honour to his face, he could be fined for it. To this day, Chinese people continue to believe that a loss of face leads to a kind of living death.

The link between honour and life is a recurring theme in William Shakespeare's dramas. "Take honour from me and my life is done," Shakespeare wrote in *Richard II*. While the bard usually saw honour in a favourable light, he showed himself to be keenly conscious of its dark and destructive aspects. In *Othello*, the tragic hero kills his wife because he mistakenly believes that she has robbed him of his honour. In *King Henry the Fifth*, Shakespeare deplores the kind of honour that pushes men into being killed in vain on the battlefield: "Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday... Therefore I'll none of it: honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism."

Honour makes a lethal compound when combined with wilful pride, and never more so than when it came to duelling. The practice of settling "affairs of honour" with the sword was particularly rampant in France. But it was also common throughout Europe, and remained so from the 17th to the late 19th century. Though various monarchs tried to put a stop to it, "It persisted almost everywhere, largely because of the utterly non-utilitarian caste-conscious principle at the root of it, that honour was its own thing, with imperatives that trumped all others," as Professor Geoffrey Best has observed.

A new type of duellist emerged in the American Old West, where inexpensive firearms meant that

just about anyone could become a pistol-packing Cyrano de Bergerac. Gunfights erupted over the slightest insult to a gunslinger's *amour-propre*. Shootouts were, of course, illegal. But the popular wisdom in frontier society was that manly pride came before the law.

Lawlessness and perceptions of honour have often made a volatile mix. The Sicilian Mafia is known as "the Honoured Society." Murders by thugs who feel their peculiar code of honour has been breached are an old tradition in the underworld. The highest dishonour in gangland is reserved for those who inform on colleagues, which amounts to breaking a pledge of trust. In a twisted way, then, there is honour among thieves.

Honour was at stake in the feuds waged between families and clans from Corisca to Scotland to the American Appalachian Mountains. It is a short step from the honour of the family or clan to the honour of a nation. The latter is also prickly and also deals in revenge.

In 1870, Napoleon III and his ministers announced that Prussian designs on the throne of Spain constituted an affront to the honour of France. Their declaration of war on Prussia led to a humiliating defeat, the imposition of onerous war reparations, and a large loss of French territory. The theory that the honour of

The destructive side of the concept lives on

France could not be restored while the captured territories remained in "enemy" hands helped to bring on World War I, which took a toll of 10 million lives. The loss of face by the Germans in that conflict helped to bring on yet another appalling bloodbath in World War II.

Documents show that the French leaders in 1870 were actually less concerned with the honour of the state than with its political and strategic interests. The call to defend the honour of France served as a handy device to whip up public support for war. Honour has been used in any number of circumstances as a stalking horse for less lofty motives. "The louder he talked of his honour," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "the faster we counted our spoons."

Where does all this history leave us today? As far as the destructive side of honour goes, much the same as ever. Motorcycle and street gangs still settle their accounts in blood when they feel their honour has been breached, and political leaders still invoke national hon-

our as a reason for resorting to armed force.

Like junior Mafioso, contemporary schoolboys abhor and scorn a "squealer." Gentlemen who believe that their honour has been impugned still seek to punish their abusers, although instead of going after their blood with a sword, they now go after their money in libel suits.

"The law often permits what honour forbids," as the philosopher Jacques Saurin noted. If people in western countries now feel beset by a legalistic, bureau-

It is older than ethics, and more clear-cut

cratic and over-governed system, it may be because honour has been superseded by legality. Acting with honour means putting oneself in the position of living up to commitments without being forced to do

so. Honourable people need not be coerced into keeping their word by laws or regulations. More honour among the public would mean less crowding and waiting time in the courts.

Instead of asking "Is it legal?" more people ought to be asking themselves before taking an action, "Is it honourable?" That applies as much to private as to public life. We keep being told, for instance, that many of the more-severe personal problems in our angst-ridden times stem from a lack of self-esteem. Honour may be just what the doctor (or the psychiatrist) ordered for those who suffer from a bad self-image. Nothing makes people feel better about themselves than the sure knowledge that they have done the right thing. Conversely, by avoiding dishonourable acts, people avoid the self-reproach that leads to low self-esteem.

Of course, acting with honour presupposes that one knows what it is all about. It does not speak well for the public awareness of the basic rules of good conduct that ethics have to be taught to high school students in the classroom rather than in the home. Still, honour is older than ethics, and far more clear-cut and simple. Only a few points about it need to be remembered. Honour means honesty in the sense of telling the truth and in dealing with people without trickery or hidden motives. It means not taking unfair advantage of others, not betraying others, living up to one's promises, paying one's debts, and keeping one's word.

Conventional ethics of the sort debated in courses and seminars offer loopholes that the more rough-hewn code of honour does not recognize. It has no room for sophistry or self-justification, or for what you can get



away with without getting caught. It cannot be moulded into shape to fit expediency. There might be such a thing as situational ethics, but there is no such thing as situational honour. Either you have it in all situations, or you have it in none.

It would be a relief to see a politician on an election campaign refrain from twisting the facts to suit the situation. Some politicians indulge in outright lies on the premise that the furtherance of their cause is more important than simple honesty. Nowhere is there more talk about honour than in Parliament, but any sceptical observer of its proceedings might wonder whether the appellation "the Honourable Member" is a prescriptive or a descriptive term.

Honour seems to be lacking in many other fields of activity. Great institutions engage in sneaky coverups, and former bastions of pristine conduct such as military schools turn out to harbour nests of liars and cheats. Media personalities renege on promises of confidentiality for the sake of a titillating sound bite, and businesspeople sell products they know to be defective. It is as though the modern worship of success has made people forget the standard rule of conduct expounded by Sophocles in the 8th century B.C.: "Rather fail with honour than succeed by fraud."

*The tradition
of honour
in business
still prevails*

One sign of just how unfashionable honour has become is that people talk about it in euphemisms such as conscientiousness or accountability. If there is one widely used synonym that strikes to its core, it is the word integrity. Integrity is defined as "the quality of being unimpaired; wholeness, completeness." By that standard, it is just as impossible to be half-honourable as it is to be half-pregnant. "Honour is like the eye, which cannot suffer the least impurity without damage," as the French philosopher Jacques Boussuet wrote.

If honour is indivisible, it is also non-transferable. Its presence or absence is nobody's business but your own. Just as the knights of old disobeyed orders that would lead to discreditable acts, the narrow course of honour decrees that you resist the blandishments of others to do dishonourable things because they are convenient or pleasurable or lucrative. In what has been dubbed "the psychological society," we are all too ready to excuse ourselves, putting the blame for our moral failings on our upbringing, our environ-

ment, or "the system." Honour precludes such diversions of blame to anything or anybody else.

The great cop-out for dishonourable behaviour is that "everybody's doing it." The sweep and intensity of the media have made ordinary people aware of just how much duplicity and dirt exist in the world. Accustomed as they are to demonstrations of sleaze, people have become more cynical than ever about the yawning gulf between ideals and practice. Why cling to high personal standards when, evidently, nobody else gives a damn?

The difference between pretence and practice might lead the cynical to believe that honour is nothing more than a psychological device invented by elites to get the masses to do their bidding. It may be pointed out quite correctly that even the great ideal of chivalry deteriorated in many cases to oppression and pillage by so-called white knights. But even cynics have to admit that the fact that a thing is abused does not make it into a bad thing in essence. The chivalric code was based on the best of intentions. In the instructional literature of the order of chivalry, its members were specifically enjoined to sacrifice their own interests to the common good.

While the knights were engaging in their jousts and looking around for maidens in distress to save, something much more important was happening in the shops and counting-houses of medieval cities. Merchants and traders were developing and refining a system of honourable dealings which still prevails.

Any business that is done without an actual exchange of goods or money on the spot is conducted on the assurance that when business people make a commitment, they are honour-bound to live up to it. Today, our whole vast global financial and trading system rests on the honour of the participants. Financial transactions in the billions are concluded on the understanding that people and institutions will honour their debts.

Thus, far from being a thing of the past, honour is as modern as the satellite and the computer. We could not get along without it. Still, everyone would benefit by paying more attention to its nature and terms.

Obviously the whole world would be just that much better off if more people in all walks of life were to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, stick faithfully to their commitments, and refrain from taking unfair advantage of people and situations. It would be a good thing for all of humanity if honour were given less lip-service and more thought.

