

H

Honor



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Synonyms

[Dignity](#); [Integrity](#); [Nobility](#); [Prestige](#)

Definitions

1. Positive social standing (“She is an honored member of the community”), or the marks (“Among his many honors are . . .”) or conferral (“You honor me”) thereof.
2. The quality of being respectable (“He did the honorable thing, although he was reviled for it”).

Such a bewildering and contradictory welter of behaviors and traits are connoted by “honor” and its best equivalents in other languages that analyses of the concept have daunted philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, and literary scholars for millennia (Bowman 2006, Brown 2016, Gerrard 1994, Johnson 2009, Jones 2000, Krause 2002, Welsh 2008). Is it an external good given – and revoked just as easily – by others? Or does “honor” name an inner good that is absolutely in our control: our

integrity, our very commitment to right conduct? Is honor a central moral virtue – as when we might say that “all was lost, save our honor”? Or is it a good quality that is not-quite “moral,” or indeed even an antiquated virtue hostile to true morality? Is the honorable man a heroic figure who protects the weak, or one who can be expected to bully the weak, as in the case of “honor killings”? Is honor aristocratic and inegalitarian, and thus a virtue that enables and ennobles what is essentially oppression? Or is honor a signal virtue of fair-dealing, fair-fighting, and fair competition, as evidenced in sportsmanship?

Honor as Prestige

What can be said with some confidence is that, at its core, honor is about positive social standing, prestige, high status, or good reputation. This sense is retained today in our *honor* societies, graduations with *honors*, and *honorable* mentions. As it intersects with the study of heroism, it is widely appreciated that many ancient and pagan heroes were explicit in their hunger for honor in this sense. Wealth and health are typically seen as merely a means to securing the *summum bonum* of glory: Beowulf, for example, prizes gold mostly for the way it helps leaders like him secure status as “ring-givers.” Achilles’ choice of a glorious short life over a long one puts the matter as plainly as a thought experiment.

Mother tells me, the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet, that two fates bear me on to the day of death. If I hold out here and lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies. . . true, but the life that's left me will be long, the stroke of death will not come on me quickly. (Homer 1998, Iliad Bk. IX)

From External to Internal Good

Western moral philosophy begins with a rejection of the heroic norms in Homeric literature (Cairns 1993). Plato (1992) and Aristotle (1999) may be understood as moderate honor skeptics, insofar as they broke from the aristocratic norms of their day by teaching that the pursuit of honors – which honor researchers term “outer” honor (Stewart 1994) – was to be subordinated to the aims of (respectively) ordered psychological harmony and eudaimonia. The value of outer honor, for its own sake, or at least as legitimate instrumental good, would continue to be debated (Taylor 1992). Cicero argued that the hunger for honor was good for motivating civic sacrifices, while Stoic and Epicurean thinkers often argued it encouraged just the opposite (Olsthoorn 2016). Biblical writings can be read as endorsing outer honor, but only when it comes from God, not man (1 Chronicles 29:12), a message still capitalized upon by missionaries to honor cultures (HonorShame).

Although even in Roman mouths “honestas” was deemed an internal virtue despite sharing the root of our “hon(-or),” internalized conceptions of honor, along with other moral concepts, seemed to have gained more currency in recent centuries. Much as one’s “character” in Victorian England referred to one’s reputation and not, as it is today, one’s actual moral grit, to be “honorable” or a “man of honor” has come to mean an internal quality, and tantamount to having integrity. This tension is reflected in the analyses of honor that are most widely cited among its contemporary researchers. For instance, anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers understands one’s honor as his

value in his own eyes, but also the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgment of

that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* to pride. (1974, 21, emphasis in the original)

Anthropologist Frank Henderson Stewart’s analysis of honor compresses this idea down to the elegant “right to be treated as having a certain worth” or, in short, the “right to respect” (1994, 21). Such views are not temptingly simple “bipartite” analyses that understand outer honor as wholly external and contingent on opinion and inner honor as an “honorableness” of a virtuous integrity that utterly disregards social consequences. Rather, these analyses are more organic, conceiving of even inner honor as being recognition-oriented, even if only by ideal spectators. Much as a “comedian’s comedian” will eschew easy laughs and wider acclaim because he is more interested in impressing true connoisseurs of the craft, an honorable person might do something that brings her only ignominy because she feels that better people (who may not even exist) would honor her for it. The others in question are not typically the world at large, but an actual, imagined, or ideal “honor group” (Sessions 2010).

Horizontal and Vertical Honor

As long as you maintain the basic principles of the group, your “horizontal honor” is maintained (Stewart 1994). Horizontal honor is had equally and fully by all members. In contrast, vertical honor is apportioned to group members according to its various functions, and here we have the introduction of rankism and often competition for honors. So, for instance, even though any knight may challenge any knight, or any gentleman may resent an insult by any other gentleman, there may be wide distinctions among knights or gentlemen according to their various exploits.

To be low-ranked in an honor group is not generally regarded as shameful. What is shameful is the sense that one violated the code that defines membership in the honor group (Gilmore 1987). So, for instance, it is not shameful to be an obscure academic, but it is shameful to be a plagiarist. Shame is widely considered the primary negative self-regarding emotion of dishonor, analogous

perhaps to guilt when we judge ourselves to have treated another unjustly. Contempt, the primary negative other-regarding emotion we bear toward those we deem dishonorable, is helpfully contrasted with anger or outrage toward the unjust. These emotions make sense insofar as shame and contempt are about failing some performance standard one is expected to satisfy given one's role or station, whereas guilt or outrage is rational only when the guilty party has wronged another (Williams 1993). The contrast between "guilt" and "honor" cultures is an important vector in honor scholarship (Berger 1984).

Normative Systems

If we understand a normative system as an integrated network of behavioral expectations, emotions, and rules governing punishment and reintegration for offenders, then it would seem that "honor" is associated today with three distinguishable normative systems.

The first may be termed "honor-as-honestas." Its virtues are integrity, principledness, selflessness, quiet dignity, dutifulness, honesty. This brand of agrarian, stoical, bourgeois, and whiggish honor is the type that is most readily embraced by Christians, the commercial class, and modern militaries. It is the most service-oriented: the soldier to his country, the whistleblower to her profession, the statesman to his people, the businesswoman to her clients or firm, the working man to his wife and family. Today's military academies, which stress "duty, honor, and country" promote this brand of honor, and often teach some variant of the rule that cadets "do not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do" (French 2003; Sherman 2005). The honor counsels of such institutions and even some universities – the official manifestation of the honor group – typically weigh in on infractions of integrity.

Heroes of the "honor-as-honestas" type do not seek out distinction. They gain distinction by being at the right (or wrong) place at the right time, where they face adversity with steadfast equanimity. Examples include Cincinnatus,

religious martyrs, George Washington, Atticus Finch. Medal of Honor recipient Desmond Doss, whose heroism was dramatized but if anything undersold in the 2006 film *Hacksaw Ridge*, is paradigmatic of this sort of honor. A WWII conscientious objector for religious reasons, Doss was made a combat medic, and over the course of week of furious fighting during the Battle of Okinawa, he rescued nearly a hundred infantrymen despite incurring multiple wounds. Disabled after the war, Doss returned to his wife, and quietly raised a family on his farm without any attempt to capitalize on his military record.

In stark contrast to honor-as-honestas is the honor-mindedness of an Achilles or a Horatio Nelson ("If it be a sin to covet glory, I am the most offending soul alive"), which may be termed "agonistic." Highly ludic in nature (Huizinga 1950), its virtues are boldness, showmanship, "valor" or "gallantry" more than simple courage, nobility, spiritedness, grace in victory and defeat, and competitive fairness. This brand of honor is associated with aristocracies, athletics, and the higher reaches of academia. It is self-orientated insofar as "players" in this "honor game" are out to maximize their prestige, but it is governed by the ethic of contest, which in athletics is termed "sportsmanship." On it, prestige can be gained only by overcoming evenly matched, respectable opponents. Adversity, in the sense of contests, is sought, but it is presumptuous to challenge too far up the ranking. Nor may one decline challenges from suitably close challengers. Ideally the rules of engagement are well-established beforehand. If the paradigmatic evil for honor-as-honestas is failing one's duty, the main sin on agonism is cheating, be it in a game or battle – which, in the aristocratic tradition, was indistinguishable from a game (Fields 1991).

Warfighters and competitors generally have struggled for millennia to resolve the inherent tensions between the more selfish, glory-seeking agonistic and the more disciplined or service-oriented "honor-as-honestas" approaches to honorable conflict (Robinson 2006). Achilles sulked at his tents because he felt personally slighted by Agammenon, letting his fellow Greeks die in droves on the plains of Troy. At the Battle of

Copenhagen, Nelson ostentatiously put his telescope to his blind eye so he could not see the signals from his commander ordering him to refuse battle. Agonists are naturally in conflict with authoritarian command structures and even loyalty to the nation, and thus this ethos is discouraged in institutions, such as modern militaries, that rely on discipline, coordination, control, and (to some extent) interchangeability of its warfighters (Demetriou 2013). Turning to sport, no fewer than 15 American Olympians competed for other countries in the 2022 Winter Olympics, much as eighteenth-century officers might fight for other countries if peace or dispreference interfered with their martial ambitions. In the realm of academic research, superstar professors (whose talents usually could have earned much more money outside of academia) relentlessly pursue scholarly laurels, and often abandon their institutions for more prestigious ones at the first opportunity.

The third honor-based normative system – and the one by far most studied in the social sciences – is usually discussed in terms of the “culture of honor.” The virtues of this form of honor are those associated with “manliness” in the given culture, but these typically will include: virility, fatherhood, pridefulness, sexually chaste womenfolk, hospitality, independence/nonservility, and a hair-trigger temper (Gilmore 1987; Peristiany 1974; Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992; Wyatt-Brown 1982). Regarding the last of these, “cultures of honor” are characterized by swift and violent riposte to slight and insult. Psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen’s *Culture of Honor* (1996) is the seminal work in this tradition, arguing that norms calling for violent responses to insult are adaptive in areas where weak central authority combines with easily stolen goods, such as in pastoral societies where cattle are easily rustled. “Cultures of honor” are especially common in highlands or hinterlands where centralized authority cannot enforce law. This ethos can also be adaptive in urban settings where (say) an alienated minority lives outside the law and interacts in an informal economy of contraband (Anderson 1999). Examples of such cultures include Scottish and Cretan highlanders, the Bedouin of Arabia,

many East African peoples such as the Masai, Rendille, Jie, Samburu, and Nuer, and the Pashtun of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Unthinkable to the honor-as-honestas type of honorable person, the “culture of honor” adherent is often a raider. Anthropologists inform us that cattle raiding is “endemic” to pastoral societies, from Ireland to East Africa to Central Asia (Schneider 1971). Rob Roy, both the man and the heroic character of the eponymous Scott novel, was an ardent cattle rustler. So was the superlatively honorable aristocratic highlander Fergus MacIvor of *Waverley*, who as a matter of policy employs rustlers to steal the cattle of Lowland gentlemen failing to pay him protection money. At one point, the English protagonist Waverley asks his lowland hostess about this “thief-taker” MacIvor who has lately robbed her father of his cows.

“Thief-taker!” answered Rose, laughing. “He is a gentleman of great honor and consequence; the chieftain of an independent branch of a powerful Highland clan, and is much respected, both for his own power, and that of his kith, kin, and allies” (Scott 1814/1985, Chap. 15).

Generally speaking, feminine honor in a culture of honor is a function of fecundity and chastity (Gilmore 1987). Regarding the former, recall the Biblical sisters Leah and Rachel, whose competition to out-do each other with children from Jacob grew so fierce that they recruited their female slaves into their respective causes (Genesis 29–30). Regarding the latter, Livy’s tale of the Roman noblewoman Lucretia is particularly instructive and rich. When threatened with death unless agreeing to sleep with the prince Tarquinius, Lucretia chooses death. But Tarquinius devilishly threatens to frame Lucretia after killing her so that it will appear to her husband and family that she was having an affair with a male slave. Although Lucretia would rather die than be raped, she’d rather be raped than dishonored, and so she accedes to Tarquinius’ demands. Afterward she calls her menfolk back home, and in tears tells them how she “lost her honor” to the prince and that they, “if they are men,” will avenge her. The men swear to punish Tarquinius and they do their best to comfort Lucretia, assuring her that her

honor has not been besmirched. But Lucretia is disconsolate and declares, “Though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia,” at which point she brandishes a hidden dagger and stabs herself to death (Livy 1912).

Some of the dynamics of raiding culture apply to women as well. Although Lucretia dies at her own hand, even today thousands of women are killed annually by family members in “honor killings” meant to cleanse the family name from the dishonor of their unchastity, or even rape (United Nations 2012). But one must not infer from their vigilance of their womenfolk that cultures of honor are impartially opposed to sexual assault. In parallel with cattle rustling, in many honor cultures, honor not only allows but is embellished by successful seduction or even bride-kidnapping.

The Moral Status of Honor

Is honor a moral value? Some readers will doubt the moral veracity of agonism (but see Demetriou 2014), as will almost all readers the moral probity of “cultures of honor” (but see Sommers 2018). That said, whether we agree with a norm is a separate question from whether the norm operates as a moral code in the thoughts and actions of its followers. If moral norms are ones whose concerns trump all others, including prudence or personal preferences, then we probably should consider these normative systems moral ones (Kumar and Campbell 2016). If morality is understood more narrowly, to include only norms that promote well-being or that are cooperative in nature, then the honor codes of “cultures of honor” and agonism will probably not count as moral codes (Appiah 2010).

Cross-References

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- ▶ [Medieval Heroic Chivalry](#)
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