

Honor's champion

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WE know there can be honor among thieves, but who ever heard of honor among liberals? The word conjures up visions of liege-lords and knights-errant, of chivalry and gallantry. It bespeaks a world enchanted, both beautiful and barbaric. The modern world—democratic and disenchanting—has presumably rejected codes of honor, and it has certainly given up the *point d'honneur* (the practice of dueling or judicial combat). It isn't only the forms and trappings of honor that have been lost; as Sharon Krause says in her new book *Liberalism With Honor*,[†] even “the language of honor went out of fashion with the French Revolution.... These days honor seems quaint and obsolete, even frivolous, and it makes us vaguely suspicious.” The grounds for suspicion arise from honor's links to manliness and aristocracy; in other words, honor seems both sexist and elitist.

Krause aims to restore honor to honorable mention. She argues that liberal democracy will always stand in need of knights in shining armor—or at least updated equivalents thereof. Against the charge of sexism, she counters that damsels can be knights too. While dragon-slaying might have been an exclusively male pursuit, women today can enter the lists in opposition to tyranny, whether it be the tyranny of an overreaching government or the tyranny of public opinion. In times when the pen is as powerful an agent of resistance as the sword, and when political courage counts for more than battlefield prowess, women can become champions of liberty.

Against the charge of elitism, Krause shows how extraordinary men and women of honor have come to the rescue of democracy in distress. Far from being hostile to modern constitutional liberty, honor (and individuals motivated by honor) may be essential to its preservation. Yes, there are superior

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individuals, but superior individuals can be champions of equality (in the sense meant by the Declaration of Independence's assertion of equal rights). Krause offers in evidence a pantheon of great Americans: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Martin Luther King, Jr. And she reminds us that our Declaration of Independence concludes with the signers pledging to one another "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

DESPITE honor's contribution to our regime and its continuing force as a spring of human action, it is rarely acknowledged by contemporary theorists, whose view of human motivation tends to be an impoverished one. Taking their lead from the great reductionist Thomas Hobbes—who said that honor "is nothing else but the estimation of another's power; and therefore he that hath least power, hath always least honor"—today's rational choice theorists see only narrow self-interest and calculations of advantage at work in human behavior. Arrayed against them are a diverse lot of communitarian, civic republican, and liberal theorists who, in search of sources of moral renewal, stress the individual's obligations to others. They speak of the "sense of justice," the "agreement motive," the duty of reciprocal recognition, the responsibilities of participatory citizenship, and the virtues of civility and toleration. Krause, rightly, finds this sharp theoretical divide between the partisans of self-interest and the partisans of civic duty to be unhelpful and untrue to the human psyche. While she shares the aspiration of the "virtuecrats" to invigorate liberalism, she thinks they've been looking in the wrong places, expecting too much of citizens in the way of altruism and too little of them in the way of spiritedness and proud self-command.

Honor is simultaneously self-centered and self-sacrificing. That combination is what makes honor potentially both compatible with liberalism and a transcendent corrective to it. Here is how Krause explains it:

And because obligations to others require altruism, they are always at odds with the self-interest that predominates in modern liberal societies. By contrast, honor rests on the sense of duty to oneself. Since it never renounces self-concern, honor does not require altruism and consequently has a natural (if partial) affinity with the liberal way of life. Yet while honor is self-serving, it is not limited to the lowest forms of self-interest. Honor rises above the natural limits on human action imposed by the motive

of egoistic interest. As a result, it can animate riskier and more difficult actions, even actions that involve the risk of life. Honor is more reliable than altruistic obligations to others and braver than self-interest.

SHARON Krause was a student of Harvey Mansfield, and she shares with the notable Harvard conservative a conviction of the needfulness of what might be called the aristocratic residuum. She turns to both Montesquieu and Tocqueville in order to understand the essential features of honor. Guided by these thinkers, she regards contemporary substitutes for honor like "self-esteem" and the notion of intrinsic human dignity as inadequate and, indeed, pernicious, because they have the effect of detaching self-respect from achievement.

What is unexpected is that Krause is a left-of-center, feminist Mansfieldian. The territory that Mansfield likes to claim as proper to his sex—as "man's field"—Krause contends is rightfully woman's too. Accordingly, she speaks of the suffragettes as embodying "precisely the spirit that Tocqueville had hoped would emerge, if only on occasion, in modern democracy, the 'aristocratic' love of liberty that will not rest satisfied with material satisfactions but instead rises to defend liberty as an end in itself."

Stanton and Anthony may have had the right spirit, but it should be pointed out that their object was not one with which Tocqueville had the least sympathy. In fact, he inveighed against the agitation for women's political and economic independence. He wrote with approval of America's prefeminist system of separate spheres, which established a form of sexual equality based on complementarity, not sameness, and which, while it accorded women moral and intellectual equality, resolutely refused them political and social equality. Tocqueville praised American women lavishly for their willingness to accept (and even take pride in) this disposition of affairs. The "superiority" of American women—which Tocqueville says is the principal cause of the nation's "singular prosperity and growing force"—consists in the conscious sacrifice that wives make of their autonomy for the sake of domestic happiness and national greatness. Tocqueville pays homage to this female courage—the courage of service and self-abnegation—and he claims that American men do too:

Thus Americans do not believe that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show the same

esteem for the role of each of them, and they consider them as beings whose value is equal although their destiny differs. They do not give the same form or the same employment to the courage of woman as to that of man, but they never doubt her courage.

KRAUSE, by contrast, wants to place honor and valor on the side of democratic reform. I have no quarrel with her presentation of the suffragettes, and I don't intend to argue for a return to Tocqueville's America; however, it does seem that Krause brushes too quickly past the question of whether honor is naturally gendered. For millennia past, a man's honor and a woman's honor were different things. What is lost and what is gained when they become indistinguishable? And what about sexual honor, that is, chastity and fidelity? Tocqueville claims that Americans, both men and women, "put their honor in being chaste," in great part because domestic tranquillity and "regular habits" are linked to success in business—honest success that is. Krause, however, talks not at all about sexual honor.

The likely reason for her silence on that score is that she wants to establish honor's role in rebellion, nonconformity, and individuality. All of her positive examples, from Montesquieu's Viscount of Orte to Martin Luther King, Jr., are bold resisters, obedient to a finely developed sense of personal rectitude, who set themselves against the tyranny of both kings and peoples. Sexual honor—and especially its inculcation and enforcement by authority figures from parents to neighborhood busybodies—is not so heroic.

Krause is right to note that the individual conscience plays a larger role in our reconfigured democratic honor than it did in Old World honor. Moreover, in her intelligent and nuanced discussion of the distinctions between public honors, codes of honor, and honor as a quality of character, she makes clear that her focus is on this last, more internalized dimension of honor. Nonetheless, her attempts to separate these three facets of honor go too far, with the result that honor (as a quality of character) emerges as more independent than it truly is.

The flip-side of honor is shame, and shame is inseparable from the eyes and opinions of another, whether man or God. Krause worries that communitarians give too much scope to public opinion, thereby risking majority tyranny or at least "the problems of exclusion and coercion." She prefers honor because it can lend the inner fortitude to resist peer pressure. However, honor is also in great part a social construct. Yes, an

honorable individual may become a revolutionary or a conscientious objector, but the formation of an honorable individual usually requires the absorption of a code of conduct coupled with a fear of being shamed. Although Krause offers elegant accounts of honorable reformers and dissidents, she doesn't much explore how their heightened sense of honor came to be. I suspect it entailed not nonconformity but rather an early and acute sensitivity to praise and disesteem. If we were to take seriously the project of reviving honor, we would need a pedagogy that restored shame to a dominant role in the upbringing of the young. Good luck getting parents and educators to embrace the psychological and characterological value of shame. These days "shame on you" is said only to dogs, and progressive trainers tell us we shouldn't be saying it to them either.

Krause hopes to strengthen "individual agency," but she disclaims any intention "to improve the morals of American citizens." She recognizes that not everyone will be an honor-lover. Yet even those who don't live (and die) by honor admire those few who do. Krause argues that the honor of a few can be an inspiration for ordinary folks, showing them that human beings are not just victims of circumstance. Because of the tendency of democratic peoples to slip into deterministic modes of thought (a phenomenon well-explained by Tocqueville), these examples of self-governing democratic heroes are important. They become a nonreligious resource for buttressing belief in free will. Thus Krause does envision an indirect and general benefit from her focus on the few.

SINCE Krause's unabashed elitism is refreshing, I don't want to put a populist damper on it. However, there can be a problem if honor comes to be regarded as the exclusive preserve of the exceptional. I have seen it firsthand in student reaction to the life of Frederick Douglass. While they do indeed admire him, many of them see his achievements as inimitable. They simply cannot accept him as a model for their own transformation. There is a democratic disconnect. Our responsiveness to the remarkable might improve if we had more familiarity with the ordinary, modest brands of honor—like sexual honor and scout's honor and telling the truth on one's honor (that is, not because honesty is the best *policy*).

There is one moment in the book where Krause herself, high-hearted though she is, succumbs to this democratic disconnect. Although it occurs in a footnote, it is significant, for in that one passage she negates Douglass's central message

about honor and freedom. Of Douglass's conviction that one must hazard life for liberty, Krause says:

To instruct the oppressed that they ought to prefer a noble death over an undignified life is no solution to the problem of injustice. A complete solution to the problem of injustice, if it could be achieved, would mean eradicating the necessity of such a choice entirely. Even a partial solution, or a piecemeal attack on injustice, would have to attend as much to the motives of those in power as to those of the oppressed.

This is carefully worded. I might have to agree with the letter of it, but the spirit is all wrong. "To *instruct* the oppressed" might not be a solution, but if the oppressed act on the instruction, it is indeed a solution. It's true that evil would still lurk in the hearts of those who desire to enslave others, and in that sense it is not a "complete" solution to the problem of injustice. However, in tangible and political terms, it is a solution, since the oppressed would no longer be slaves. Douglass never tired of reiterating this harsh, but heartening truth:

Hereditary bondmen, know ye not
Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?

Thus Douglass was adamant that black soldiers participate fully in the Civil War. Blood spilled for one's own freedom and the nation's would erase the stain of slavishness. We may quail at Douglass's message, but we should remember what is at stake. Douglass's words apply not only to hereditary bondmen but to the inheritors of liberty as well. If we today are unwilling to die for liberty, then our liberty is only technical (or even illusory), since our souls are slavish. Douglass said that the moment he rose up against his taskmaster, he became "a free man in *fact*," though he remained "a slave in *form*." His words should alert us to the danger of the reverse possibility: that one could be a free man in form, though a slave in fact.

SUBSCRIPTION to a motto along the lines of "live free or die" does not mean one must fight foolishly or court suicide. Douglass himself combined prudence with his bravery. Left to its own devices, however, honor can become unruly. It is uniquely susceptible to exaggeration. Krause illustrates the danger of honor unmoored from reason and justice through an examination of honor in the antebellum South. We can see the

same puffed-up perversion of honor in gangs of all sorts, from street gangs to the gangs of radical Islamic terrorists. In these unregenerate honor cultures, violence that is gratuitous and murderous is held to be mandated by one's outraged honor.

Krause is not prepared to dispense with honor, just because some of its incarnations have been wrongheaded. Indeed, if the impulses to honor are rooted in human nature, as she argues, then some permutation of honor will always exist. Better that it be a hybrid form—like the civilized and Christianized standard of gentlemanship—than regressive and barbaric forms (like the mafia's *omertà*). *Liberalism With Honor* recommends an American version of honor rooted in the principles of the Declaration—a modified form of traditional Western honor, brought to you courtesy of the red, white, and blue. Krause has thrown down the gauntlet, and that is an excellent start. I'm willing to serve as her second. Pistols at one hundred paces, anyone?