

*Has Honor Become
Worthless?*

An essay by

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What do you think when you read, or hear, the word “*honor*”? I'd wager that your idea of what “honor” means is flawed in some way. That's just a guess though. Perhaps you have a negative view on the concept? If not altogether demanding that the word be banned from ever being used again, you're likely, at least, thinking it's outdated. It's a common opinion. Around the globe, and over centuries, the concept of honor has varied greatly. It has varied in many ways. Even the importance of honor has varied. In recent decades the idea of honor seems to have become disliked, possibly even despised. But I'm not convinced that doing away with the concept of honor is the right way to go. It seems to me that honor still does, and will continue to, have a valuable role to play in society. I'd guess there are many bad ideas out there about honor. But, I think those should be exposed and dealt with reasonably. What we need is a logical and clear concept of honor. I think I can offer an intelligible, useful and even a moral concept of honor here. So, let's not throw the proverbial baby out with the bath-water.

Misconceptions about honor certainly abound. Among them are several problems, which are as much the fault of those who've been in past so wound-up in honor as it is of those who have been so offended as to reject the idea of honor altogether. It seems to me that for most of the last century the fashionable trend, on a large scale, has been to target honor for abolition. It seems the very idea that honor matters has been claimed to be obsolete. The line dividing opinions on whether the concept of honor is good or bad seems to have become parallel to the fence between political camps, conservative and liberal. I don't think that is really the way it should be. While there have been changes – particularly in the U.S. – to the societal concept on honor over the last century, since the sixties the abolition trend has accelerated. I believe that the times have changed, and thus the concept of honor has had to undergo updating, but I think that that does not necessitate the wholesale doing-away-with of honor. Nor, do I think this modernization, and what it entails, necessarily validates being rid of honor. I suppose in some quite serious ways our cultural ideals of individualism and personal liberty have had something to do with this trend as well. Perhaps we've developed an unhealthy obsession with individualism and personal liberty to the extent that they pass the level at which they're good things and have in our culture become contrary to the very nature of society.

That unhealthy obsession is something that I can't help but see in many Libertarians and Ayn Rand's so-called “Objectivists”. These are two similar groups – birds of a feather, if you will – who argue that “greed is good”, that “government is bad” and that “rational selfishness” somehow

motivates people to be good. That view is, at best, a bit of a farcical stretch. A balance is often best. Indeed, our American cultural ideals of individualism and personal liberty must be balanced so as to hold our society together. Without responsibility and duty what good are we? Well, we've seen a terrifying glimpse of a lack of control, and excessive self-interest, in the example set by Wall Street and many corporate CEOs. Excess is inherently antithetical to honor. For that matter, so are individualism and "self-interest", or greed which is self-interest in its extreme. Though, individualism and self-interest are not altogether bad, it's really a matter of degrees. This is why it's a matter of balance. It's a matter of not allowing our individualism and self-interest conflict with what is best for our communities and humanity. Honor is, by its nature, a concept that arises because of the nature of society. To put it in a picture, hermits have no use for honor.

Extreme liberals, let's call them "hippies", also often tend to be opposed to honor. While many Libertarians and Rand-variety "Objectivists" can't find the strength to be honorable, the far-out kind of liberals seem to not want to be honorable. I mean, in the sense that most Libertarians and "Objectivists" fundamentally embrace ideals that are contrary to the nature of society, and thus contrary to honor. While the extreme among the liberals seem to not like what honor means. It is common to hear "don't be judgmental", and yet it is an inescapable part of human nature. We all are judgmental, the only relevant question is to what degree and what particulars do we consider in making our judgments. Honor requires some amount of judgment by people. In fact, you can't be either honorable or dishonorable without other people judging you to be so. But, I also agree with most liberals, even the extreme among them, that we ought not to be judged by such superficial and pointless things as the color of our skin, or whether the gender of those we lie down with is the same as our own.

More specifically, I agree with Martin Luther King Jr. when he said in his "Dream" speech about judging people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. It is absolutely right to judge people by the content of their character. One's character is no trivial thing. Character is whether you're a liar, or a cheater, or a thief, or a murderer. Part of your character is whether you are corrupt, or a just person. Of course, your work ethic, your sense of social justice, your integrity and intellectual honesty are all parts of your character, and thus your honor. The extremely liberal tend to include a prohibition on judging people by whether or not they are liars or thieves, and it is there that

an honorable person must depart from their company. As a matter of fact, being able to judge people's characters is important, if a society is to be cohesive. How can a society survive an epidemic of “don't be judgmental”? We would, if we took it – following the directions of those who are so extremely liberal – to the extreme, allow known pedophiles to run daycare centers, and allow known terrorists to manage our nation's security and so forth. It must be obvious that there is a limit to that “don't be judgmental” mantra. Clearly society could not operate without people being judgmental in some ways. We need only be concerned about what is reasonable, in the context of the greater good, to judge others on, and to judge by.

Surely many people dislike the unpleasantness of many different ideas on honor. Particularly the archaic ideas. Bad ideas like; honor-killings done when a woman somehow “dishonors” her family by being the victim of rape, or the ritual suicide to save one's honor after some failure, or the misappropriation of honor as if it were gold to wealthy and famous people. Clearly those ideas are all seriously misguided. In no way does a person deserve more honor simply because of being born into a certain family, or because of being famous or wealthy. Indeed, to the contrary of what they think, any family that murders a member of that family in order to save their honor severely dishonors themselves. They mostly tend to miss the mark, or get a warped concept about the subject. The perversions have run the idea nearly into the ground. Though, I suspect it's easy to reject the idea of honor, altogether, given the other twisted views on honor. Just as there are absolutist views of morality – religiously oriented views – there are some who believe honor to be an absolute. Absolutism is the idea that there is some outside source of, in this case honor, and some idea that it's set in stone. The idea that morality, or honor, can't be relative to the changes in society is highly absurd.

The flip side of that is Relativism, the idea that it's all just relative and so there's no real value to morality, or in this case honor. On this subject, there is a popular notion that honor is irrelevant. Though there are some things about honor which may be quite firm, there is not any convincing way to say that honor is either absolute or irrelevant. The interesting thing is that there are those who believe that honor – or morality – is out dated, or irrelevant, because of claims by those who subscribe to absolutism. In their case it is a misunderstanding. They seem to think that the proposition put forth by the absolutists is the only available version, and therefore deserving of rejection. Conversely, there are also those who view any alternative to their absolutist position to be inferior or unqualified. To their

thinking, in the case of morality, it is dictated from upon high and carved into stone. Yet what they think is unchangeable tends to change over generations, but they'd never admit it. In regards to honor, the absolutist tends to treat honor as if it were a tangible concrete thing. They often regard it as if it were inherited from family, as if there are – almost magical – rituals to mend it, as if one's honor could so easily be injured by the words or deeds of others. But, there is a middle option, a third choice. The position that honor is not absolute, nor irrelevant, but rather that it's relevant and relative to what is actually a valid concern for society.

Can your honor be damaged by someone calling you a derogatory name? What if someone insinuates something particularly nasty about your partner? What kind of a slight would it take to call your honor into question? There are so many common misconceptions involving the “insult”. And frankly, I don't get those who puff-up their chests and throw their heads backward in a sort of Chihuahua-meets-Gorilla dance of challenge. Honor is not something that can be “insulted”. I've seen too many instances of some insult, to which a sense of offense drives an attempt to restore honor. It's an absurdity, it seems to me. It's a completely misguided notion that some have that one's honor might be injured by another person's words or actions. How could that be the case? The truth is that one's honor can only be affected by one's own actions, and no other person's. Words are nothing to honor. The great, almost comedic, tragedy lies in when a person, in a misguided and poorly-thought-out effort, tries to restore honor only imagined to be damaged and in the process actually damages his/her honor. It bears repeating, honor can only be influenced by one's own behavior. There is no such thing as an insult to your honor done by someone else. Your honor is not affected by someone saying an insult about you, but it is certainly affected by how you choose to react. Reacting violently, or in a vindictive manner, is a failure of self-control. Since we are each responsible for our own behavior, reacting in that way to provocation is what brings dishonor. It turns out, that if someone says your friend is a “bitch”, you only damage your honor if you react with violence. It is dishonorable to escalate a verbal confrontation to a physical one because in that case you are demonstrating that you're much closer to an ordinary animal than a thinking animal. It is shameful to allow others to manipulate you, especially in such an obvious and unsophisticated way. This sort of behavior essentially makes one a danger to society.

Many people have attempted to argue that the idea of honor is out-dated. However, I believe

good arguments can be made in support of certain concepts. Namely, that honor is an idea that we can't be rid of so easily. Also, that honor cannot be affected by others. And first, that honor is actually still important today. If you behave dishonorably people will not respect you, and deservedly so. Honor is, fundamentally, the currency of social exchange. It is very closely related to reputation. So, while those detractors may have some valid points, they are wrong on the overall case that honor should be abandoned. For one thing, committing suicide supposedly in order to preserve one's honor is misguided. Even when ritualized, suicide is not an honorable act. Though there should be a distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice made to benefit the greater good. Fundamentally, there is no honor in quitting since that is usually the easy and unproductive way out of a difficulty. Though quitting is not always dishonorable, it is how extreme suicide is and the fact that it is giving-up that makes it dishonorable. And even if suicide were not dishonorable, using that approach to try to protect one's honor fails because it's not logical for killing one's self to have a positive affect on one's honor.

Honor is relevant today, *vis-a-vis*, our reputations and our interpersonal interactions. I'll concede that nagging question, "what about the fact that we live in large metropolises now?". Of-course, the concept of honor is hindered and not as potent a force in our modern times given the nature of our societies now. But, the nature of humanity, the interdependence of each of us upon one another makes honor still relevant. The anonymity of our reputations that big cities offer can diminish the effectiveness of honor, when compared to ancient times. However, it can't actually do away with it altogether. It is something that you can have a little of, or much of, though one can't have too much. It's something that can be in deficit or surplus. Albeit some people may have undeserved or misappropriated honor. Likely the fault of the people who give such undue honor, as in the case of many famous people. Many fans regard a celebrity with more honor than is appropriate simply because of being a celebrity. That is not necessarily the celebrity's fault. And certainly many average people don't seem to get as much respect of their honor as they may deserve, but that is a circumstance of big cities and popular attitudes. Still the fact is that the concept of honor must change to adapt to the changes of the times. But, honor will likely never go away altogether as a phenomenon of community and humanity. So, your honor is something worth thinking about.