

Chapter One

The Passions and Limitations of Honor

The Godfather describes the existential conflict between two sets of values partially constituting competing prescriptive and descriptive visions of the world: a nineteenth-century Sicilian perspective grounded in honor and the accumulation of power within a culturally specific family order, and a twentieth-century American perspective celebrating individualism and commercial success. The two sets of values coalesce uneasily in the same cultural setting and their conflict is irresolvable. Ultimately, the Sicilian perspective must wither away in the United States because, unlike the old country, the new world lacks its sustaining cultural conditions. This reading interprets *The Godfather* as, among other things, a commentary on the transformation of personal identity within the Sicilian and Italian immigrant experience.

This chapter concentrates on two pivotal scenes: Amerigo Bonasera's solicitation of the intercession of Don Vito Corleone in punishing miscreants who brutally assaulted the undertaker's daughter; and Tom Hagen's discussions with film mogul Jack Woltz pursuant to securing a movie role for Don Vito's godson, Johnny Fontane. The substance and aftermath of these encounters illuminate the nineteenth-century Sicilian values that Don Vito embodies. Most strikingly, they demonstrate Don Vito's boundless regard for honor, respect, and power, for both measuring personal worth and protecting self and family in a hostile social environment. On this rendering, the accumulation of wealth is a means facilitating the realization of these higher values. The chapter provides philosophical analyses of the values of honor and respect, as well as critically evaluates

their benefits and limitations for salutary living. As such, this chapter provides the foundation for understanding *The Godfather* as showcasing the existential incompatibility of nineteenth-century Sicilian patriarchal values and twentieth-century American culture.

A Mortician Seeks Justice

“I believe in America. America has made my fortune.”

—Amerigo Bonasera

The Godfather begins brilliantly with an aptly named undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera, petitioning Don Vito Corleone at the wedding of Constanza Corleone and Carlo Rizzi. Knowing that, by tradition, a Sicilian father cannot refuse any reasonable request on his daughter’s wedding day, Bonasera describes what Don Vito¹ already knows: two non-Italian boys forced the undertaker’s beautiful, virtuous daughter to drink whiskey and then brutally assaulted her when she refused to submit to their sexual overtures. Bonasera swells with pride as he assures Don Vito that the girl kept her honor. However, she suffered a shattered jaw, broken nose, permanent facial disfigurement, and horrifying emotional distress. As a Sicilian craving desperately to become fully American, Bonasera brought charges through the criminal justice system. In the light of overwhelming evidence, the two reprobates pled guilty. The presiding judge scolded the criminals and levied sentences of three years each, which he promptly suspended. As the two malefactors left the courtroom they smirked when passing Bonasera, in effect rubbing his nose in dishonor. The mockery of legal probity besmirched the undertaker’s faith in America and disgraced his entire family. Amerigo now asks Don Vito for the justice denied him by American jurisprudence. He whispers that he wants Don Vito to murder the boys and will pay any price for the service.

Don Vito, parceling out contempt and condescension in measured doses under the guise of explanation, informs Bonasera that although the Don’s wife is the godmother (*commare*) to the victimized girl and a close friend of Bonasera’s wife, the undertaker has avoided all contact with Don Vito. Amerigo has trusted in and been rewarded by the new country and has received his justice from the courts. Why does he now complain? He has garnered precisely what an unconnected Sicilian immigrant should

expect. Now, Bonasera does not offer friendship. He ignores traditional Sicilian manners and protocol. Moreover, Don Vito is not a killer by contract and what Bonasera asks is a disproportionate response to the offense, not justice.

Translation: Bonasera, you thought America was different from Sicily—that judges were not corrupt, law enforcement was impartial, and you could ignore the family structure, allow a legal dispute to remain such, and thereby be rewarded for your civic rectitude. You have played the fool and you now reap what you have sown. Your courageous daughter retained her honor, whereas you have cast honor aside in deference to profit and assimilation. You have received that for which you bargained. You have assiduously shunned a relationship that was forged by my wife’s sacred oath as *commare* to your daughter. You now seek to exploit my daughter’s wedding day to gain your vengeful design. Instead of petitioning for forgiveness, demonstrating respect, and redeeming the relationship of our families, you regard this matter as murder for money—an arm’s-length bargain between strangers or acquaintances. Bonasera, is there any Sicilian remaining within you? You know or should know the appropriate drill, but you reveal yourself as nothing more than a commonplace *stronzo*. You have earned your American fortune but squandered your manhood.

Bonasera gushes with an extravagant faith in the possibilities of the new world that has been rewarded. He has made his fortune in America and has achieved material security unavailable in his homeland to a person such as himself. Now, he has run afoul of a legal system manipulated by the wealthy and powerful and of licentious social customs that contributed to his daughter’s victimization. This conflict forms the cornerstone of the dilemma all immigrants, including Don Vito, experienced at some level: Does individual aggrandizement, amplified personal freedom, and material success undermine the preservation of family cohesion? Can the family and the old value system survive in a radically different cultural context with relaxed standards of propriety? If not, what is to become of our identity, how may we define ourselves in the new world?

After lowering his demand for justice from killing the perpetrators to making them suffer comparably for what they inflicted on his daughter, Bonasera, stunningly, is so fearful of incurring a debt to Don Vito that he again offers money for the Don’s services. Don Vito calmly but firmly excoriates Bonasera’s Americanism. The undertaker has secured “his fortune” through dishonorable submission: he dances like a puppet at the end of strings manipulated by corrupt, American masters.

You go to the law courts and wait for months. You spend money on lawyers who know full well you are to be made a fool of. You accept judgment from a judge who sells himself like the worst whore in the streets. Years gone by, when you needed money you went to the banks and paid ruinous interest, waited hand in hand like a beggar while they sniffed around [your affairs].²

The godfather wonders how he has offended Bonasera such that the undertaker reiterates such disrespect. He instructs Bonasera that should he vow friendship (pledge his loyalty) all his enemies would become Don Vito's enemies and Bonasera would become a feared man by association. At once, Don Vito scorns Bonasera's feckless understanding of power and asserts the range of his own agency. In the instant case, the culprits who terrorized his daughter would be suffering forthwith. Finally perceiving the obvious, Bonasera implores Don Vito for friendship while kissing his hand. These words and this gesture are performative: they constitute Bonasera's pledge of loyalty. Don Vito accepts and reminds Bonasera that there may come a day when the Don will request a service from his newly vowed friend.

The film omits some critical information from the novel. The two reprobates were Jerry Wagner and Kevin Moonan, presumably German-American and Irish-American, respectively. One of them was the son of a powerful politician, and the implication is stark: the sentences were suspended through political and legal corruption. The judge noted that the perpetrators were from "good families." Bonasera fatuously placed his faith in American justice, but the fix was in place at the outset. Don Vito is not surprised because his illegally obtained gains depend upon arrangements with corrupt members of law enforcement and government.

Amerigo Bonasera believes in America because the new world has provided opportunities for upward mobility unavailable in his place of birth, has allowed him to flourish financially, and has encouraged him to dream. But he must now seek Don Vito's intercession if he is to gain justice for his injured daughter and restore the honor of his immediate family. The mortician's belief in America is rewarded insofar as his interests do not conflict with those of higher social rank and their political collaborators. Owning and operating his funeral home are nonthreatening capitalist enterprises. Lodging criminal allegations against scions of the American establishment is quite another matter.

Curiously, Bonasera is one of the few characters in the film who speaks with an Italian accent. Despite his most profound yearnings, the self-styled American straddles two worlds. That Don Vito feels compelled to remind Bonasera that friends bear mutual obligations of assistance underscores the godfather's lack of faith in the undertaker's Sicilian allegiance. Of course, Bonasera would understand the terms of their relationship, the precise stipulations he had tried to avoid by obtusely offering money in exchange for the services he requested. Throughout the discussion, Bonasera forgets that the accumulation of money is merely an instrument for securing higher Sicilian values: power, respect, and honor. In his quest to assimilate, the mortician has confused a means as an end. He now pays the spiritual price.

Don Vito poses as a tradesman of justice. He refuses Bonasera's initial request of murdering Wagner and Moonan on the grounds of its disproportionality to their offense. This pose reeks of disingenuity: Don Vito had often retaliated disproportionately in the past and will do so in the future. For example, Don Vito responded disproportionately when he coerced the bandleader to renounce the personal services contract he had negotiated with Johnny Fontane. He will react disproportionately when he orders the murder of a union leader trying to shake down Johnny for fifty thousand dollars in return for smooth labor relations during a movie production. Suppose the two thugs had violated Constanzia Corleone prior to her marriage. Would Don Vito have not rendered them deadlier than the fish that will soon nestle in Luca Brasi's bulletproof vest?³

Indeed, his code of honor permits disproportionate retaliation to transgressions of honor. In the instant case, Bonasera has forsaken Sicilian honor in exchange for the pursuit of material gain, comfort, and leisure; he has become an American in aspiration if not fully in citizenship. Don Vito is unwilling to respond to disproportionality in the name of a person who explicitly scorned the principles of the family order—Carmela Corleone is godmother of Bonasera's injured child, which should have cemented bonds of loyalty but did not—and who now, at most, totters uneasily upon a flimsy nexus of coerced allegiance. Bonasera does not rest within Don Vito's circle of intimacy; thus, only proportionate retaliation is appropriate. Bonasera lacks an intimate relationship with Don Vito, and therefore is devoid of the metaphysical bonds that might warrant disproportionately harsh redress.

The lessons of the film's opening scene include the primacy of honor—even Bonasera evinces pride at his daughter's retained honor and

bristles at his own loss of honor in the courtroom—and the unwelcome consequences borne by Sicilians who renounce the family order by trusting naively in the tender mercies of the new world. Beneath the surface, the opening scene describes the conflict between two sets of values, competing descriptive and prescriptive cultural visions: those reflecting and sustaining the traditional understandings and imperatives of the Sicilian family order and those entrenched in the ideology of the United States of America. The conflict between these two competing sets of visions and values is irresolvable, even if their climactic battle can be delayed. The opening scene of *The Godfather* offers a minor skirmish within that ongoing conflict.

Ironically, Bonasera comprehends this viscerally, although not intellectually. He is prepared to shuttle the prescriptions of the Sicilian family order and embrace the new world's jaunty individualism seasoned by the solace of the nuclear family. He must "believe in America" because doing so has "made his fortune." However, vestiges of Sicilian honor are sparked by the torments inflicted on his daughter and the indignities ladled on him in the American courtroom. He must compromise his social blueprint and seek extralegal intervention. As in the old world, to attain justice Bonasera must transform a legal dispute into a private, personal matter. Bonasera, foolishly, approaches Don Vito with hopes of avoiding relational entanglement. He must have known better. Don Vito has no interest in orchestrating murders for money that are unrelated to his wider organizational network. Bonasera—given his wife's intimacy with Don Vito's spouse who is *commare* to Bonasera's only daughter—should be Don Vito's "friend," at least among his loyal associates. Instead, Bonasera presents himself as no more than a cordial acquaintance and desires no deeper relationship.

Later in the novel, Tom Hagen signals to Jack Woltz the significance of *commare* (godmother) and *compare* (godfather) relationships: "Mr. Corleone is Johnny Fontane's godfather. [To the Italian people that] is a very close, a very sacred religious relationship . . . Italians have a little joke, that the world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him, and that's why they have godfathers."⁴ Much the same can be said about godmothers.

Bonasera, so desperately aspiring to Americanism, sprouts ethnic amnesia. He misunderstands Don Vito's standard, indirect Sicilian discourse; offers money for murder; evinces an uncomplicated faith in new world institutions; and must even be reminded that Don Vito's service entails future obligation. At the conclusion of the scene, Don Vito refuses to acknowledge

his agreement with the undertaker. Instead, he advises Bonasera to consider “this justice a gift from my wife, your daughter’s godmother.”⁵ Don Vito at once underscores the past bond that Bonasera has hitherto contravened and expresses a reservation about Bonasera’s semi-coerced oath of loyalty to him. Don Vito grasps acutely that but for Bonasera’s recent calamities the undertaker would have accompanied his wife and attended Constanzia Corleone’s wedding but assiduously avoided the Don.

Later, Bonasera is terrified when he receives a telephone call from Hagen requesting a service on behalf of Don Vito. Of course, he cannot refuse. But the undertaker fears he will be implicated in serious criminality. Even if he escapes legal retribution, depending on the service he renders, Bonasera might be targeted by Don Vito’s enemies. Fortunately, Don Vito’s request is strictly legitimate: he asks Amerigo Bonasera to “use all your powers” to salvage cosmetically the bullet-ridden corpse of Santino Corleone. Don Vito again invokes his wife: “I do not wish his mother to see him as he is.”⁶ Even now, the exchange of services, although transacted by the men, flows most directly from their two spouses. Don Vito and Amerigo Bonasera, each suspended between two world visions in different ways, can never be more than transactional “friends.”

Still, Don Vito understands intellectually that the Sicilian vision must perish in the United States, but he resists this truth viscerally. He refuses to assimilate gently or transform his sense of masculinity obligingly in the new world. Fred L. Gardaphé explains well the tensions that thereby ensue:

From the very opening of *The Godfather*, it is apparent than an Italian sense of masculinity cannot survive transplantation to the United States . . . The problems that [Bonasera and the other petitioners] face wouldn’t arise in Italy, or if they did, the men wouldn’t have to face them alone. They would have their family members for support. To solve these problems in the United States, they must go to see Don Corleone, the head of the symbolic larger family . . . the central conflict of *The Godfather* is how to keep the family together and “Sicilian” for its own good in a land that has lost its dependence on the family unit for survival.⁷

A man of indomitable will, extraordinary mental toughness, and high ambition, Don Vito has steadfastly refused to act sycophantically with American power brokers, those political and social magnates who wield

disproportionate influence over the terms of social life. These *pezzonovanti* (*pezzi da novanta*) masquerade as apostles of justice and goodness, but Don Vito knows all too well the genuine designs they harbor. They have helped him make his fortune, broaden his enterprises, and amplify his covert power. Nevertheless, Don Vito had expected that the most American of his sons, Michael, might become one of them: a senator, a governor. Don Vito was neither a warrior for social justice nor a dreamer conjuring a more egalitarian society. He accepted people for what they were and what he suspected they always would be. Don Vito would agree with the cynical adage that “In this world a person must either be a hammer or a nail.” His choice was anchored and unblurred.

A Philosophical Analysis of Honor

To comprehend *The Godfather*, we must philosophically analyze the concept of “honor.” Don Vito understands and presents himself as an honorable man. He does not perceive himself as a murderer, gangster, hoodlum, or common thief, all of which he most certainly is. More strikingly, he does not recognize himself as merely an exceptional businessman or successful capitalist. Instead, he is a talented, strong-willed, man of honor who refuses to dance like a vassal at the end of strings manipulated by the dishonorable *pezzonovanti* who otherwise define the terms of social life. Don Vito’s signature value, then, is honor, and fulfilling the prescriptions of the code he has internalized is his greatest virtue.

Although the term “honor” has been used in a variety of contexts throughout history, a reasonable rendering of personal honor can be reconstructed.⁸ A sense of personal honor, which is a measure of an individual’s value, obtains if four components are in place:

1. A canon of behavior such that
 - a. a set of imperatives (the “honor code”) constrains an agent’s choices and actions;
 - b. the force of honor code imperatives cannot be destroyed or softened by considerations of expediency, utility, or personal advantage—the pursuit of honor and the satisfaction of such considerations are often conflicting aims; thus

- c. living up to and complying with the honor code often involves personal risk or sacrifice to the agent up to and including death.

The power of honor codes is designed to trump considerations of expediency and personal advantage. The values embodied by the honor code are taken to have the greatest call upon the agent's allegiance in part because they are most definitive of personal identity. The Italian proverb illustrates that point: *Meglio onore senza vita che vita senza onore* (Better to have honor without life than life without honor). To live with shame is to eviscerate and betray the self, deny one's innermost values, and impoverish one's entire life. To die with honor is to enhance one's biography by validating one's inner worth and higher values. Fulfilling the imperatives of an honor code often conflicts sharply with short-term self-interest and preservation. Where the risk or sacrifice to the agent is greatest, the highest honor is merited. Thus, honor often conflicts with prudence, which weighs risks, tallies and compares advantages and disadvantages, and selects the course of action promising the greater probability of tangible gain.

The following imperatives partly constitute Don Vito's honor code: subordinate gangsters swear absolute obedience to their superiors; they do not ask for and are typically not offered explanations for their bosses' orders; the availability of subordinates—their willingness to carry out these orders and their effectiveness in doing so enhances their honor, which facilitates more opportunities for financial gain, information, and power; the interests of the crime family take precedence over all other interests, including those of a soldier's immediate household; those within the crime syndicate must be truthful with one another in order to nurture mutual trust; mutual loyalty is critical; individuals must make appropriate choices of spouses and act properly within marital relations; the principle of silence (*omertà*) must be strictly observed; a member's cache of honor is enhanced by the rectitude of his spouse; and compliance with the honor code vivifies a member's sense of professionalism, group identity, and shared system of values.⁹

Accordingly, Don Vito is willing to risk everything to comply with a principle of honor, often triggered by revenge. Considerations of expediency fade away under such circumstances because embodying and exemplifying honor partially constitute his self-understanding. His code of honor grounded in the imperatives of the Sicilian family order circumscribe his individual license.

2. A group affiliation promoting a sense of belonging such that
 - a. the honor code arises from a group membership that the agent has either antecedently chosen or posteriorly accepted (internalized) as the agent's own;
 - b. the honor code may but does not necessarily correlate to the wider society's professed moral principles, policies, and standards;
 - c. the agent judges and evaluates himself or herself in large part in accord with how the agent perceives the way others who are capable—the group members who are qualified to assess—judge and evaluate the agent given the agent's compliance with the honor code, and how the agent judges his or her compliance with the honor code;
 - d. a merited positive evaluation in that regard heightens the agent's self-esteem and pride and nurtures a more profound sense of belonging, whereas a negative evaluation implies that the agent has demonstrated weakness of character and has acted disreputably, which signals that the agent has betrayed the group ethos and thereby weakened his or her sense of belonging;
 - e. a recognition by the group members qualified to assess that the agent deserves such a negative evaluation is typically followed by censure up to and including exclusion from group membership or even death unless the agent regains his or her honor;
 - f. to have personal honor is to possess a right to be treated as having a certain value and includes the right to respect and to be treated accordingly within the group; to lose personal honor is to relinquish those rights by failing to live up to the honor code.

An honor code need not correlate to a nation's rendering of morality. As mentioned, groups try to define "honor" in accord with their distinctive values. As such, "honor" cannot be tied necessarily to the imperatives of conventional morality. Honor among felons is certainly possible. A

criminal enterprise, such as the Corleone family, may define “honor” in terms of remaining silent when arrested and thereby protecting fellow criminals from prosecution; always responding, even disproportionately, to perceived slights, insults, and demonstrations of disrespect; manifesting respect to superiors within the enterprise by certain ritualized behaviors and by sharing with them the proceeds of criminal ventures; being careful to never inappropriately address or treat family members within the group; providing material and emotional support to the families of group members who fulfilled the honor code and are incarcerated by the authorities; and observing the rule that received benefits create obligations that must later be fulfilled as an expression of gratitude. In living up to such an honor code, a group member will often transgress conventional morality because of the nature of the honor group.

More specifically, the typical rules of honor informing a *Cosa Nostra cosca* (gang) include the following:¹⁰

1. The principle of *omertà* arises from the lack of public trust. Secrecy was required to ensure family, friends, and allies would evade oppression from corrupt state law enforcers. Conveniently, the principle also shrouded criminals from rightful prosecutions. Prior to widespread use of electronic surveillance, Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) indictments, and witness protection programs, the principle of *omertà* sequestered executives of criminal families from prosecution as convicted associates and soldiers remained silent when pressed to disclose the felonies of their leaders.
2. Subordinates owe a duty of absolute obedience to those superior to them in the family hierarchy. Unlike the military, where the lowest ranking member is permitted to disobey an unlawful order from an institutional superior, in *Cosa Nostra* all orders flowing from above are regarded as sacrosanct. Leader infallibility rules. Moreover, allegiance to the crime family trumps all other obligations, including those typically associated with kin, friends, and intimate allies.
3. Respect must be accorded the wives, daughters, female relatives, and girlfriends of other crime members. This imperative facilitates internal crime family peace and avoids

feminine wrath that could undermine unity. Don Vito's honor code would surely endorse *Cosa Nostra's* prohibition against affairs with the wives or girlfriends of other mobsters and duty to ensure their safety and well-being when their mates are absent due to mob business or incarceration. The penalty for failure to comply is often death. Pleas that retribution is disproportionate are summarily spurned.

4. Unauthorized physical violence against those holding the rank of soldier or above is strictly prohibited. Violations are first subject to negotiation at a sit down presided over by a capo. Typically, a rapprochement is seemingly crafted. But, as this is organized crime suffused by an honor code hypersensitive to insults, future congenial relations can never be assumed.
5. Soldiers and associates must seek and receive permission from their caporegime prior to undertaking business dealings, embarking on a vacation, or engaging in antecedently unauthorized activity.
6. Most families levy explicit prohibitions against drug trafficking. Since the onset of *Cosa Nostra* in America, crime bosses prohibited drug trafficking under penalty of death. The ban, however, was, at most, selectively enforced and even then invoked as subterfuge for vengeance for other offenses. Profits from narcotics are colossal, and violations of this imperative are frequent even among family bosses.

Don Vito's group membership consists of the general Sicilian community, wherein the imperatives of the family order reign, and the subgroup of organized criminals where those imperatives serve evil designs. The resulting honor code does not correlate to the normative principles prevalent in American culture. The Sicilian family order arose from a specific societal context, while organized crime cannot be officially endorsed by any government or nation.

The set of imperatives that structure a person's choices and actions is the honor code that arises from the group to which the person belongs.

The nature of the honor code varies in relation to time, place, group, and social setting. In each context, a group tries to capture the meaning of “honor” for its distinctive values. Sometimes people belong to a group by virtue of ratifying what originally were unchosen attachments such as the class into which they are born; the nation in which they were raised; their ethnic, religious, or racial inheritance; and the like. At other times, people choose their group affiliations by entering clubs and teams, or pursuing causes with others with whom they share purposes. In all such cases, the group affiliation becomes constitutive of personal identity insofar as it is connected to honor. Although many group affiliations are peripheral to a person’s self-image and merely pleasing ways to pass time, what distinguishes an honor group is that ongoing connection to it is critical to a person’s sense of self. This is true regardless of whether the person entered the group by choice or first discovered and later ratified his or her affiliation.

Most fundamentally, the code of honor reigning over Don Vito’s world shapes the identity of all those subscribing to its imperatives and distinctive rules of behavior, which constitute modes often conflicting with those of dominant society.¹¹ The struggle for honor is a competition for social advancement, especially among those not fully cognizant of the intricacies of the capitalist market. Conflicts ensuring within the honor code mentality are zero-sum episodes: my increase in honor can occur only at a commensurate dishonor to another. Those amassing less honor than others will in some respects and social circumstances be dependent on those garnering more honor—thus Amerigo Bonasera’s dependence on Don Vito to achieve what he takes to be his just purposes.

The importance of “honor,” then, is intricately linked to a sense of self and to community. To breach the honor code, perhaps by turning state’s evidence, fractures the extant solidarity and thus mars the integrity of the betrayer’s character. Even when incarcerated, members must maintain a sense of dignity by adhering to the imperatives of the code.¹² While it is plausible that a person might conjure an individualistic, unique code of honor applicable only to himself or herself, typically the concept of honor is connected strongly to group or institutional roles. The person crafts his or her identity within such roles, and to separate or be severed from them is to alter the topography of the self. Accordingly, the notion of honor will glisten most brightly in settings that stress communal attachments, institutional roles, and social bonds.

3. An internalization of the canon of behavior such that
 - a. living up to and complying with the honor code, which confers status, is tightly bound to the agent's sense of identity and self-worth;
 - b. a positive evaluation in that regard is a source of deserved, deepened self-respect and pride;
 - c. a negative evaluation, which follows from a known and recognized failure to live up to the honor code, is taken by the agent as a mark of disreputability, as manifesting a weakness of character and typically elicits shame, diminished self-esteem and reduced pride.

Those subscribing to an honor code evaluate themselves largely in terms of several vectors: Have I complied with the honor code? How do the group members, who are most qualified to assess my compliance with the honor code, evaluate my compliance? How does the group judgment influence my evaluation? How does my evaluation influence the group judgment? My behavior will manifest whether I embody the personal qualities that entitle me to honor, and qualified group members will recognize my inner worth or lack thereof by their assessments of my compliance with the code. My evaluation of my inner worth will depend greatly on how the relevant others perceive me. My sense of worth and honor does not depend on the perceptions of other people in general. Instead, I trust only those within the honor group, especially those who have proven themselves the most experienced and capable evaluators. I can retain my honor in the face of negative evaluations from outsiders, but I cannot do so when confronted by those I take to be most qualified to judge—those whom I respect as fellow members of our honor group.

Attributes of honor, then, are bound to complex relations and the interplay of several evaluations. No single assessment—whether by the agent or by the honor group—is sufficient. Each assessment is linked closely to other assessments. The overall evaluation embodies the dynamic tension of its constitutive units.

To have conferred and to confer upon oneself a favorable evaluation of one's honor is to cultivate a deserved, deepened self-esteem and pride, and a more profound sense of belonging to the honor group: I have lived up to a difficult set of imperatives, a set most other human beings would

be unable to fulfill; I have placed principles over narrow self-interest and have renounced the easy path; I have kept the faith with my vows of compliance and thereby proved my worth.¹³

To have conferred and to confer upon oneself a negative evaluation of one's honor is to recognize failure and to lose status: I have failed to live up to the honor code; I have chosen expediency over principle; I have betrayed myself and the honor group; and I have demonstrated the poverty of my spirit. In such cases, the appropriate response is shame, a loss of self-esteem and pride, and a weakened sense of belonging to the honor group. My inadequacy and disgrace are evident to those qualified to evaluate my inner worth based on my failure to fulfill the imperatives of the honor code.

Once the group members recognize that a fellow member deserves a negative evaluation, they administer some form of censure up to and including exclusion from group membership or even death unless the agent regains his or her honor. To violate the honor code is to choose to risk forfeiting membership in the group. Depending upon the specific honor code at issue, a disgraced member may be punished or simply banished. Under the most primitive codes, punishment may mean death. Some honor codes permit shamed members to restore their honor through prescribed actions. Other honor codes insist that once honor is lost it is forever gone. Moreover, depending on the nature of the honor code and my connection to it, my loss of honor may also shame my family or the honor group itself.

To have personal honor is to possess a right to be treated as having a certain value and includes the right to respect and to be treated as an equal within the group. To lose personal honor is to relinquish those rights by failing to live up to the honor code. In addition, one's personal honor can be infringed upon by insults, which by themselves neither impair the agent's reputation nor diminish the agent's inner worth, but which fail to treat the agent commensurate with his or her status. The transgressor has failed in his or her duty to treat the honorable person in accord with that person's value. In such cases, honor codes typically include an imperative of response: if someone impugns the agent's honor, the agent must respond in the prescribed fashion; otherwise the agent's honor is diminished or destroyed.

As argued, Don Vito embodies honor as constitutive of the self, scoffs at Bonasera's loss of honor in pursuit of American identity and material gain, and bemoans the mortician's diminished self-esteem and shame. Still,

Don Vito understands that personal transformation, implying abrogation of the specific honor code to which he subscribes, will be required of the next generation. He, however, can remain authentic. Or so he presumes.

4. A principle of redress such that
 - a. personal honor can be infringed upon by insults, even those that by themselves neither impair the agent's reputation nor diminish the agent's inner worth, but which fail to treat the agent commensurate with his or her merited value; and
 - b. honor codes typically include an imperative of response: if someone impugns the agent's honor, the agent must respond in the prescribed fashion; otherwise the agent's honor is diminished or destroyed.

Those subscribing to a code of honor are typically more easily insulted than are ordinary citizens. By placing heightened value on the personal standing linked to a code of honor, agents become sensitive, often overly so, to words, gestures, and actions that do not wholly affirm their standing or code. Moreover, the principle of redress underwriting an agent's response to perceived insult rarely embraces strict proportionality. Few honor codes include paeans to retributive justice. Redress under most honor codes is frequently disproportionately harsh.

In the case of Don Vito, his refusal to murder the young reprobates who viciously assaulted Bonasera's daughter arises from the undertaker's metaphysical distance from the mortician. Amerigo has acted as if he were only among Don Vito's acquaintances, not as an intimate friend. His induced pledge of loyalty places him, at most, within the loyalists who are regarded at best with attenuated affection. Don Vito's obligations to him are formal and fragile. He will not murder the punks who viciously assaulted Amerigo's daughter, but he will have them thrashed appropriately.

Also, when Don Vito forswears vengeance for the murder of Sonny and sues for peace, he seemingly dishonorably violates his code and demonstrates weakness that his rivals exploit. However, when Don Vito repeats a Sicilian proverb that "Revenge is a dish that tastes best when it is cold,"¹⁴ he underscores his conviction that vengeance delayed is not vengeance denied. Michael will serve as his avenging agent and restore Don Vito's honor posthumously.

Although their role in mob negotiations is merely alluded to in the film, in Puzo's novel the fictional extended Bocchicchio clan exemplify a stunningly fierce, primitive commitment to the honor code.¹⁵ Even by nineteenth-century Sicilian measures, the Bocchicchios' unshakeable allegiance to family solidarity, the principle of *omertà*, the sanctity of vendetta, veneration of honor, and unadulterated ferocity were remarkable. In earlier times, the Bocchicchios were significant players in a small segment of Sicily. Trading in protection and a monopoly in flour mills, they controlled the water supply in their corner of the island. The success of their enterprises depended only on the clan's primary excellences and allegiances. The Bocchicchios were ruthlessly straightforward and unrepentantly aggressive, but were devoid of the cunning, subtlety, and subterfuge exercised by more capable Sicilians. Still, by understanding their strengths and remaining within their areas of competency, the Bocchicchios flourished.

The adage maintains that our most debilitating shortcomings arise from the exaggerations and distortions of our most glorious capabilities, and our worst vices spring from the amplification of our greatest virtues. The Bocchicchios provide a sad example of the truth of these maxims. When Benito Mussolini seized political control of Italy, he vowed, among other things, to destroy organized crime in Sicily. For what is the point of being a Fascist dictator if you lack a monopoly on the exercise of violence? He declared the equivalent of martial law on stilts in Sicily and authorized Cesare Mori, notorious as the "iron prefect" and "the man with hair on his heart," to eviscerate the Mafia. Given the Bocchicchios open, defiant, and guileless perpetration of their craft, they were early and easy targets of Mussolini's project. When confronted by overwhelming Fascist forces, the Bocchicchios responded in trademark fashion. As was inevitable, their aggression and overt resistance—their most outstanding strengths—facilitated their self-destruction given the circumstances at bar. Almost half of the extended clan were killed in combat, while almost the entire remaining half were imprisoned. Around two dozen or so survivors immigrated to the United States by way of Canada.

The Bocchicchios eventually settled, as a unit, outside of New York City and made their way in the sanitation industry, employing their distinctive capabilities. Unable to compete successfully in mob enterprises such as prostitution, gambling, narcotics, and government fraud, the Bocchicchios, relatively simple but relentless, eased into their underworld niche as hostages during crime negotiations between warring families. A Bocchicchio would stand as surety when a significant sit-down was

scheduled. For example, when Michael Corleone met with Virgil Sollozzo and his bodyguard, Captain McCluskey, the Corleone family demanded that Sollozzo pay for and provide a male Bocchicchio as insurance against treachery. Should harm befall Michael, the Corleones would murder the Bocchicchio hostage, and the remaining Bocchicchios would exact vengeance against Sollozzo, the proximate cause of their tribesman's death.

As a matter of honor, the Bocchicchio hostage would accept death, and his surviving family members would execute their vendetta against the treacherous party who had betrayed them. No appeal to expediency, no offer of reparations, no public atonement, no cost-benefit analysis, no threatened punishment would dissuade the Bocchicchios from murdering the traitor responsible for their clansman's death. Bocchicchio hostages were renowned as the ultimate insurance policy during crime negotiations. In the new world, the Bocchicchio brand, grounded in straightforward adherence to a code of honor leavened by primitive ferocity, glistened with currency. A Bocchicchio hostage would never accept money to harm the party who held him hostage; would never resist death should that party have justification to kill him because its representative had been injured during negotiations; and the extended family could never be swayed from fatal retaliation in the event the hostage was slain. Simple, primitive, rigorous adherence to such an honor code engendered safe, reliable negotiations among warring crime families.

What is not even alluded to in the film but chronicled in the novel is the role the Bocchicchios play in the return of Michael from Sicily. After Don Vito brokers peace among the five crime families of New York City, at a palpable loss to his prestige and honor, in order to secure Michael's return, one glaring obstacle remains. The police have only one prime suspect in the murders of Virgil Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey: Michael Corleone. Relief emerges from a Bocchicchio who is already convicted and condemned to die for a classic Bocchicchio revenge killing. After being supplied details of the murders that will render his admissions credible, he agrees to confess to the murders of Sollozzo and McCluskey in exchange for significant money for his survivors. Once a Bocchicchio had successfully avenged a slight to his honor—after all, the entire clan was Sicilian in the requisite sense that they would risk everything for a principle such as vendetta—and was sentenced to death as a result, he might as well turn fatal adversity into practical advantage for his heirs.

The Bocchicchios lived in a black-and-white world lacking exceptions, fine print, and thin distinctions. They had transformed their old

world ferocity into new world value. The indefatigable combatants had become instruments of peace, at least insofar as their employers complied with the same code of honor. As ever, they represent unsullied, agrestic allegiance to honor.

The Case for Honor

Reliance upon honor codes, other than in the military, police, criminal organizations, and the like, strikes most contemporary thinkers as anachronistic. The notion of “honor” conjures images of knightly combat; duels arising from perceived insults; ongoing vendettas whose originating causes have been long forgotten; and murders resulting from husbands who have been cuckolded or fathers whose daughters have been sexually violated. Invoking “honor” recalls class-based societies in which personal identity was closely allied with social roles—times when the only honor available to women centered on retaining chastity. Even the vestiges of honor in paramilitary and criminal enterprises underscore the masculine, violent, antagonistic foundations of such codes. Such vestiges remind us that much of the history of honor is bound to male bravery, machismo, and eagerness to avenge all perceived insults, aspects of social life that may strike us now as recklessly out of place. We might well be tempted to conclude that the virtual disappearance of honor codes and invocations of honor are events to be cheered.

For example, years ago, in an academic unit at my institution, a professor, whom I will call Giordano, opposed a colleague’s application for promotion to the rank of professor. Although Giordano held that colleague in high esteem, his evaluation was based on the colleague’s failure to publish a book. In the history of this academic department no faculty member had been promoted to the rank of professor without having published at least one book. Although this requirement was not expressed in any written document, it was longstanding tradition and transmitted by word of mouth. In Giordano’s letter of evaluation he argued that to accept a promotion only because others were willing to confer it even in the absence of one of the longstanding necessary conditions brought no honor to the candidate. Moreover, that others were willing to confer the promotion under such circumstances brought no honor to them.

Giordano’s argument was grounded in the conviction that the other evaluators and the candidate were breaking the department code of honor

in the interests of expediency: having no stake in opposing the will of the majority and having insufficient regard for the value of traditional scholarship anyway, the institution's management would endorse the majority position and grant the promotion. Understanding this, the other evaluators seized the opportunity to advance the interests of a valued member of the academic unit. Thus, the highly regarded, likeable colleague would receive the promotion under a lower standard than previously employed by the academic unit. In Giordano's judgment, such a promotion marred the honor of the recipient and those who championed his cause. In Giordano's view, they had placed expediency and a colleague's short-term interests above principle. Also, they had rendered no long-range service to their colleague by not requiring that he accomplish what he was fully capable of attaining. Having read Giordano's evaluation, the Dean was taken aback by the reference to "honor." He dismissed it as irrelevant, and his remarks stressed that he perceived no place for such a consideration in academe or anywhere else. The Dean's comments tracked clearly what is the predominant contemporary assessment of invocations of honor: they are pernicious remnants of historical periods that have been rightfully eclipsed.

That honor in the past has been most closely associated with patriarchal prerogatives, aristocratic privileges, and violent reprisals is undeniable. But nothing in the concept of "honor" requires such linkages. As stated previously, the history of "honor" is the effort of various groups to capture the term for a specific set of values and virtues.

The case for nurturing a sense of honor is compelling. Allegiance to a notion of honor and cultivating the character traits required to behave in ways consistent with that notion connect a person to wider community. Assuming that the values embodied by the notion of honor at issue are worthy, they vivify personal identity and fulfill the human need for intimate bonding with others. A salutary honor code provides imperatives that are not subject to barter or considerations of expediency. Such imperatives infuse life with meaning and purpose. For those who are firmly convinced, as I am, that if there is nothing worth dying for then there is nothing worth living for, a sense of honor frames a person's bedrock convictions. The right to be treated as having a certain worth is most resplendent when it is conditioned on the demonstration of the personal qualities that entitle a person to that right. That others within the honor group—those who share allegiance to the imperatives of the honor code—recognize that a fellow member has the requisite personal qualities reinforces the sense of that person's inner worth. In opposition to the Stoics, how other people judge us does and should matter to our