

Honor for Intro

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This piece is written as a public service to ethics professors and students interested in learning more about honor ethics. To facilitate its use in classrooms, it's written in the style of many contemporary textbooks: it focuses on ideas, principles, and intuitions and ignores scholarly figures and intellectual history. Readers should note this is an "opinionated" introduction, as it focuses on the agonistic conception of honor. It also takes for granted that the agonistic ethos described counts as a "moral" theory. Arguments for these assumptions are in print elsewhere. Any comments or recommendations for improvement are much appreciated.

Introduction

In 2012, a Spanish professional runner made headlines for the way he *lost* a race.

Ivan Fernandez Anaya, running in second place, was trailing former Olympic medalist Abel Mutai in a cross-country event being held in Navarre, Spain. But Mutai, who is Kenyan, misread the Spanish signs, thought he had already won, and stopped running just yards before the finish line. Video footage shows Anaya coming up from behind, slowing to tap Mutai on the shoulder and point forward, and deliberately jogging behind to allow Mutai to win. Afterward Mutai shook Anaya's hand, and the two went their separate ways. However, a Spanish newspaper reported on Anaya's "honra," or honorableness, and the story made international news. In an interview, Anaya explained that

I didn't deserve to win [the race]. I did what I had to do. [Mutai] was the rightful winner. He created a gap that I couldn't have closed if he hadn't made a mistake. As soon as I saw he was stopping, I knew I wasn't going to pass him.¹

In a world that seems to extol cutthroat competition (even Anaya's own coach criticized him for losing the race), it was refreshing to see someone put honor before a cheap victory.

"Honor" sounds a bit old-fashioned to college students in Western liberal democracies. However, honor was once a central topic of concern in the West. Western literature—including much of the Greek and Roman epics, Norse sagas, Arthurian legend, Shakespeare's histories, novels by Dumas and Conrad, and the verse of Tennyson and Kipling—is often propelled by stories of honor and dishonor, glory and shame. And in ways obvious and subtle we remain as concerned as ever with honor. Just think of college life: Will you be graduating with honors? Are you part of an honor society? Who will your college award honorary degrees to this year? What is the honor pledge you have to sign, or your university's honor code? How important is the reputation of your school to you,

¹ Arribas, Carlos. 2012. "Honesty of the Long-Distance Runner," *El Pais*. Available: http://elpais.com/elpais/2012/12/19/inenglish/1355928581_856388.html

your professors, your deans, and your college president? How important are the rankings of your university's sports teams to student morale?

Or consider your entertainment. Most of our biggest blockbusters are based on comic books and involve superheroes who rise above the common person to fight super-villains, who seem bent on enslaving the rest of us. A common plot line is how the superhero receives or cannot receive public praise for her or (more commonly) his heroic sacrifices. Another involves the way he's always evenly matched, or even slightly overmatched, by the bad guy. These movies usually end with a classic showdown, and ultimately the two champions end up duking out in hand-to-hand combat. Most westerns, too, and gritty crime dramas, such as *Breaking Bad* or *The Wire*, are ultimately about honor.

So what is honor? How does honor fit in with other ethical theories you've read about, such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, and contractarianism? Since the revival of honor as a topic of research is quite new, there is no consensus on the answer to these questions. Another difficulty is that no ethicist currently holds that honor *fully* describes our moral obligations, as Kantians or utilitarians think their theories do. At present, honor is at most felt to describe only one class of our moral duties. Thus, honor ethicists are likely to advocate for a pluralistic moral theory that sees honor as one important value among many.

Nonetheless, painting in broad strokes, honor ethics holds **that social standing is a value of moral importance and that it must be gained and given according to agonistic principles**. In what follows, we will first discuss social standing, and then turn to the distinctive "agonistic" competitive principles governing its honorable distribution.

The good and the right

By now, you are familiar with the difference between the question of what is *good* and the question of what is *right to do*. For instance, you learned how hedonists have a particular opinion about the good: they say it is pleasure. Even so, hedonism alone doesn't tell us what we morally ought to do given this piece of information. For instance, an egoist hedonist says everyone ought to maximize his or her own pleasure. A hedonist consequentialist says we ought to maximize overall pleasure. A hedonist contractarian will say that we ought to make sure pleasure is gained and distributed in ways that respect the rules of mutually-beneficial cooperation. All three of these individuals agree on what's good, but they disagree on what's right.

Honor ethics holds that positive social standing—what we'll call **standing** for short—is a good thing (indeed, one of the main senses of "honor" is prestige or high social standing). According to honor ethics, standing isn't good because of the pleasure it provides, or because it is a proxy for some other more fundamental good, such as power or freedom or welfare. Rather, standing is thought of as a fundamentally good thing, and as important of a good as any other—maybe more important than life itself. We will distinguish between a couple forms of social standing later on. But for now, it is enough to note that the most fundamental sort of standing is being thought of as a full-fledged member of an **honor group**, i.e., a somewhat exclusive society that maintains its own

standards for membership. Some examples of honor groups include: athletic teams and conferences, academic societies, militaries, street gangs, high school cliques, and (sometimes) even families.

The right to respect

Socrates was once asked if it would be better to be unjust but thought to be just, or just and thought to be unjust. His answer was latter: we must do the things that make us *worthy* of trust and good reputation, even if we'd be distrusted and punished for doing so. Likewise, a sophisticated honor theory is unlikely to place much weight on actual social standing. Honorable people do the sorts of things that (they think) *warrant* good standing, whether or not the actual honor group in question agrees.

That may sound puzzling: if honor sees standing as the good, how could it possibly justify and even require acts from us which, given the wrong sort of honor group, will earn us only infamy and public humiliation? The short answer is that although ethical theories may be naturally oriented to some sort of good, their principles place restrictions on how that good is to be gained. *Prima facie* goods gained in ways violating those principles are felt not to be worth pursuing after all. For instance, even if, as Hobbes and most contractarians think, *justice* is naturally oriented toward the good of material welfare (life, security, prosperity, and so forth), once we accept the cooperative principles of justice, we are inclined to think that ill-gotten welfare isn't worth having. You might love the thought of owning a plantation house and sipping mint juleps on your sprawling veranda, but you wouldn't be able to tolerate these things if they were supported by slavery. In the minds of many ethicists, a commitment to justice entails seeing only *justly-gained* benefits as desirable.

Likewise for honor: even if you care a great deal about standing, and that concern led you to care about the moral rules governing standing, commitment to those rules will cause you to reject dishonorably-gained standing. One famous and very ancient example of this is found in the Chinese history *Zuo Zhuan*, which records how Duke Hsiang of Sung, in the 7th century BC, intercepted attacking Ch'u troops as they were fording the Hung River. Hsiang, against advice from his subordinates, allowed the Ch'u to cross and form ranks. He was defeated, and his lieutenants blamed him for losing unnecessarily. Unrepentant, Duke Hsiang declared that

the gentleman does not inflict a second wound, or take the grey-haired prisoner.
When the ancients fought, they did not attack an enemy when he was in a defile.
Though I am but the unworthy remnant of a fallen dynasty, I would not sound my drums to attack an enemy who had not completed the formation of his ranks.²

Duke Hsaing lost his standing in the eyes of his people. But he was concerned not so much with the opinions of the honor group he happened to be in, but rather those of the honor group he actually respected: namely, the "ancient" warriors who fought wars nobly and with honor. Whether Hsaing was right or wrong to do what he did, he was obviously more concerned with deserving honor than having it.

² Quoted from Fields, Rick. 1991. *The Code of the Warrior: In History, Myth, and Everyday Life* (New York: Harper Perennial): 109.

Honor theorists often point out, then, that there's a difference between *being honored* and having the *right to be honored*, a genuine claim to honor, or **a right to respect**. The honorable person tries hard to honor people according to what sort of respect they have a right to. And when it comes to accepting honor, the honorable person strives to be someone who has the right to be honored, not someone who is honored as such.

A connected distinction is between **outer honor** and **inner honor**. Honor ethics is naturally concerned with outer honor—positive social appraisal, and those symbols that tell us others have a good opinion of us. Honor ethics says it is okay to want these things. But being honorable is really about having inner honor, or that virtue of character that compels people to do the honorable thing even at the cost of outer honor.

Honor-seeking

Since we are obligated to do what is honorable even if we won't be honored for doing so, it follows that being a mere **honor-seeker**—someone who seeks out public acclaim—isn't permissible according to honor ethics. There are such people, of course, and some of them may be morally principled insofar as they hold that *everyone* should maximize his or her social standing. Nonetheless, such people are best thought of as ethical egoists who happen to see prestige, instead of material success, as “the good.”

It is usually painfully obvious when someone is prepared to do anything to anyone in their pursuit of fame and glory. But sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between someone motivated by honor and someone motivated by mere hunger for prestige. For example, if Jack can get status only by doing what his society thinks is honorable, he may act in honorable ways. But his actions won't be honorable if he does them only because he must in order to get the status he craves. Similar things can be said for other ethical theories: as Kant's example of the shopkeeper teaches us, sometimes people behave in ways that (seem to) respect a person's humanity, but do so only because they maximize their personal wellbeing by doing so, not because they actually respect others as ends-in-themselves.

If honor isn't about accumulating as much prestige, status, or social standing as one can get, it must have some principles that place limits on how we pursue those things. Let's go one level deeper, and examine some of those principles and the reasoning behind them. We will approach those principles by briefly exploring honor's connection to bullying, integrity, and forceful resistance.

The dishonor of bullying and taking advantage

At a Minnesota Dairy Queen in 2013, a blind customer pulled out some cash and unknowingly dropped a \$20 bill. A woman just behind her quickly picked up the bill and pocketed it. Joey Prusak, the Dairy Queen server, saw what happened, and directed the thieving customer to return the money. She refused. So Prusak expelled her from the restaurant (much to her protest and despite her threats to have him fired) and gave the blind customer a twenty from his own pocket.

Onlookers notified the local press and Prusak's story went viral, and he was rightly praised for his honorable deed. But why was what Prusak did *honorable*? He gave a blind person some money: but millions of people donate much more than \$20 on a monthly basis to those in need, and they are not called "honorable," but "altruistic" or "generous." And if the customer he defended were sighted, it isn't at all clear we would call his actions "honorable." So why was Prusak said to have acted honorably?

The answer is that Prusak *protected the weak from the strong*. Merely helping a vulnerable person is insufficient for counting as honorable, as is merely acting forcefully against a wrongdoer. Both components combined, however, in most circumstances makes an action honorable. Much the same can be said on the negative side of the ledger: the unnamed customer who stole the \$20 was heaped with contempt. But thieving alone doesn't make one contemptible: lots of heist movies feature likable rogues who steal from the powerful, for example. What made the thief in the Prusak case dishonorable and contemptible was that she stole money from a vulnerable person.

So honor says we must protect the weak against bullies or those who exploit their advantage in some unfair way. However, honor ethics doesn't tell us that we must help the poor, weak, and downtrodden *as such*, as (say) a Christian or utilitarian ethicist might. Superman is not expected simply to help us out, as he certainly would if he turned the crank of an enormous electric generator and solved the energy and climate crises in one fell swoop. No, Superman is only expected to save us (the weak) from powerful villains (the bullying strong).

Other moral theories say we must intercede against those who exploit the vulnerable, too. Surely plain justice demands that we prevent unprovoked aggression, and bullies display unprovoked aggression. However, honor theory is again distinctive for not being too concerned about *mere* aggression. It might be wrong for other reasons, but not particularly dishonorable, for you pick a fight with a professional boxer.

So honor is especially sensitive to the relative power of conflicting parties. With refinements we will discuss later, honor permits unprovoked aggression and challenge, but not on those weaker or somehow more poorly-positioned. And it says we must defend the weak from unprovoked aggression or challenge from the stronger or better-positioned, but not because we ought to help the weak generally.

Integrity

The etymology of "integrity" has to do with structural soundness: we say a plane's wing has good integrity if it is whole, if it is strong, and if won't easily fall apart. The rough idea in the moral case is that people with integrity don't morally crumble in the face of temptation or adversity.

Being "honorable" for many people connotes having integrity. For example, some universities with strong honor codes allow their students to take their exams at home, on the expectation that, on their honor, they will not cheat. Some libraries allow people to borrow books without checking them out. I have a neighbor who sets out pumpkins in his unattended front yard every autumn, along with

a little box for payment (which itself could be easily stolen). We call any such practice an **honor system** because it is sustainable only if the participants have integrity.

What explains the tight connection between honor and integrity? One answer is that we think integrity ought to be honored. But this can't be the full explanation, because there are many other virtues of character which do not connote honor, such as compassion or patience. Perhaps the best explanation for the honor-integrity connection is psychological. It may be thought that people who are honor-minded are psychologically predisposed to display more integrity for some reason.

Consider, for example, how integrity is tested. It is often said our integrity is revealed by how we act when no one is watching. So if one has little integrity, one is prepared to do "sneaky" things—things one wouldn't do if there were a good chance of others finding out. In stark contrast, honor favors the bold and open deed. For instance, in the era of honorable warfare, snipers and spies were considered dishonorable combatants, and even regular soldiers' uniforms were brightly colored (as opposed to camouflaged) precisely because of this sense that honor is incompatible with stealth and dissimulation. In fact, even if you do something the honorable condemn, they will usually at least respect your doing it brazenly, since this communicates that *you* don't find the act to be shameful. So that it runs particularly counter to the character of the honorable person to do anything furtive or surreptitious is perhaps one reason why honor and integrity are so closely linked.

It is not quite true that integrity is tested only when we are unwatched. Sometimes people morally crack under pressure quite publicly, especially when physically threatened. In these circumstances, people who do not put much value in material wellbeing, such as the religiously pious on the one hand or the honorable on the other, are less likely to be cowed by threats. (Piety and honor both figure prominently in Socrates' refusal, recounted in *Crito*, to forsake his principles and flee his death sentence.) Honor especially, as a martial virtue, was supposed to steel our resolve in the face of pain, suffering, and death.

Honor for those who resist

In 1839, Sengbe Pieh, an African prince of his tribe, was captured by slave-traders, stuffed into the schooner *La Amistad* along with dozens of other Africans, and was transported by his captors to Cuba. But as the slaver neared its destination, Pieh literally broke free of his chains, freed his fellow Africans, grabbed some machetes used for cutting sugar cane, and successfully led a takeover of the ship which resulted in the death of most of the Spanish crew. However, unable to sail the schooner themselves, the kidnapped Africans were forced to rely upon the ship's Spanish navigator to sail them home. The navigator managed to trick them by sailing north at night, and so the *Amistad* was finally intercepted by an American cutter.

A complicated set of court cases followed. The Spanish demanded a return of their "cargo" and punishment for the slave "murderers." The African crew was represented by abolitionists, whose legal reasoning was that the slaves were from Africa and thus free, given that the African trade was illegal by this time. The case ultimately wound up being heard in the Supreme Court.

In the courtroom drama that ensued, former President John Quincy Adams defended Pich and his fellows, and sometimes supplemented his technical legal arguments with appeals to honor. Since some Supreme Court justices were Southern anti-abolitionists, one might think that this fact would cause Adams to downplay the violence of Pich and his cohorts. Quite the opposite. Adams argued that Pich and the other captives “indicated their natural right to liberty, by conspiracy, insurrection, [and] homicide” of their Spanish captors. He went on to compare them to classical heroes of liberty who proved their right to be free by their resistance to tyranny.

Rhetorically, it would seem unwise for Adams to argue that one “indicates” one’s natural right to liberty by, among other things, the “homicide” of one’s oppressors! But Adams knew that, despite the racial prejudices of at least some Justices, as “Southern gentlemen” they could be moved by appeals to honor, and that it cannot be denied that forcefully resisting enslavement is an important indicator of honorableness. Indeed, even today, the classical republican tradition (which is not to be confused with the American Republican political party) connects the honor of a citizenry with their ability to resist oppression. Pich’s noble resistance helped prove to the nation that Africans were not “natural slaves,” and that nobility of spirit—the true dividing line for the honor-minded—cuts across racial lines. The Justices ruled in favor of Pich and his fellow captives, and at his request Pich was sent back to his home.

On both the level of the state and individual, honor is often felt to require us to put some effort into protecting our rights and prerogatives. Although there is no dishonor in being weaker than another as such, and no dishonor in mere defeat, there is dishonor in carelessness about our rights, in culpable weakness, and in failing to put up as good of a fight as possible in defense of our prerogatives. That “fight” may be non-violent, as was the case of the passive resistance of the liberation movements led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. But responding to infringements of our rights cannot take the form of mere running to authorities or idle complaint. When challenged, our prerogatives are most honorably secured by our own efforts, not someone else’s, according to honor.

In proportion to your size or stature, then, honor expects people and groups to seek the power to resist insult, aggression, and challenge. This is why honor-minded societies tend to emphasize armament at the level of the individual and the state, and honor is often symbolized by the weapons one can display and wield. That honor requires us to stick up for ourselves is why warrior-aristocrats placed weapons over their doorways or fireplace mantles, and claimed the right to carry swords in public. (Today, many citizen groups claim the right to carry sidearms because they feel their dignity as citizens obliges them to maintain their dangerousness to would-be oppressors.) This principle is also why flags, seals, or coats of arms often feature some sort of weapon or dangerous animal. Or why nations desperate for recognition will conduct elaborate military parades meant to impress international observers. Or why female students practice self-defense drills in the university mall during a rape awareness campaign. In all cases the message is, “Don’t tread on me.”

Military honor

Because of honor's commitment to self-defense, integrity, and checking bullies, honor remains a core military value.

Honor has always been a martial value, but for different reasons. Our modern militaries are descendants of older, warrior-aristocratic fighting forces. Warrior-aristocrats essentially fought to distinguish themselves and win glory. Homer's Achilles, for example, knowingly forsakes a long, prosperous, but obscure life back in Greece for a short and glorious one on the battlefields of Troy. As hinted at by the story of Duke Hsain above and some comments on spies and snipers, warrior-aristocrats had to fight fairly in order to win acclaim—cheap or easy victories are meaningless for honor. In both myth and real life, armies and individuals would agree to fight on terms that made their battles more fair, orderly, and dignified.

This older, warrior-aristocratic ethos is actually discouraged by military training today. Soldiers are not supposed to fight for glory, but for their country or, barring that, their fellows. Soldiers are supposed to be self-sacrificing, not self-oriented. A good soldier would never, as Achilles does, walk away from a war simply for feeling slighted by his commander. Nor would a good commander disadvantage his side to make a battle fairer. Nevertheless, honor is a cherished value in most militaries.

One reason for this harkens back to the principle that the honorable protect the weak from the strong. We place our trust in our militaries: they are stronger than we civilians are, and our militaries could enslave us if they wished. Many a nation has been ruled by its military forces from the start, or has seen its military overthrow its elected government. Thus, it is very important for a democratic culture to inculcate an ethos in our fighting men and women that they are here to protect us, not to rule us.

Honor is also an important value in war because, as we have noted above, although honor doesn't allow us to bully, it does allow us to fight. A main difficulty for war ethics is to explain how it could be okay for soldiers to kill other soldiers when the latter haven't committed any wrongdoing—how could it be okay to try to kill a *morally and legally innocent person*? This puzzle doesn't come up for honor theory, because honor doesn't prohibit fighting the innocent strong (in fact, it is *preferable* on honor that our opponents be our moral equals). However, we still expect our soldiers to show restraint toward civilians. Honor does an excellent job of encouraging honorable treatment of non-combatants—indeed, it may be that honor ethics provides the best justifications for distinguishing between a fighting soldier on the one hand and a civilian working in a munitions plant on the other.

Finally, as we have seen, honor requires us to stick up for ourselves as we are able. Force is the most obvious form of self-defense, and a nation's military forces are its expression of its interest and willingness to defend its rights. In that sense, the honor of a nation requires its military to be proportionally strong and completely courageous.

The agonistic essence of honor

We noted the superficial sense of "honor" as a "good" of social standing. Some "honor cultures" are so-called simply because they stress that sort of good. What we have been discussing is some-

thing more fundamental, a “theory of right” (or at least an aspect of rightness) that forwards specific principles and moral virtues as being honorable. But what is the connection between those virtues and principles and the good of social standing? We are now ready to get to what some honor theorists feel is the essence of honor, which is that it is an *agonistic ethic*.

In ancient Greece, an **agon** was literally a public contest meant to reveal excellence. It may be a battle between two champions, a poetry competition, an athletic event, or any other forum in which respectable equals were matched up to compete for fame. The word “agon” has come to mean something like a stressful, but meaningful and compelling, contest. Honor is the ethic that regulates agons and agonistic relationships. Whereas some ethical theories (especially liberal, contractarian ones) see morality as being about the rules governing *cooperation* for *material benefit*, honor sees morality as about the rules governing *competition* for *social standing*.

Agonistic competition is serious play. It is playful insofar as it obeys the logic of sports, games, or other contests that emphasize fairness. But it is serious, in that the stakes are high. Many people structure their entire lives around their quest for status, and our performance in the agon is often the most important basis of our pride and sense of self-worth.

As noted above, the most fundamental sort of social standing one can have on honor is being a member “in good standing” of an honor group. According to the agonistic honor ethic, no matter if you’re high-ranking or low-ranking within an honor group, if you earn your right to be part of it, you have this fundamental sort of standing fully and equally. You must earn the right to be part of an honor group on this agonistic picture—you cannot have it by merely being human or sentient, and you cannot be gifted it or inherit it. Moreover, your membership in good standing can be revoked for dishonorable conduct.

Some theorists refer to this sort of honor as **horizontal honor**. On the agonistic picture, horizontal honor gives you the right to compete for **vertical honor**, or competitive prestige. Unlike horizontal honor, vertical honor is not possessed equally by all who have some: you have more or less of it proportional to your ranking in the honor group. The honor ethic itself is constituted by the agonistic principles governing our assignment of horizontal and vertical honor.

It is imperative on the honor ethic that we try to make sure those who deserve honor get it in the right amount, in the right way, and for the right reasons. Interesting things follow from this.

First, once you’re a part of an honor group in which prestige is competed-for, you are obliged to “find your place” in the ranking of competitors. This means that you may not accept a higher ranking than you deserve. For instance, on some occasions, you must refuse an award, privilege, or compliment if you feel someone else deserved it more. This sort of honorable humility is, as was the case in Anaya’s gracious loss, widely admired. However, more problematic from some other moral perspectives is that honorable people must strive for a higher rank if they feel they can win it. This sort of personal ambition common in honor realms has often been looked at with disapproval by Christian moralists (who feel it to be prideful), classical liberals (who feel it often leads to needless competitive striving and even war), and authoritarians (who prefer everyone be satisfied with their as-

signed position within hierarchies). Nonetheless, it would distort the public ranking just as badly to accept a lower rank than one deserves as to accept a higher rank than one deserves, so ambition is obligatory.

Second, to help ensure that one doesn't occupy a higher rank than one deserves, honorable people must welcome challenges from likely up-and-comers. You cannot simply *claim* to be the best violinist in the orchestra: you must prove you are by accepting challenges to your position. On the other hand, since not all would-be challengers have a plausible claim to one's rank, one needn't and indeed shouldn't accept challenges from those much lower-ranked, or challenge much higher-ranked competitors. It would be "impertinent" for a low-ranked player to challenge the first chair violinist without displacing those violinists in between. **Impertinence**, or not acting in ways suitable to your place in the competitive ranking, is a serious offense in honor ethics, since it either suggests you're unaware of relative excellence or just don't care.

Third, since one's claim to higher status isn't proven by besting lower-ranked opponents, the honorable avoid challenging those weaker or somehow lower-ranked than themselves. Although *accepting* challenges from those lower-ranked than you is often obligatory, *initiating* a contest with lower-ranked or weaker competitors suggests to others, if anything, that one sees oneself as deserving a lower, not a higher, place in their esteem.

Fourth, obviously one has no right to a certain competitive rank if one cheats. Honor demands scrupulous fairness in competitions among agonists. Without fairness, the competitive excellence we use to rank ourselves will remain obscured and our rankings will be arbitrary.

Dishonorable people, or those who violate the principles of honor, are to be excluded from the honor group and are banned from competitions for status within it. Exclusion from the honor group takes the form of contempt, whereupon the dishonored are rendered metaphorically invisible by the honor group, suffering what is sometimes termed "social death." Conflict with the dishonorable, which is sometimes inevitable, is not friendly and the courtesies owed to the honorable are not required.

We can codify these thoughts with the following principles:

RANK AMBITION: One must seek the highest status one deserves, so one must challenge those slightly higher-ranked if one thinks one can defeat them.

RANK HUMILITY: But one mustn't challenge those much higher-ranked, and much higher-ranked parties cannot accept challenges from those much lower-ranked.

NO DUCKING: One must not decline legitimate challenges to one's rank.

NO BULLYING: One mustn't aggress upon/challenge those of lower rank.

FAIR PLAY: Competition for rank must be fair.

FRIENDLY PLAY: You can compete only against the honorable.

RANK RESPECT: One must give (and demand) respect on the basis of membership and rank in the honor group.

There are more principles than these, of course. There are principles that govern how to “retire” from your honor group once you’re done competing, how to erase dishonor, how to respond to various sorts of insult, etc. And these seven principles themselves require fine-tuning, as any stated ethical principles inevitably do.

These principles and their underlying agonistic rationale make sense of some of the features of honor we have observed above. Honor is naturally concerned with standing because honor is agonistic, and the reason for the agon is so we can distribute social prestige according to relative excellence at something: poetry, music, football, philosophy, or almost anything else. Nonetheless, sometimes honor requires us to forsake standing because it obliges us to compete for prestige according to agonistic principles meant to suss out true competitive excellence: honor wants our *true excellence* to be recognized, but places no value whatsoever on undeserved status.

Honor allows a sort of unprovoked aggression directed toward the innocent strong, but not the weak, because (understanding aggression as challenge) honor assumes an agonistic framework in which you are allowed to challenge “up,” but not “down.” Challenging “up” is a gesture of respect to the challenged party, in fact, as is accepting a challenge from a lower-ranked challenger. On the other hand, bullying isn’t tolerated because it is viewed as an inappropriate challenge to a weaker party. This is why we say to bullies that they “should pick on someone their own size.”

That said, these aggressive confrontations must be understood as the “serious play” suitable to agonistic competition within an honor group. Thus, simply aggressing or challenging someone outside of the honor group, who isn’t part of the “game,” is not honorable. Moreover, honorable antagonists compete/fight/play without animus and with friendly regard. That is why (although it is not always possible) the honorable avoid any contact—including conflict—with those they consider dishonorable.

Why is honor so closely and uniquely associated with the virtue of integrity? Whereas those unconcerned with honor may be tempted by the sorts of pleasures or advantages one can illicitly gain when no one is watching, for the honorable agonist the very fact that no one is watching is what makes “goods” in such contexts utterly worthless. There is nothing sporting, fun, or meaningful in taking, with impunity, some illicit “good” for oneself. And as far as maintaining one’s resolve under pressure, the toughness and grit that come with the agonistic life are of the utmost value.

Finally, honor demands that we put up personal resistance when challenged, rather than give in or seek intercession from a stronger party, because (according to the agonistic mindset) your right to your prerogatives is dependent upon *your* ability to protect them against challenge. Your right to a position as a starter on the team, for example, is only as legitimate as your ability to defend it.

To a rather extreme honor mindset—and one shared by many cultures not so long ago—freedom itself was not considered a human right but a prerogative one had to earn by fighting for it. On that view, the community of free persons was itself seen as a sort of honor group one had to fight one's way into. Adams was able to successfully justify Peh's violence and "thus" his right to be free by exploiting this principle. Most of us no longer think that freedom should have to be earned. But that does not mean that honor doesn't require us to take an active role in resisting threats to our dignity, one aspect of which is certainly our freedom.

Objections and conclusion

Some traditional objections to honor ethics include the following.

First, it is questionable whether good social standing is valuable at all. For instance, hedonists will vigorously argue that the only good thing about positive social standing is the pleasure you get from it, and that if you were just as pleased at being dishonored, you'd be just as well off as you would be if you were honored. Others, including Aristotle, conceded that (outer) honor was superior to pleasure, but happiness through proper function was better than both. Preference-satisfactionists reduce the good for us to getting what we want in some sense, which may or may not be positive social standing. Disputes over the good are ongoing, and honor's contribution of positive social standing adds an interesting but controversial option to that debate.

Moving from honor's account of the good to its account of the right, it seems highly improbable to most people that the fundamental moral relationship between individuals and groups is agonistic. For example, all of us need care, and some of our strongest intuitions about what we must do are those saying we must care for others. It is also powerfully intuitive that we ought to work together and respect peoples' autonomy. These intuitions, captured (variously) by care ethics, contractarianism, and Kantianism, go unaccounted-for by honor ethics, it would seem. And of course, since honor is a deontological ethic, consequentialist objections inevitably apply: if a great deal of suffering could be prevented by one dishonorable act, doesn't it seem as if we are morally obligated to do it?

Finally, ethicists of various stripes consider agonistic competition itself to be morally problematic. It seems to some to necessitate needless unhappiness, since for every winner there must be a loser. Honor ethics can appear to justify elitism, and it is patently non-egalitarian, at least with respect to vertical honor. Finally, agonism pits us against each other. Unsympathetic ethicists tend to think morality should do just the opposite.

There may be satisfactory replies to these objections. And before dismissing honor on the basis of these or other objections, it is worthwhile to consider whether any moral theory you have encountered so far appears to be fully adequate. For honor ethicists, at least, this moral approach captures at least *part* of the truth—maybe that aspect of our lives that is about competing, testing ourselves against others, and seeking recognition.