

1

Honor as a Social Motive

Although the view that virtues such as justice and courage need honor as a reward goes back a long way, it was worked out most systematically by various Roman authors who did not only discern something noble in the longing for honor and a name that never dies, but also ascribed an important function to it. For instance, the Roman historian Gaius Sallust wrote in the first century BC that the greatness of Rome was a result of the competition for glory between those young men who, destined to lead by birth and education, entered the battlefield with a burning desire to beat their peers by being the first to slay an opponent (*Catilinae Coniuratio* 1–2, 7). Nearly two millennia later, Colonel Ardant Du Picq stated in his *Battle Studies* that, where the Greeks mainly pondered on the ideal depth of the phalanx, the in military affairs much more successful Romans addressed the question of what makes men fight, and that they had found the answer in making use of the soldier's sense of honor and shame (1947, 50–5). Although Du Picq is not entirely fair to the Greeks here,¹ it is true that they were in general less inclined to the view that virtue needs a reward. Plato, for instance, wrote in *The Republic* that

good men will not consent to govern for cash or honors. They do not want to be called mercenary for exacting a cash payment for the work of government, or thieves for making money on the side; and they will not work for honors, for they aren't ambitious (347b).

Although Plato stated in the concluding sections of *The Republic* that being just will be rewarded in this life with a good name (613), that reward is not presented as a helpful, let alone necessary, encouragement to virtue; a good man will persist in being good even if he gains a reputation for wickedness by it. Plato took a somewhat different position when he tried to sketch a more feasible ideal in his *Laws*; in that work he wrote about name and reputation as being necessary incentives, and the penalty of public disgracing as an effective disincentive (738, 740d, 754e-5a, 764a, 784d, 926d).

Although in general more practically minded than Plato, Aristotle wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that reason keeps good men on the path of virtue and that they therefore do not really need their sense of shame—a good man would be ashamed if he did something shameful, however, as he is not shameless (1095b, 1128b). On first sight, this view that reason suffices to keep a good man good might seem at odds with the fact that in the same book Aristotle described honor as being the most important of the secondary goods, and not to be disdained (1123b). Finding a right position towards honor is in fact an important theme in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where it is dealt with under the headings of magnanimity (for the great men) and ambition (for the rest of us). Magnanimity, wrote Aristotle, is about finding a mean between vanity and boastfulness on the one hand, and being overly modest on the other. Basically, the virtue of magnanimity, and the two accompanying vices of vanity and pusillanimity, are all about estimating one's own worth properly, and claiming due honor for it. The person who is too humble fails here just as much as the boaster does. One could even argue that the overly humble person is more to blame because his diffidence will bar him from an active life that, in the case of a man of virtue, would serve the public cause (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1123a–1125a). Ambition, more relevant to most people, is about finding the (unnamed) mean between seeking honor too much (and that goes under the name ambition) and too little (unambitiousness), and about seeking honor from the right sources and in the right way (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b). Yet, in the end Aristotle's account of honor is rather unenthusiastic, and entirely consistent with his dismissal of shame: the man of virtue only accepts honor because there is nothing greater to bestow upon virtue, and it only gives him moderate pleasure. He definitely does not need it as a spur to virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1124a).

Honor and the Romans

Most Roman authors were much more outspoken on the good effects of honor than that: they thought that almost no one is willing to act for the greater good unless there is honor to be earned. Virtuous acts should therefore be seen and, more important, praised at length. Sallust, who sought fame as a man of letters only after other paths to glory (such as politics and the military) were blocked to him at a time (i.e., after the civil war that brought Julius Caesar to power) when, as he saw it, honor was no longer given to the deserving (*Bellum Iugurthinum* 3–4), opened his account of the conspiracy of Catiline with the statement that

every man who wishes to rise superior to the lower animals should strive his hardest to avoid living all his days in silent obscurity, like the beasts of the field, creatures which go with their faces to the ground and the slaves of their bellies (*Catilinae Coniuratio* 1).

Other Roman historians held similar views, as did some Roman philosophers, most notably Marcus Tullius Cicero. The latter, besides a philosopher also a lawyer and statesman, is without a doubt the best-known and most subtle representative of the Roman honor ethic, and, until not too long ago, a very influential one, more influential for instance than the Greek philosophers that we today tend to hold in higher regard. In fact, Cicero's *On Duty* has been called (alongside Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*) the book most influential on the modern world (Strachan-Davidson 1894, 369; see also Long 2008, 56).

In Cicero's works we find a form of conventional ethics that is, albeit less demanding, as moral and as sophisticated as modern accounts of morality that give center stage to the notion of autonomy. A notion we can safely assume Cicero would have thought unattainable: although the view on honor that underlies the ideal of autonomy—honor is neither needed as an incentive, nor as a heuristic device to discover what is just—has come to be the dominant view only quite recently, it has always had its adherents. Opposing the honor ethic, writes Charles Taylor, there was for instance “the celebrated and influential counter-position put forward by Plato. Virtue is no longer to be found in public life (. . .). The higher life is that ruled by reason, and reason itself is defined in terms of a vision of order in the cosmos and in the soul” (1992a, 20). In Greek and

Roman antiquity varieties of this counter-position were defended by the Platonists, the Cynics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics (see also Taylor 1992a, 20). Cicero especially opposed the latter two schools, which both tried to convince their respective audiences that honor was definitely not worth pursuing, as it brings more ill than good.

To begin with the Epicureans (their ideas were spread among the Romans through the poet Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*): they held that happiness and peace of mind are the two most valuable things in life. Our Sisyphus-like struggle for honor and glory puts those very things at risk, since failure clearly brings pain, while success only brings the envy of others. Equanimity (and with that a god-like life) can only be attained if we do away with our unwarranted fears, above all that of death, it being the principal source of the ambition for a name that lasts after one's demise (Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* III 59). The Epicureans were always keen to ridicule that wish for an eternal fame—why bother about one's standing when no longer around to enjoy it? But in Cicero's view, more polemic than truthful—Cicero must have read the work of Lucretius, but misrepresented the Epicurean moral philosophy as hedonistic all the same—Epicurean philosophy was mistaken in seeing man as essentially living for himself, and even self-seeking.² Although convinced of its being misguided, Cicero feared the consequences of people trying to live by Epicureanism nonetheless, neglecting their duties to the state.³

The Stoics were equally hostile to the notion of honor. Partly because of reasons similar to those the Epicureans held, and partly out of a more demanding view of man that held that people potentially love virtue, and should be able to act accordingly. That this potential is often not realized is because our natural, good inclinations seldom win out over the prejudices of society, which value money, power, and glory over virtue. That we in general listen to the murmuring around us is the main cause of our falling short of the Stoic benchmark, which states that an act undertaken in exchange for a reward, for instance honor or fame, is not virtuous in any way—below the level of perfect virtue everything is equally bad. Imagining that a Cato or Scipio is present might help someone on his path to virtue, yet virtue is only truly attained when being one's own witness suffices, Seneca wrote to his friend Lucilius (*On Reformation*).

According to Cicero the Stoic definition of virtue was unworkable and even dangerously strict, as it takes away the incentive for trying to be virtuous from those who are not without faults, but mean well (*De*

Finibus IV.21, 55, 63–8, 75–7; *Pro Murena* 61–5). Although it is conceivable that someone perfectly wise acts virtuously for the sake of virtue, just like the Stoics wanted to see it, such individuals are very rare—Cicero claimed he had never met one (*Tusculanae Disputationes* II.51). For the not so wise some feedback from peers might, in combination with a concern for reputation, be of help (see for instance *Tusculanae Disputationes* II.47–50). So where Epicurean philosophy asks too little, Stoic philosophy asks too much, while Cicero himself was proud that he wrote about what the Stoics called “mean duties,” a level of morality that falls short of perfection yet is within reach for the average person (*De Officiis* III.14–17). Even such a less demanding philosophy is of no use, though, for those who fall below that average level; thieves and cut-throats have to be constrained by “chains and prison walls” (*De Officiis* III.73). It is a good thing that such nihilists form only a small minority. As Rome “had no central peacekeeping force” (Barton 2001, 18) the beneficial effects of chains and prison walls were bound to be limited. Rome could only flourish as long as honor, shame, and a fear of disgrace governed its citizens (Barton 2001, 23).

Fortunately most Romans remained convinced, despite the influence of Epicurean and Stoic thought, that honor was the highest good for men, and something with an existence in reality. Cicero therefore thought that honor could provide a middle ground between the alleged hedonism of Epicureanism and the strictness of the Stoics.⁴ Virtuous persons are in general far from indifferent to praise, and this should not be held against them because of the two functions, already mentioned in the introduction, that honor performs. First of all, our concern for how others see us can help us to actually *see* what the virtuous way to behave is:

We observe others and from a glance of the eyes, from a contracting or relaxing of the brows, from an air of sadness, from an outburst of joy, from a laugh, from speech, from silence, from a raising of a lowering of the voice, and the like, we shall easily judge which of our actions is proper, and which is out of accord with duty and nature (*De Officiis* I.146).

Also, since we detect faults more easily in others than in ourselves, it is wise to study others to find out what is unbecoming (*De Officiis* I.146). We do well, finally, to seek advice from men of learning and practical wisdom for guidance; not unlike painters, sculptors, and poets, we

should consult the judgments of others to find out what to do and what to leave undone, and what to improve or alter (*De Officiis* I.147).

Secondly, the concern for reputation motivates to also *behave* virtuously; although most people are in general not selfish, we cannot expect them to perform their duties from a sense of duty alone. In one of his pleas Cicero stated that “magnanimity looks for no other recognition of its toils and dangers save praise and glory; once rob it of that, gentlemen, and in this brief and transitory pilgrimage of life what further incentive have we to high endeavour” (*Pro Archia Poeta* 28). What’s more, “deep in every noble heart dwells a power which plies night and day the good of glory, and bids us see to it that the remembrance of our names should not pass away with life, but should endure coeval with all the ages of the future” (*Pro Archia Poeta* 29).⁵ According to Leo Braudy, especially Cicero’s later speeches became “more and more filled with allusions to the central importance of the urge to fame as a motivation to public service” (1986, 78). But honor forms not only a spur to virtue, it also keeps us from doing the wrong things; Cicero thought that the censure from our peers is a punishment we cannot run away from and, more important, that no one is insensible enough to put up with the blame of others—that is a burden too heavy to bear.

What confuses matters a bit regarding this second function—honor as an incentive to do the right thing—is that Cicero paid tribute to the exacting Stoic position (and described himself as being Stoic) on some instances in his philosophical work. Cicero took a strict and Stoic stance, for example, when he attacked Epicureanism in *De Finibus* (II.52–3), or in *De Re Publica* (I.27), defending the Platonic position that military commands and consulships should be undertaken from a sense of duty, not for profit or glory, and also in *De Officiis*, arguing that what is morally right is “worth the seeking for its own sake” (III.33). Referring to the tale of Gyges, Cicero stated there that good men “aim to secure not secrecy but the right” (III.38). What is *honestum*, that is, worthy of honor, still deserves honor when no one honors it (*De Officiis* I.14; *De Finibus* II.48; see also Moore 2002, 370).

But on the whole, it is the position that honor is legitimate and necessary motivator that he took most often, also in his philosophical treatises. In the first book of his *Tusculanae Disputationes* he for instance wrote:

Again, in this commonwealth of ours, with what thought in their minds do we suppose such an army of illustrious men have

lost their lives for the commonwealth? Was it that their name should be restricted to the narrow limits of their life? No one would ever have exposed himself to death for his country without good hope of immortality (I.32).

And, in the second book:

Nature has made us, as I have said before—it must often be repeated—enthusiastic seekers after honor, and once we have caught, as it were, some glimpse of its radiance, there is nothing we are not prepared to bear and go through in order to secure it. It is from this rush, this impulse from our soul towards true renown and reputation that the dangers of battle are encountered; brave men do not feel wounds in the line of battle, or if they feel them prefer death rather than move one step from the post that honor has appointed (II.58).

Cicero thought that no one will put aside his or her own interests for the greater good if there is no fame or honor to be earned. He believed this applied to all, citizens and soldiers alike; we should not believe people who claim to be insensitive to fame and glory (*De Officiis* I.71). Something that of course not only holds true for the average and uneducated, but also for philosophers, even the Stoics and Epicureans: “Do they not inscribe their names upon the actual books they write about contempt of fame?” (*Tusculanae Disputationes* I.34).

Although it might appear a little ironic in light of his sometimes ambiguous position on the relation between honor and virtue, Cicero emphasized that in his opinion “philosophers (. . .) must be judged not by isolated utterances, but by uninterrupted consistency” (*Tusculanae Disputationes* V.31). Hannah Arendt, however, has argued (writing about Marx) that “fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of great authors they lead into the very centre of their work” (1958, 104–5), and that might also be the case with Cicero’s wavering position on honor. As to the question which is Cicero’s most “true” position on honor, the Stoic one he now and then espoused in his philosophical work or the more enthusiastic one present in both his pleas and his philosophy, we should keep in mind that Cicero was not a philosopher’s philosopher, but a practically minded author who wanted to be relevant, setting a standard that was achievable for most people. He certainly did not subscribe to the Aristotelian view, referred

to in the above, that shame is not a virtue because a mature person can be expected to never do actions one should be ashamed of (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b, 1128b).

True and False Honor

Yet, although recognizing that virtue needs a reward, Cicero at the same time insisted that recognition for public service should be sufficient remuneration for a statesman or a general, and that seeking wealth as a reward for toils endured is, in fact, corrupt. Cicero cited examples from Roman history of commanders who brought enormous spoils into the treasury, but kept for themselves nothing except “the glory of an immortal name” (*De Officiis* II.76). In Plutarch we read how Coriolanus, although selfish in his desire for recognition, earlier in his career won admiration for declining the one-tenth share in war booty that was offered to him (*Coriolanus* 10). Later, Cato Major would act similarly, as he wanted to compete in bravery with the bravest, and not in greed with the greediest (Plutarch *Cato the Elder* 10). For his own rescuing of the republic from the hands of Catiline and his fellow conspirators, Cicero asked, in his speech to the people of December 3, 63 BC,

no reward for my valour, no signal mark of distinction, no monument in my honour except that this day be remembered for all time. It is in your hearts that I wish to have set all my triumphs, all the decorations of distinction, the monuments of fame, the tokens of praise (*In Catilinam* III.26).

In his speech to the senate he asked nothing, “except that you remember this occasion and the whole of my consulship” (*In Catilinam* IV.23). Although this might have been modest requests in Cicero’s own eyes, Plutarch wrote that most Romans after a while “grew tired of hearing him continually praising himself” (*Cicero* 24).

Reading Plutarch’s biographies of Roman statesmen and commanders suggests that all great Romans experienced some difficulties finding the correct attitude towards fame and recognition, with the more austere Romans of the earlier centuries of the republic doing a better job at it than their successors. Roman history contains some telling examples of ambitious noblemen, such as Coriolanus, Catiline, and, most notably, Caesar, who brought the republic close to disaster by putting their own personal glory above state interest, taking up weapons against

their fellow citizens in their quest for recognition. More a moralist than a historian, Plutarch portrayed Caesar, but also Coriolanus, Catiline, Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Mark Antony, to serve as warnings of what can happen if the longing for honor and glory is not checked by wisdom and some zeal for the public cause. It is not a coincidence that in the end most of these men (Marius and Sulla are the exceptions) died violent deaths. Plutarch ends his *Life of Caesar* with the remark that Caesar, when he died, had not much more than “a glory which had awakened envy on the part of his fellow citizens” (69).

Recounting such examples from the past, as Plutarch and Cicero were in the habit of doing, served more purposes than just illustrating one’s point; as most Roman authors they thought that examples, both the good ones and the bad ones, can also contribute something to character formation:

For, if you turn your thoughts back to early history, you will see that the character of our most prominent men has been reproduced in the whole state; whatever change took place in the lives of the prominent men has also taken place in the whole people (Cicero *De Legibus* III 31; see also Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b).

In the Roman view, people do not get the government they deserve, as the saying now goes, but vice versa: politicians get the people they deserve by the example they set. According to Cicero, for instance, “every state is such as its ruler’s character will make it” (*De Re Publica* I.47).⁶ It is therefore important that the censors “shall allow no one guilty of dishonourable conduct to remain in the senate” (*De Legibus* III. 7), so that “the senatorial order shall be free from dishonour, and shall be a model for the rest of the citizens” (*De Legibus* III.10).

Although it was in his view the only reason to high endeavor in life, a necessary check on our behavior, and an indispensable tool to find out what is just at the same time, Cicero did see that a lack of moderation in the pursuit of fame and glory can be dangerous. He warned that the pursuit of honor can also work against the common good: the higher our ambition, the more easily our desire for recognition can tempt us to act unjustly (*De Officiis* I.26, 65; see also Barton 2001, 27, 54–5). Many Romans were more willing to part with their money or life than sacrifice the slightest amount of personal glory in the interest of the state (*De Officiis* I.84).

Like many philosophers of the past, Cicero therefore distinguished between true and false glory, and held that true glory should serve the public cause, not merely some personal end (*Tusculanae Disputationes* III.3–4). He described true glory as

the agreed approval of good men, the unbiased verdict of judges deciding honestly the question of pre-eminent merit; it gives back to virtue the echo of her voice; and as it generally attends upon duties rightly performed it is not to be disdained by good men (*Tusculanae Disputationes* III.3–4).

Because false glory—mere public reputation—looks very similar to true glory, some people, despite having “some noble ambitions,” are “misled in their quest of the best,” and bring about the ruin of their country or themselves (*Tusculanae Disputationes* III.3–4). In Cicero’s view

true and philosophic greatness of spirit regards the moral goodness to which nature most aspires as consisting in deeds, not in fame, and prefers to be first in reality rather than in name. And we must approve of this view; for he who depends upon the caprice of the ignorant rabble cannot be numbered among the great (*De Officiis* I.65).

Or, as Aristotle stated it before him: the rightfully proud man despises honor from ordinary people, given on trivial grounds (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1124a). Honor does not consist of the applause of the masses, and especially when we are doing well, we should not listen to flatterers suggesting that we are entitled to praise when we actually are not. Such flattery might lead to the worst kind of blunders (*De Officiis* I.91). Honor and fame are not the same (see also Bowman 2006, 273–9; Welsh 2008, 1–4).

But while this idea of honor as the agreed approval of good men, and serving a greater good, tackles some of the drawbacks of honor, Cicero at the same time feared that this was too demanding. Great ambitions in general spring up in “the greatest souls and brilliant geniuses” (*De Officiis* I.26), and Cicero thought that taking the moral high ground could bring us “on very slippery ground; for scarcely can the man be found who has passed through trials and encountered dangers and does not then wish for glory as a reward for his achievements” (*De Officiis* I.65). But as he did not subscribe to the Stoic belief that there is no relation at all

between honor and virtue, our wish for honor and glory as a reward was not necessarily problematic in Cicero's view; that undeserved praise gives us little pleasure shows that honor and virtue are closely connected (*De Legibus* I.32). So Cicero could write quite unproblematically that

the man who concludes that the soul is mortal may yet attempt deeds that will not die, not from a thirst for fame, of which he will have no enjoyment, but from a thirst for virtue, which of necessity secures fame, even if it be not its object (*Tusculanae Disputationes* I.91).

Mere "pretence" and "empty show," on the other hand, will not suffice to secure glory; the short cut to glory, Cicero cited Socrates, "is to strive to be what you wish to be thought to be" (*De Officiis* II.43). Cicero held that it was because of "the similarity between moral worth and renown" that "those who are publicly honoured are considered happy, while those who do not attain fame are thought miserable" (*De Legibus* I.32).

Cicero argued elsewhere that the wisdom of the statesman brings fame and is therefore preferable to the wisdom of the philosopher (*De Re Publica* III.6). And it is for good reasons that we laud the statesman more than the philosopher, seeing that "the existence of virtue depends entirely upon its use," and that "its noblest use is the government of the state" (*De Re Publica*, I.2). Such an active life leaves enough time to philosophize (*De Officiis* I.19). But in the end Cicero's urging to not neglect one's duties to the public cause proved to no avail. In Sallust we read how the competition for honor that had made Rome flourish, gave way first to ambition, a fault that, according to Sallust, still comes close to being a virtue, and later avarice, weakening man's moral fiber and in the end causing the ruin of the Roman republic (*Catilinae Coniuratio* 10). Cicero himself noted that "the moral sense of today is demoralized and depraved by our worship of wealth" (*De Officiis* II.71; see also *Pro Publico Quinctio* 93).

That Plutarch emphasized no less than three times that Caesar was more afraid of pale and lean (and hence virtuous) men, such as Brutus, than of fat and luxurious men (*Caesar* 62; *Brutus* 8; *Mark Antony* 11) is also a sign that times were changing for the worse. That Caesar feared the virtuous more than the wicked suggests, besides ill intent on his part, that it was personal glory he was after. In a way it is ironic that Cicero was to witness how unchecked hunger for glory caused the end of the Roman republic (and Cicero's life) when Caesar started a civil

war because of perceived offences to his *dignitas*. Political theorist William A. Galston seems therefore to have been quite right when he wrote that vanity

can never be satisfied with the honor and recognition of one or a few men, for every man who goes his own way or refuses to honor the vain man is a direct threat to his self-esteem. Vanity feeds on, indeed requires, new conquests, for in a curious way the men who bow down cease to be taken seriously, their esteem ceases to be esteemed. The vain man thus looks for larger and larger worlds to conquer and ends up by desiring universal recognition (1975, 238).

The Stoic and Epicurean view that peace, and especially peace of mind, is to be valued most in life would become more popular during the tumultuous days that followed the collapse of the republic. More than before, the competition for honor and glory was seen as endangering those very values.

Aristocratic Honor Criticized: Honor is a Form of Vanity

The end of the Roman republic did not bring an end to the honor ethic, however. The notion of honor still played an important role, for instance, in the code of chivalry of the Middle Ages, although it took a different form. In theory chivalry heavily depended on Christian notions of perfection (see for instance Matthew 5: 48) and purity of intention (Matthew 6:1–6 and 16–18) that were even more strict, and hostile to honor, than Stoicism was. According to Hannah Arendt,

the one activity taught by Jesus in word and deed is the activity of goodness, and goodness obviously harbors a tendency to hide from being heard or seen. (. . .) The moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake. When goodness appears openly, it is no longer goodness (1958, 74).

An otherwise good act that is seen by others is, because of that fact alone, not truly good.

But the Christian ideal actually raises the bar considerably higher than Arendt thought, seeing that even being conscious of one's own

good deed, and possibly feeling good about it, already diminishes the goodness of that deed. A humble Christian, Avishai Margalit writes,

is supposed to pay no regard to himself while being constantly preoccupied with himself, especially with the purity of his own motives. This seems to be a logical impossibility. In contrast, the Stoic “internal” man is supposed to ignore the outside social world—not an easy task, but not a logical impossibility (1996, 26).

In reality, chivalry often resembled the individualistic striving for honor as depicted by Homer (Huizinga 1982, 61). As the Polish philosopher Maria Ossowska put it: “Although the Church tried to make the knight subservient to its aims, the moral code of the knight was in disagreement with the teachings of the church. Pride was extolled instead of humility, vengeance was urged for every real or imaginary insult” (1971, 138). The Christian and bellicose elements came together in a favorite pastime of the mediaeval knight, the crusade, while another popular diversion, the tournament, provided the knight with a public to show his valor (although some public was present during medieval battles too). When in the late Middle Ages war began to resemble what we call guerilla tactics, the mediaeval form of honor began to dwindle. The canon eventually sealed the fate of chivalry (Huizinga 1982, 100).

In the Renaissance the rediscovery of classical thought gave the ethics of honor a new impulse; in 1341 Petrarca declared honor to be the highest good for a man of letters, starting the development of an ideology prescribing that the young should be educated to be enthusiastic seekers after honor (Q. Skinner 1978, 100–1). At the end of the sixteenth century, Francis Bacon, one of the founders of modern science, could still write that “there is an honour (. . .), which may be ranked among the greatest, which happens rarely: That is, of such as sacrifice themselves, to death or dangers, for the good of their country: As was M. Regulus and the two Decii” (*Of Honor and Reputation*). Honor even aspires to death, Bacon wrote elsewhere (*On Death*). With his belief that honor is a legitimate and necessary reward for virtue, Bacon stood in his moral writings still with both feet in the tradition developed by Romans like Cicero, as did many of his contemporaries.

The Renaissance ideal stayed very much alive until in the seventeenth century “with his bristling code of honour and his continual thirst for glory, the typical hero of the Renaissance began to appear

slightly comical in his willful disregard for the natural instinct of self-preservation” (Q. Skinner 1978, 101). In that century Thomas Hobbes, who in his *Leviathan* had tried to establish a science of man modeled after the natural sciences, stated that people are mainly driven by self-interest, thus reducing honor to an important yet selfish (and dangerous) motive that is hard to distinguish from vanity.⁷ According to Charles Taylor this “withering critique,” denouncing the goals of the honor ethic “as vainglory and vanity, as the fruits of an almost childish presumption” proved successful in undermining the ethic of honor (1992a, 214; see also Johnson Bagby 2009). Although he locates that critique in the work of Hobbes, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and Molière, Taylor also points out that “the negative arguments in these writers are not new. Plato himself was suspicious of the honour ethic, as concerned with mere appearances. The Stoics rejected it; and it was denounced by Augustine as the exaltation of the desire for power” (1992a, 214). Yet, as said, it was not until the seventeenth century that this “rival theory about the universality of self-interest” did so well that for the first time many people stopped believing in the reality of honor (Q. Skinner 1978, 101).

This rival theory was so successful that less than a century after Hobbes the contemporary view of honor as something with no apparent relationship with virtue was foreshadowed in the work of Montesquieu, who saw honor as the principle of monarchies, a form of government wherein virtue gave way to honor, defined (“philosophically false,” as Montesquieu himself admitted) as preferences, rank, distinction, and the like, leading to fine actions nonetheless. The principle of virtue governs in democracies, their flourishing or falling depending on its citizen’s caliber of virtue (*Esprit des Lois* I.iii.1–7). Again a century later, less than two centuries after Hobbes, Alexis de Tocqueville famously described, in *Democracy in America*, modern individualism as “a calm and considered feeling which deposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends” (1969, 506). This is a complete turnabout from the days of Cicero and Sallust; the relatively safe private sphere was now deemed more important than the public realm, the domain in which a name could be made, not in the least by exploits in war. What happened was, again in the words of Taylor,

what Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of values.” The new highest good is not only erected as a standard by which other, ordinary goods are judged but often radically alters our view of

their value, in some cases taking what was previously an ideal and branding it a temptation. Such was the fate of the warrior honour ethic at the hands of Plato, and later of Augustine, and later still in the eyes of the modern ethic of ordinary life (1992a, 65).

Nevertheless, in Tocqueville's view "that which our ancestors called honor was really only one of its forms" (1969, 623), and those who, as Montesquieu did, held that there is no place for honor in democracies, mistook what was only a species, in Montesquieu's case the honor of the court, for the genus. According to Tocqueville, although at one point stating that only "some scattered notions" of the aristocratic notion of honor had survived in democratic America (1969, 620–1), honor still performs its function in modern society, although with rules less odd and less numerous, and its workings less visible.

Conclusion

As an astute observer of the difference between aristocratic and democratic honor, Tocqueville noted that in democratic times the rules of honor are not only less far removed from common sense, but also less specific. As a consequence, they are bound to lose something of their force; democratic honor is less compelling than aristocratic honor because it is less peculiar. Although, according to Tocqueville, a democratic people has needs "which give rise to common opinions concerning honor," these opinions never present themselves "with equal intensity to the mind of every citizen; the law of honor exists, but it is often left without interpreters" (1969, 624). With such an indefinite law of honor, less understood than the prescripts of old and accordingly hard to apply, public opinion, "the natural and supreme interpreter of the law of honor, not seeing clearly to which side to incline in the distribution of praise and blame, always hesitates in giving judgment" (Tocqueville 1969, 625). That in democratic societies (by which term Tocqueville basically meant egalitarian societies and not per se societies ruled by the people) the rules of honor are somewhat unclear—but also less martial and violent, and more gentle and productive—is in itself a relatively small price to pay for the providential fact that democratic honor, analogous to the shift from the Roman ranking concept of *dignitas* to the more egalitarian notion of dignity, is less hierarchical and more inclusive than Cicero's aristocratic notion of honor.

Essentially, democratic honor and its indefiniteness are the by-products of a more egalitarian society. Aristocratic honor concerned mainly those who were by birth destined to lead, and who therefore had a stake in specific rules and a rather violent conception of honor since that helped them to maintain their privileged position, whereas in a democracy, with its citizens less keen on eccentric conventions, it is the action itself that is praiseworthy or blameworthy; who performs it (or suffers from it) is irrelevant (Tocqueville 1969, 617; see also Walzer 1983, 251, 267). In other words, while in aristocratic society descent was very important, something that made honor based on merit close to impossible, democratic honor is based on desert. Or so it should be; in the real world, peculiarities—traces of more hierarchical notions—remain (Tocqueville 1969, 618). That notwithstanding, in democratic societies the rules of honor tend to stay close to “notions of right and wrong that are common to all the world,” and do not resemble the “very exotic notions” that honor endorsed in earlier times (1969, 616).

A bit more particularistic, although in tune with the present (which somewhat clouds its particularity to us), is that in Tocqueville’s days honor was supposed to advance the productive virtues, and not so much for instance military valor or courage in dueling, whereas such things as idleness were something public opinion should discourage: “all those quiet virtues which tend to regularity in the body social and which favor trade are sure to be held in special honor by this people, and to neglect them will bring one into public contempt” (Tocqueville 1969, 621). The admiration for these, in Tocqueville’s terms, “quiet virtues” was at the expense of the esteem for the “turbulent” ones (the latter probably resemble what Adam Smith called the awful virtues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) that bring glory but also trouble to a society. Emile Durkheim would in *The Division of Labor in Society* observe that “the praiseworthy man of former times is only a dilettante to us” (1964, 42). And, writes Durkheim, “we refuse to give dilettantism any moral value; we rather see perfection in the man seeking, not to be complete, but to produce; who has a restricted task, and devotes himself to it; who does his duty, accomplishes his work” (1964, 42). That in a democracy citizens are more disposed to admire the gentle and quiet virtues is of course because that is what benefits them, and society, most. These changes, as a more recent author put it,

did not just mean the reduction or removal of the element of force from the prevalent concept of honor. The change also had

a positive side, in the sense that something else took the place of force. Thus, by the seventeenth century, economic solidity was a major supplementary source of honor for men (Spierenburg 1998, 6).

This affirmation of ordinary life, which brought about the admiration for the productive and useful virtues, was bound to have a negative effect on the valuation of the, almost by definition unproductive, soldierly virtues. Immanuel Kant, who held that wars were the result of aristocrats fighting for personal honor and glory, had gone as far as stating, in his *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, that putting the power in the hands of the people would make war a phenomenon of the past because ordinary citizens would only lose by it—a thought that still lies at the basis of the democratic peace theory in the study of international relations.

And indeed, according to Tocqueville, especially “martial valor is little esteemed” in the democratic era (1969, 620–2), while Hume already had pointed out that

heroism, or military glory, is much admired by the generality of mankind. They consider it as the most sublime kind of merit. Men of cool reflection are not so sanguine in their praises of it. The infinite confusions and disorder, which it has caused in the world, diminish much of its merit in their eyes (*A Treatise of Human Nature* III.iii.ii).

Adam Smith held that officers of war, and “the whole army and navy, are unproductive labourers” (*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* II.3.2), and that war itself is a very destructive activity. For the rest, Hume and Smith did not mention war and the soldierly virtues nearly as often as for instance Cicero or Sallust had done. In our day Smith’s observations are echoed by, for instance, Francis Fukuyama who remarked that the “struggle for recognition has shifted from the military to the economic realm, where it has the socially beneficial effect of creating rather than destroying wealth” (1995, 7). It seems that honor in the modern era should spur us to industrious lives. This more democratic and productive form of honor had gotten its intellectual footing in the political and moral philosophy in the two centuries or so that preceded that of Tocqueville.